

ROOMS WITHOUT NAMES

What Wakes With You

PAULIUS KAJOKAS

A Novel

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PART I
Aftermath Frame

Chapter 1: The Air That Stayed

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1:06 p.m.

The first thing he knew was that time had narrowed into voices.

It was no longer a thing measured by meetings, market openings, launch windows, and the private, expensive machinery of a life built to outrun stillness. It had become a man's calm voice saying, somewhere beyond the dark and the weight and the body that did not feel like a body anymore, "Time is now one oh six p.m. We will begin in five minutes."

Five minutes.

The phrase moved through him like a blade underwater. He could not open his eyes or pull air in by choice, but he heard everything with awful, crystalline precision. The hiss of oxygen. The polite electronic metronome of monitors. The small involuntary sounds people make when they are trying to hold grief inside a human mouth. Fabric shifting. Rubber soles on hospital floor. Someone swallowing tears and failing.

Brigit was the closest. He knew it before he could see her because her silence had a shape, because there was a faint pressure around his hand that had to be her fingers, because some part of his body—whatever part still belonged to the world of the living—recognized her by the patient, circular motion of a thumb moving over his knuckles as if touch were a language she was using in place of speech.

His mother was in the room too. He could hear the break in her breathing, the way she tried and failed to make sorrow dignified. His father was quieter, a held-in sound, a man wearing control as long as he still could. Matthew stood somewhere farther away, his anger coming off him like heat, even without words. John's grief was smaller and harder to listen to because it still believed in miracles and therefore had farther to fall.

Steve tried to move.

The effort went nowhere.

Inside, he surged against himself like a trapped man at a locked door. Nothing answered. There was only the machine breathing for him and the voices gathering around his bed like people at the edge of a grave.

“Mrs. McKerry,” the doctor said softly, and Steve understood, with the kind of clarity that does not need sight, that he was speaking to Brigit because she was the legal hinge on which this hour swung. “We’ll do this slowly. He will not be in pain.”

Brigit made a sound that was almost a word and then not. Steve wanted to say her name. He wanted to say her name, to stop the room, to tell her the city had been real and that he had spent whatever existed between death and waking trying to return, but the body in the bed remained sealed. Panic rose fast and clean and animal. He had never in his life been more fully conscious of his own helplessness.

A memory flashed with none of a dream’s softness, exact and immediate. Pale streets. A handleless door. The feel of smooth, cool surface under his palm. The Healer’s voice, calm enough to be cruel: Returning there won’t remove your problems. It will only remove your excuses.

Then the ICU came back in fluorescent white and breathing machinery, and he understood that this was there—the life he had chosen because it was the only one still his.

“Steve,” Brigit whispered close to him, voice shaking so badly it sounded torn. “If you can hear me—if there’s any part of you that can hear me—please.”

He tried again to move. Nothing. The clock moved toward one-eleven.

Someone adjusted a line. A nurse murmured to the respiratory therapist. His mother sobbed once, sharply, then muffled it against her own hand as if grief were a thing people could still be polite about.

At one-eleven, the attending said, “Okay. We’re going to proceed.”

The ventilator stopped.

The absence of it was not silence. It was a cliff. One second there was mechanical breath entering him from outside, a machine insisting that his body remain part of the world, and the next there was only the terrible open space where air had to be chosen and could not be. For a fraction of a second Steve had the clear, horrifying knowledge that this was the moment he would fail, that consciousness would stay lit just long enough to watch the body die around it.

A tone rose. Then his chest seized.

It was ugly. A wrenching, ragged effort that hurt without yet locating the pain, an inward drag of air so shallow it barely qualified as a breath and yet was unmistakably his. The tone broke. The monitor stuttered back into rhythm. A second breath followed, uncertain and wet. Then a third.

“Wait,” someone said.

“He’s breathing.”

The room changed all at once. Not from sorrow to joy—nothing that complete—but from prepared grief to stunned motion. Rubber soles moved fast. Plastic rattled. A nurse leaned over him, hands quick and competent. Somewhere to his left his mother made a broken sound that might have been a laugh forced through tears. Brigit’s fingers crushed his hand hard enough that he felt it in flashes. His father said his name once, low and disbelieving. Matthew exhaled as if he’d been punched. John made a sound like hope coming back too fast.

Steve rode those first breaths the way a man rides out of wreckage, stripped of dignity and control, held up by refusal alone. Air scratched through a throat that felt skinned raw. His mouth tried to work around its own dryness. The body was still mostly far away, but the distance had changed.

He fought his eyes up.

Light knifed in, white and hostile and almost abstract. Fluorescent panels. A blurred ceiling. Color smearing at the edges of vision. He blinked and the room shuddered into pieces that gradually began to accept the idea of being a world: the rail of the bed, the pale blue sleeve of a nurse, tubing, chrome, a monitor with green lines pacing out his continued existence, the dark shape of a man in a white coat, the soft wreckage of family arranged around him.

Brigit came into focus first.

Her face was thinner than it should have been. Her eyes were swollen in a way that belonged to months, not hours, and the sight of it struck him with such force that for a moment he forgot the room. He had done that. Whatever else had happened on roads and in courtrooms not yet reached and through nights he had not yet lived, he had put that look on her face. Her hair was tied back carelessly, like a woman who had not had

time to make decisions about anything except survival. She looked both shattered and held together by pure will.

“Steve,” she said again, and this time it wasn’t a plea into darkness. It was a word landing somewhere.

He tried to answer.

The attempt was humiliating. His mouth shaped itself slowly, clumsily, as if the muscles had to be reacquainted with speech one broken millimeter at a time. What came out was not a name or a sentence, only a dry, fractured sound that might have been the first piece of one. His tongue felt too large. His jaw felt disconnected from intention. He had once moved rooms with a paragraph. Now a syllable collapsed on the way out.

Brigit cried harder at the sound, which was its own kind of cruelty. She leaned close enough that he could smell hospital soap, stale coffee, the metallic salt of tears drying on skin. “It’s okay,” she whispered fast, as if calming him and herself were the same task. “Don’t force it. Don’t—just—”

Past her shoulder, he saw his sons.

Matthew looked older than the boy Steve had last understood as Matthew. Anger had sharpened him. There was a new hardness in his face that did not belong to age alone, a version of manhood built too quickly around resentment. John stood half-hidden by Brigit, not because he wanted to disappear but because grief had made him small. His eyes were huge and red. He looked like he had been waiting for permission to believe in this and had only just received it.

Steve wanted to say both their names. He wanted to say I’m sorry. He wanted to say don’t become me. He wanted, with a force that made his vision blur, to tell John not to be afraid and Matthew not to hate him for being weak. The words remained trapped behind a mouth that no longer knew how to serve him.

At the edge of the room, through the glass partition of the ICU hall, a figure stood watching.

It was only there for a second before a nurse moved, but the stillness of it hit Steve harder than the fluorescent light had. A man in a pale hospital gown. Upright. Calm. Eyes carrying something that did not belong to a stranger looking into another family’s catastrophe.

Recognition. Not sentimental. Not dramatic. Just precise. The same quality of presence he had seen in the city when truth arrived before explanation.

Steve tried to follow him with his eyes. The effort made the room tilt. Brigit's face moved back in front of his.

"Stay with me," she said, and he realized she thought the drift in his gaze meant fading, not pursuit.

The attending, recovering his own composure faster than everyone else because that was the privilege and burden of training, leaned into Steve's line of sight. "Steve, I'm Dr. Feldman," he said, voice clear, measured. "If you can understand me, blink once."

Steve blinked.

"Good. Look at me."

He did. Or tried to. The doctor seemed satisfied enough to continue.

"Can you squeeze your wife's hand?"

This, at least, there was a path for. It was faint, distant, almost theoretical, but he could feel Brigit's fingers around his. He gathered everything he had, not into a dramatic show of will, but into one narrow channel, and something in his right hand obeyed. The squeeze was pathetic, tiny, more tremor than grip, but Brigit felt it immediately. Her face broke open with relief so raw that Steve nearly turned away from it.

"He did it," John whispered.

Matthew let out a sound halfway between a laugh and a curse and put a hand over his mouth.

His mother stood now, one hand pressed against her chest as if physically holding her heart in. "I told you," she said to no one and everyone, tears running freely now. "I told you he was in there."

His father did not say anything. He simply looked at Steve with an expression so stripped down it almost passed for innocence: relief without victory, fear without performance. Steve had not seen that face on him before. Maybe it had always required the possibility of losing a child.

The nurses checked monitors, spoke in low clipped terms, adjusted leads, took numbers. The machine that had almost become his final witness now stood silent beside the bed, useful only as a standby. Steve breathed again, then again, and each breath hurt more than the one before

because sensation was returning unevenly, bringing the body back online in pieces. His throat burned. His chest felt bruised from the inside. He was alive enough now to register how much life cost.

A neurologist arrived within minutes, a woman with steady hands and a face that had practiced seriousness so long it no longer looked like strain. She introduced herself to the room, then to him, though everyone understood the real introduction would be through examination.

“Steve,” she said, coming into his line of sight. “My name is Dr. Chen. I’m going to ask you to do a few things for me.”

He wanted absurdly to tell her he already understood enough, that whatever had happened between one life and another had sharpened comprehension beyond anything these people could test with flashlights and finger squeezes. Instead he blinked at her and waited.

She checked his pupils with a penlight. Asked him to follow her finger. Asked him to lift his gaze, then lower it. He could do those things, though each felt as if his eyes were being moved through wet sand. She touched his face, shoulders, and arms, naming each point and waiting for evidence that he could feel it. He could. Imperfectly and uncomfortably, yes. Sensation lived above the waist in scattered, imprecise territories.

“Can you say your name?” she asked.

The question was almost comic in its cruelty.

Steve gathered himself. Name had once been the easiest currency in his world. Now he opened his mouth and dragged sound across a throat that did not trust him.

“St—”

It broke apart there, slurred, breathy, useless.

Brigit looked down quickly, tears falling. Matthew stared at the floor. John watched Steve’s mouth as if concentration alone might complete the word. His mother whispered, “It’s okay, baby,” in the tone she used when she wanted comfort to erase reality instead of meeting it.

But it was not okay. Steve knew that with a fury so clean it almost steadied him. He was in here, fully, unmistakably, and the body had turned him into a man who could not even deliver himself intact.

Dr. Chen did not flinch from the limits of it. “That’s alright,” she said. “Try to nod if you understand me.”

He nodded. A small, miserable movement, but enough.

Then she tested movement instead of sensation. Grip strength. Shoulder lift. Arm control. He managed only a few inches, his left lagging behind his right, but both still belonged to him in some damaged way. The relief in the room at each small success was dangerous. Steve could feel it building around him, making a story too early.

Then she moved lower.

“I’m going to test your legs now,” Dr. Chen said.

Something in the room changed, not because anyone said a word, but because everybody understood that this was where uncertainty became shape. Brigit’s grip tightened again. His father straightened. His mother went very still. Matthew lifted his head. John moved closer to the bed without seeming to realize it.

Steve followed the neurologist’s hand with his eyes as she touched his thigh through the blanket, then his knee, then lower, narrating the exam in the calm voice of a professional walking a family through the edge of a cliff.

“Can you feel this?”

He searched for sensation.

Nothing.

Not numbness, not pins and needles, not a distant pressure. Nothing. It was worse than pain because pain acknowledged belonging. This was absence so complete it felt metaphysical. Below a certain point the body simply did not report itself. He might as well have been asked to feel the floor three rooms over.

She pressed harder. Touched his shin. His ankle. His foot. He stared as if vision might compensate for the missing circuit.

“Steve,” she said, still gentle, “can you move your right foot for me?”

Inside, he did.

Inside, he sent the command with such force it made his jaw tighten. Move. The instruction went down and vanished into white static. There was no resistance because there was no connection.

“Your left?”

The same nothing.

The feet at the end of the bed remained arranged under the sheet like borrowed objects.

Dr. Chen pinched a toe hard enough that he saw the pressure change in the blanket.

Nothing.

The room had become so quiet that the monitors sounded indecently loud. Steve could hear Brigit trying not to cry again. He could hear his mother taking in breath through her nose as if preparing to reject whatever came next. He could hear Matthew not moving at all. He could hear John's belief beginning to understand that survival and restoration were not the same word.

Dr. Chen straightened slowly, glanced once at Dr. Feldman, then back at the family. She did not speak with theatrical gravity. She spoke the way serious people speak when they know false hope can do as much damage as bad news.

"He is awake," she said. "He is following some commands. He appears to have preserved awareness and partial upper-body motor function."

Brigit nodded too fast, as if she could keep the sentence there and prevent the next one.

Dr. Chen continued, eyes steady, voice level.

"But at this point," she said, "there is no motor response below the waist."

The words landed in the room and did not move.

Steve stared at the ceiling because he could not look at any of them yet. Somewhere beyond the glass, beyond the white walls, beyond the machines and the signatures and the life that had almost ended at one-eleven, the city had been right in the only way that mattered: coming back had not removed anything.

It had only made him responsible for all of it.