

Chapter 136

In the old house, the protagonist delved into a chaotic collection that mirrored his madness, rediscovering items left untouched for a decade, all of which once brought him closer to Grace. The shelves sagged under the weight of “Time,” alongside local newspapers and articles. The walls were adorned with aged maps, scribbled streets in marker, and a collage of clippings from various catalogues such as Junior Bazaar and Misses Fashion. These items reflected outfits that he pieced together from fragmented conversations—fragments that had surfaced during the quiet of night, compelling him to rush downstairs and write in nearly fifty journals. His thoughts, disjointed yet vivid, encompassed words like plaid, cut loose, emery, and vanilla, interpreted variably with the passing days through sounds, smells, and visions.

He engaged in a peculiar craft, intertwining magazine faces with newspaper hairstyles, often altering eye colors with a paintbrush. Acknowledging the seemingly inevitable truth of Grace’s absence, and possibly viewing his past foolishness through a mind now clearer, he decided to purge his collection. With resolve, he stripped the remnants from his old bedroom, filling a metal trash can in the yard to the brim. After retrieving a can of gasoline from the garage, he soaked the pile and ignited it, watching his memories succumb to the flames.

As he inhaled the acrid smoke and closed his eyes, he found himself transported back to a moment long buried in darkness—a moment ignited by the specter of Grace. Amidst the smoke, he recalled her desperate plea: “Wake up, Patch. I’ll try and pull you out. I’ll try and keep you with me.” Her voice, strained with exertion and emotion, echoed in his ears, framing his isolation as she confessed her inability to rescue him alone. Finally, as the smoke spiraled upwards, he looked up through tear-filled eyes, revealing a night sky he had long overlooked, stark against the memories now surrendered to the fire.