

CHAPTER 6

Monday, December 2

Teddy Reed wondered why the words which came out of his mouth never seemed to match up with his memories. A supervisor on the electrical maintenance team at the Shannon Nuclear Power plant in Pottstown, PA, Teddy was recounting his latest fishing expedition for muskie on the Susquehanna and his audience in the Level 4 break room was falling asleep. His co-workers shuffled and fidgeted. They slurped at their coffees, glassy-eyed and indifferent.

That which was, Teddy thought, *was made pure by my memory, redefined, made resplendent*. And yet, now, the remembrance spilled out without form, grace or elegance. The symbols clumped up and collided. Then again, it was 4:00 in the morning.

But, in his mind . . . In his mind, it was different. When he said, “Then I cast my lure . . .” in his memory, in a cascade of exquisite bio-electrical energy, he could still see the bright copper spoon as it arced like a firework—lit by tendrils of dawn, coursing over the water—as it started to finally descend, piercing the brooding black surface tension barely an inch from that stump. He recalled how his line had just stopped, how the thick rod had bowed, pumped and steadied, and how, in the distance, he had seen the black water swell for an instant, lifted up by the tail of that fish. That fish!

Teddy heaved back on the rod—once, twice—setting the hook.

“What is it?” said Angelo, his fishing companion.

There was a splash and the line started singing as the spool doubled back on itself. “Don’t know.”

Angelo dropped his rod to the gunwale and reached for the landing net. The fish was running for the rocks. “Looks decent,” he said.

The fish ran once again, then slowed. Teddy twisted on his seat, swinging his line round the bow. He pumped and he pumped, and a dark silhouette churned the water. Northern pike. And, judging from the movement of the rod, the way that its dorsal fin slashed at the surface, Teddy knew it was big. Twenty pounds. Maybe more.

Angelo reached across with the net, only to stop and say, “Jesus H. Christ. What the fuck?”

Teddy peered into the murky currents of the river. The pike had twisted to one side and, clamped across its back, primordial and huge, he could see the thorny jawbone of another fish. There was a flash of golden stripes. The frigid water heaved. The reel began to sing again and he saw the pike collapse upon itself, the massive body cut in half.

Angelo pulled his hand back into the boat reflexively.

The pike began to sink, its severed head concealed behind an amaranth of blood. The second fish advanced. It swam lethargically beside the boat, the jaws maneuvering the remnants of the pike along its bony throat, the hackled fins extended and blood discharging through its gills.

For a moment, it was still, its left eye fixed upon the fishermen as if in recognition. The muskie was as long as the boat. Then, slowly, deliberately, it sank into the depths.

This is what Teddy saw in his mind. But the words . . . They came out all different. The tale seemed to falter and still, to fold back, to collapse on itself. Like that pike.

“And then he just kinda vanished,” he concluded.

Teddy’s co-workers barely acknowledged his story. They sat in the break room distracted, half-asleep, simply sipping their coffees.

Teddy sighed. *Words are never enough. There are things and the symbols of things*, he considered. But as close as they came, they never converged. They were broken, like faulty capacitors, always shy of full charge.

His radio beeped. It was Andy Wisniewski, one of the Control Room Operators.

“You’d better get down here,” he told him. “Dick’s having a connipshit.”

“Which one?” Teddy asked.

“They both are.”

Though part of a three-man electrical team, the other two members were off tagging faulty equipment, so Teddy took the elevator down by himself to 2A, the level where the control room and generators were housed. A tall, lanky man with high cheekbones, black hair and dark eyes, Teddy spent several obligatory minutes in the PCM-18 by the elevators, a personal contamination monitor made by Eberline, putting both of his arms into a long metal tube to check for radiation exposure. The units were interspersed throughout the facility so that sometimes Teddy felt like he worked inside some giant submarine, with each section sealed off by watertight hatches.

By the time he reached the control room, Dick Covington, the Shift Manager, was verging on apoplexy, yelling at Dick Miller, the Common Operator.

There had been some humming on the line, Wisniewski whispered to Teddy, bringing him up to speed. At least, that's what Covington had called it. Weird vacillations in signal strength. Then, a dispatcher named Patrick Gallagher—monitoring the grid from a PJM bunker in King of Prussia—had put in a call. Something was off, he'd told Covington, as if they weren't already aware of the issue. As if they were blind.

But was it the grid, or one of the generators at the Shannon facility?

Covington asked for four minutes to check out the problem.

PJM was but one of a series of quasi-governmental companies that maintained the American power grid, shunting wholesale electrical energy from Shannon to PJM to PECO, the local power company, which divvied it up between all of the businesses and consumers in the greater Philadelphia metropolitan area who were willing to pay. They made sure the grid was both stable and working efficiently. If they said something was funky, thought Teddy, it had to be serious.

The Shannon nuclear power plant featured two boiling water GE reactors capable of generating more than two thousand net megawatts, enough energy to power more than two million homes. And each system on the 600-acre site was monitored here, in the Control Room. Forty by fifty feet of nothing but dials, gauges, displays and controls, the nerve center of the operation was manned 24/7 by two Operators, like Wisniewski—one for each system—plus a Common Operator to relieve them, a Control Room Supervisor or Shift Manager, and a pair of Equipment Operators. This shift, the Control Room Supervisor was Covington, or Dick number one, as Wisniewski liked to call him.

As soon as Covington had hung up with the dispatcher, added Wisniewski, he told the CO, Dick number two, to ease off a bit—from 100% capacity to 91%—so they could check out the system. “Everything seemed to be going by the book when one of the generators started to slow down too much, well below the prescribed sixty megahertz. So Covington followed procedure and tried to pull the faulty unit offline. But, for some unexplained reason, the system wouldn't obey him. That's when we called up to Electrical Maintenance,” Wisniewski concluded. “Since then—”

“You!” Covington spotted Reed in the corner. He practically lunged at the man. “When did you get here?”

“Just now,” Teddy said.

Covington was a large man with a thinning gray crew cut, square face and pot belly. His hunched posture always made him appear as if he were ducking to get through a doorway. Rumor had it he'd served on a nuclear carrier for a time in the eighties. Perhaps that explained it.

Covington scowled. “Go to the generator room and shut it down manually.” It was as if he were talking to a five year old child. “On the double!”

With a glance at Wisniewski, Teddy quit the Control Room. *Four hours*, he thought. Only four hours left to the end of his shift. Five hours and he'd be out on the river again, in his new boat with the wind in his face. Now that he'd seen that fish, it was all he could think about. And he knew exactly where to hunt for him now. He'd be ready.

Teddy stepped through the doorway and was immediately assaulted by the din of the first of the two GE generators. It was hissing and vibrating strangely. He ran over and tried to shut down the engine with the emergency switch in the panel, but the system ignored him. So he radioed back up to tell Covington.

“Keep trying,” the Shift Manager told him. “All the sensors seem normal. It's as if . . . Wait a minute,” he added. The radio crackled. “I'm seeing it now. Failure in the monophasic inverter, and then a delay of four seconds to the BUS bar.”

There was a frightful noise and Teddy looked up. The giant green generator, more than twenty feet

tall, began to shiver and smoke, throwing off parts. He'd never seen anything like it. The machine looked like a train engine on its way off the tracks.

An alarm began howling. Yellow lights flashed.

"The more it slows down," Teddy shouted, "the more the other generators on the grid are trying to compensate, which is only putting more stress on the system."

Teddy was suddenly joined by the two other members of his electrical team and by Miller, the Common Operator. Miller was practically crying. He had the wide round face of a beer brewer, pale blue eyes and bright silver hair.

"Pull the fucking thing out," he cried, crowding the men at the panel. "The whole gang plate. Cut the wire." He turned to face Teddy, white as a sheet. "What are you looking at? Go to the ECR. You'll have to switch out the BUS breaker manually. Take Winthrop." Winthrop was another member of his electrical maintenance crew.

Teddy ran back toward the Control Room. The electrical room was on the same level, just a few hatches away. He followed Winthrop, a gangly black man with broad sideburns, down the long corridor. Winthrop stopped off at the PCM-18 radiation monitor, following protocol. As he waited his turn, Teddy could still hear Dick Miller shouting behind him, plus the withering thrum of the generator. He could still feel the stuttering vibration in the floor plates below him as the engine cycled out of control.

"Oh, Jesus," screamed Miller. "You'll have to take that panel out too. The cable's behind it."

And the static dry tone of Dick Covington on the radio: "Turbine trip caused steam pressure increase, opening four ASDVs, plus three safety discharge valves. Dick, can you read me? Wait a minute. Now I've got an independent failure. Jesus, what's next? I've got a CA One absorber rod stuck at seventy-five percent immersion. Dick? Dick, are you listening?"

"I'm listening to this fucking thing shaking beside me. It's coming apart."

Teddy jockeyed past Winthrop, who was still waiting for the monitor to register clear.

"Hey you can't . . ." Winthrop started, then tore after him.

They ripped open the door. The electrical room was lined with dozens of gray rectangular panels which regulated the current of each system throughout the facility. This was the spark at the heart of the plant.

"Are we clear?" Teddy said in his radio as he dashed down the aisle. It was like running down the hall of some high school, with row upon row of gray metal lockers. BUS 11. BUS 12. BUS 13. He stopped.

"You're clear," replied Covington.

"Yeah, everything looked crystal before," Winthrop said in a hoarse whisper beside him. "I don't know, man."

Teddy stared up at his co-worker. He looked back at the panel. Then, without another word, he began twisting the wing latches and pulled off the panel. He pushed the Contact Position button to Off, reached down with both hands for the stab, and yanked upward.

A blue ball of energy rolled out of the panel.

Teddy Reed vanished, literally vaporized as the charge turned the water in each of his cells into steam in an instant. Standing three feet away, Winthrop's arms were singed off by the charge, severed at the shoulders by the electrical blast.

There are things and the symbols of things. But all is a wash of electrical signals. All is only made real through perception, ennobled by memory. So, which is more genuine? The thing . . . or its symbol remembered?

The last thing Teddy saw were the jaws of that muskie, bright blue and electric, swimming up through the dark Susquehanna, attached to the end of his line.