MIKE MAGNUSON

A Gathering Storm

EARLY ONE FEBRUARY Saturday, a few weeks after the Green Bay Packers won the Super Bowl, Tim left Appleton on his way to the revolution in Madison. He was happy. He had a comfortable window seat on a coach bus with his buddies from the Fox Valley United Steelworkers Local Number 2-482. He had sixty bucks in his pocket, plus a check card, plus two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches Roxanne made for him, plus about a dozen HotHands handwarmers left over from deer hunting season, plus his cell phone was new—a Droid, from Verizon—plus the union got him 18 percent off his monthly bill. His buddy Mark on the seat next to him had a new Droid, too, plus a fifth of Jim Beam and three hip flasks that he was filling for an epic, frozen-tundra-style day of revolutionary action at the state capital.

Tim knew what was at stake here. He said, "Don't spill that Jim Beam, Mark. We're gonna need every drop we can get."

Mark was a skinny, fidgety guy who never held still except for at work, when he was operating the arc welder, or except for now, because now he needed absolute stillness to fill a flask without spilling on this moving coach bus.

Mark said, "I'm like a surgeon with this shit" and topped off the flask and screwed on the cap, not one drop spilt.

Tim said, "When the end times come, man, I totally want you on my team."

Mark handed Tim the open fifth of Jim Beam and double-pumped his eyebrows and said, "Looks like I'm on your team right now."

"Here's to the end times then," Tim said and took a big swig and could feel the Jim Beam work its way down his chest into his stomach and catch fire briefly inside his body and for a moment, maybe for the first time in years, since before he married Roxanne when she was pregnant with Katie, all things felt possible in this world. Tim would be a leader in the citizen's revolt. Chicks would dig Tim, and we're talking about educated, good-looking chicks with ambition and late-model vehicles and memberships at the gym. Dudes would respect Tim, too. He would run for the state legislature and then for the U.S. Senate and then for President of the

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whole Target-Walmart-Subway-Taco-Bell-Pizza-Hut-Kentucky-Fried-Chicken-on-the-Interstate United States of America, and after that, maybe Tim would retire to be a bigshot with the United Nations and get to go on TV and tell misbehaving third-world nations to crack open a beer, for crying out loud, and sit for a while on the couch and chill the fuck out before you do anything stupid. This would happen today. All of it.

Near the front of the bus now, Dave Burrows, the rep from the union office in Neenah, got on the megaphone and said, "What's disgusting?"

Tim and everybody else on the bus yelled out, "Union busting."

Dave Burrows was a weightlifter-looking dude, not too tall, not too much hair, and a couple of weeks ago, whenever anybody mentioned him, if they did at all, the words *brown-noser* and *pussy* invariably dominated discussion. Now that the revolution was on, he was everybody's hero. He went for it again: "What's disgusting?"

Everybody yelled, "Union busting" and cheered and clapped and hooted and Dave loved it and Tim loved it and everybody on the bus loved it.

They were in Fond du Lac and taking the ramp off Military Road and merging on to US 151 West, a road so direct to the state capitol rotunda that if the brakes went out and the bus stayed on this road, it would smash right into the capitol building.

Dave Burrows said, "I want you guys to know we stand in solidarity with all public unions in Wisconsin today. But this isn't just about the teachers. This is about the future of working people in the United States of America."

Outside, a dry snow spit and swirled over the white wastes of the cornfields and woodlots and farmhouses and did not settle. The temperature was two above zero, too cold for snow to amount to anything but dreams.

Dave Burrows started talking about how much good the union did for everybody and the power the union gave to working people and how the union helped ensure working people's freedom, and so forth. Tim's mind wandered. A job, by definition, meant loss of personal freedom. A job meant you had to be at the job, and if you had to be somewhere and couldn't be somewhere else, you weren't free. Tim worked fabrication—mostly welding—at Truss Specialists in Menasha, and he'd been there twelve years, maybe thirteen, since he got out of high school. He wasn't a great employee and wasn't the best welder in the world and didn't care one way or another if he were. He showed up and did what he was told and didn't bitch, and after that, well, did it matter what he did? He wasn't

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a great husband, either, but he figured nobody really was. He felt like he'd been married, twelve, thirteen years to Roxanne and that their daughter Katie should be about ready for high school. But Roxanne was twenty-three years old, and Katie was only four, and in Tim's life, whenever he wasn't at work, which didn't seem to be very often, there was always so much yet to get to.

Just now, like magic, as if Roxanne knew Tim was thinking about her, she texted.

"Katie is acting like a little shit."

Tim texted back. "What do you want me to do about it?"

"Can you talk to her?"

Tim texted that he would call, once the union rep got done with his bullshit, which took a while, maybe ten minutes, till the bus was nearing Beaver Dam. The snow was the same, everywhere and amounting to nothing.

Tim called Roxanne's phone and Katie answered and said, "Mom says I'm being a little shit."

Mark next to him took a slug of Jim Beam now and passed the bottle across the aisle, and Tim felt a tinge of sadness that the bottle was moving out of the neighborhood and making new friends.

Tim said, "Well, Katie. *Are* you being a little shit?"

She breathed into the phone, a huge exhale that made a sound like static on a radio station whose signal was slightly too far out of reach.

Katie said, "Yeah. I've been bad."

Tim said, "Be nice to your mother, okay?" Tim didn't mean that. Part of him didn't mind if Katie terrorized her mother all day long because for Tim to go to the revolution today, Roxanne had to take the Saturday breakfast shift off at Perkin's in Neenah, where she was a cook, not a waitress. Roxanne was pissed about missing work, losing out on the money, and even more pissed that Tim wanted sixty bucks to go the bars in Madison while he was there.

Katie said, "Mom says you fucked up Netflix last night, too. We wanna watch *Ponyo*."

Before Tim could say anything, Roxanne was on the phone, sighing.

Roxanne said, "See what I'm dealing with?"

"Sorry, honey. I'm in the union," Tim said. "I have to do this today."

"Yeah, you have to get drunk in Madison."

Tim thought about opening the can of bad Pabst another argument was and decided to let it go. He said, "Did I really fuck up Netflix?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Tim, if I knew that, it wouldn't be fucked up, would it?"

He put his phone away and looked out the window at the swirling world, the slate of the February sky, the headlights on the road shining into snowflakes as if they were dust. So much snow and none of it would stick.

BY NOON, Tim floated five hundred feet over the capitol rotunda, over the tens of thousands of people there walking in slow endless counterclockwise circles on the streets around the capitol. He wisped and tumbled and swirled through the seven-degree air and made his way toward the ground, toward the street, toward the capitol steps, where none of the other snowflakes melted or stuck to the earth because the air was too bitterly cold. Puffs of wind sent Tim hundreds of feet in and around schoolteachers with signs that read "Scott Walker, you're not old enough to screw your fifth-grade teachers" or little old ladies with signs that read "Kill the Bill or Kill Your Grandmother" or men in wheelchairs with signs that read "Disabled War Veterans Stand in Solidarity with Public Unions" or the men of Fox Valley United Steelworkers Local Number 2-482, marching together, Dave Burrows leading them, Tim's buddy Mark right there at the front of the line. Dave Burrows was chanting into his megaphone: "What's disgusting?" And Local Number 2-482 was shouting, "Union busting!" Everywhere like this, more than a hundred thousand people and hundreds of millions of snowflakes dodging and darting and tumbling around them, and it did not matter to Tim that he was not Tim anymore. It did not matter that he had a wife and a child and a job and a grind to grind through week after week for the rest of life. He was something small in something much greater, something beyond whatever he knew could possibly be true. The chanting, the chanting: "I say Union, you say power. Union. Power. Union. Power."

This was what thunder sounded like on a cold snowy February Saturday in Wisconsin.

Eventually, middle of the afternoon, Tim emerged from the swirl into a small dark bar on State Street called Paul's, and he melted and reconstituted himself into Tim again and stood at the bar talking with a schoolteacher from Fort Atkinson. Her name was Elaine, tall and cheerful and with a wide face flushed from hours in the cold, and she was not talking

about the revolution with Tim. They were talking about a tree that was in the bar.

Tim said, "I wonder if the tree was here first and they built the bar around it?"

Elaine said, "I think they brought the tree in here."

"Looks like a real tree, too," Tim said.

Elaine touched Tim ever so lightly on his forearm and said, "It *is* a real tree."

Maybe it was a real tree. The tree was halfway along the bar, almost as if it were bellied up for a drink, and its trunk was too big to put your arms around. The leaves were green, springtime green, and on the branches were strings of party lights. Tim hadn't seen much in the world, but he knew trees in bars were as rare as steelworkers talking with schoolteachers in bars.

Tim leaned against the tree and said the truth: "Sure is interesting talking with you, Elaine."

She had green eyes and red hair and an obviously happy heart, and she said, "What's it like, working in a factory?"

"Not as boring as you'd think," Tim said. "What's it like, teaching school?"

"I'll show you," she said.

She put on her jacket and hat and Tim put on his jacket and hat, and they took each other's hands and stepped away from the tree and out of the dark bar and into the dull supercold snowy afternoon light of State Street and into the chanting and the marching. They looked into each other's eyes and transformed into something almost as light as air. The wind puffed them, and they began chanting until they floated into the sky.

"The people united will never be defeated. The people united will never be defeated. The people united will never be defeated. The people united will never be defeated."

WINTER ENDED. So much ended. They said, "Union." They said, "Power." But sometimes, no matter how much you say and do, you get whipped. The public unions of Wisconsin had been busted.

Around the parking lot at Tim's apartment complex in Appleton, the piles of snow turned gray and then black and then faded into something Tim couldn't really remember. He would go to work all day Monday through Friday. At night, after supper, when Roxanne was outside smoking

cigarettes and talking on the phone with her sisters and her mother and her friends, Tim would watch kids' movies on Netflix with Katie. He usually would fall asleep before the movie was over. That was okay with Tim. Kids' movies had happy endings, and Tim knew, in real life, nothing ever turned out the way you wanted it.

One Saturday morning in June, Roxanne was working six till two at Perkin's, and Tim was hanging out with Katie in the little patch of grass in front of their apartment's door. The day was nice, warm, sunny, with a few wisps of cloud, and Tim and Katie were on their backs looking at the sky and not saying anything to each other. One of the wisps of cloud was bigger than the others, almost forming into a real cloud with a real purpose.

Tim reached for Katie's hand and held it and willed himself to rise off the ground and float into the sky, but nothing happened. Katie's hand was tiny and sticky because she had not washed properly after breakfast.

Katie said, "What are you thinking about, Dad?"

"That cloud," Tim said.

"The big one?"

The cloud looked like a face, not sad, not happy, but watching down on the earth and trying to decide what to make of it.

"Yeah," Tim said. "That big one."

Katie squeezed his hand, and he could feel her watching the face in the cloud, how from its mouth language might emerge, how, when the last moment might come, when all hope and love and human kindness had finally faded from this earth, the cloud might say, "Rise up from the ground that holds you. Rise up from the wrong in the world and make it right."

Tim squeezed back, and for the smallest moment, he thought he felt his daughter rising toward the sky.