

THIS IS A TRUE STORY. It's just that some of it hasn't happened yet. It's a coming-of-age tale—about first love, and about inevitable disappointments. About the sorrows and pleasures of growing up. Not only the growing up of a single person, but the coming of age of an entire society.

It's about everything that isolates and pushes us apart, and the thread that binds us all together. Why isn't it more clear, how the future works? Are we any clearer on how things work now? I know we have the tales we tell ourselves. They are myths—democracy, freedom—and we have been honing them a long time.

Or we have been honing ourselves against them so that all their fragmented truths and misfit parts feel smooth.

Ask a child, their understanding is more fresh, more accurate. Aren't these children too articulate, too intelligent? Yet I was just as they are. I believe you were too. I think we've both lost a step since then. It's not our fault. Everyone has lost a step. How could we not? We have been sleepwalking through the ages.

Why is our hero so hapless, so removed? Is he the hero? Aren't we all the hero of our own story? Not one of us has our "own" story, though, do we? Every story is the story of who we are bound to, the web of past and future relationships that constitute a life.

It may be unbelievable for us now, this story of how everything that has been going wrong in the world goes right—a fantasy. But it's a mystery, too, I mean how we relate to it, how it can come to be: how our little peregrinations around the local space-time of this cockeyed, rocky orb can resonate together to leave great change in their wake.

Read this like a gothic tale, but know that real life is more gothic: more grotesque, mysterious, and desolate, but it doesn't have to be.

Like Dorothy's story, this one begins on a farm. Then we find a key.

"It was a game," she said. "Children played it. But the stakes were real, and the consequences were our entire world."

I.

The Farm

Chapter

1

IT WAS WHEN the Sioux were dynamiting Mt. Rushmore that I heard from her again after so long a time. They hosted livestreams every Friday afternoon, detonating one president at a time. Even those who affected moral outrage at the destruction—I was not one—would replay over and over on their personal screens slo-mo videos of half of Washington’s face sliding away from the other, or watch Teddy’s pince-nez shoot out in a cloud of dust over his bully mustache and shit-eating grin.

“Can you help me?” her message said.

This was the penultimate contact I had with June before she disappeared. (In the sense of the one before the last, a waning sense of the word—June herself used to use it in its current sense of “the most awesome,” and when I challenged her on it, she accused me of pedantry, and asserted it was a folly to try to hold back the tide of society. This was a strange stance for someone so interested in, even obsessed with, the past.) Her plea was a mirror of the first encounter we had ever had, at school, when she poked her head out with that same request from behind a pillar in the library.

Her message, which this time popped up on LinkedIn, came after several years of complete radio-silence. But that was normal for our relationship. Ever since that disastrous 11-month sublet and double bed we had shared in Brooklyn—“I have never made a worse mistake,” she told me one time, but that was hyperbole—we had maintained an intense but intermittent friendship.

I was more surprised by the venue than the message itself. June was prescient, though. LinkedIn—after an abrupt and complete 180° on privacy (from scofflaw to earnest

preserver), combined with the bland, almost invisible nature of its corporate-tuned advertising (it was like the slightly-shiny beige walls and upholstery in business hotels, designed to reject any stain)—was in the process of being taken over by teens, who, out of an initially ironic impulse, began to saturate the service with their youth, and litter it with imaginary CVs. In a year they would own the place, making it useless for employment purposes, and anyone who was anyone wanted to hang out there. I wasn't anybody, and I kept my own presence there out of the same inertia that had long dominated my life.

Leave it to June to know which way the wind blew.

Maybe she meant it as a clue. Her mind worked like that. It took me a while to respond; I was wary of being dragged into something (it had happened before). When I did, at last, she replied cryptically, with a time, and a date, but no place. It was a test of the telepathic connection neither of us believed in, but that somehow always seemed to work. We finally met up. What she needed was a favor. I had no choice but to grant it. We lost touch again.

If you recall the tumult and turbulence of that time, its tribulations, I don't think you can blame me. Nevertheless, I felt that it had been my fault; that I had lost her.

When I made an effort to contact her again, I discovered that she really was lost—June had gone missing. The more I thought about it, the more I realized our last meeting had been for her a cry for help. A provocation.

I decided to take it up, at last.

June's message to me had been a key, and only after I set out did I discover its use—that it unlocked a deep mystery, an adventure. I should have known—she was like that, everything about her that seemed normal later grew in significance. Our entire life had been a great unfolding, like one of those old USGS topographical maps we had pored over in Boy Scouts. It all started in mid-October 1993, with a disembodied voice calling out for help.

I had turned twelve that year. The early months had been good for snow so we had more than our usual time off from school. I had saved my allowance and, together with the

Easter money, upgraded by mail order the RAM in my home computer. I finished reading the last Sherlock Holmes story in the omnibus collection, and discovered the wry voice of Mark Twain. That summer my friends and I engaged in an intense campaign through a series of inhospitable but ingeniously crafted dungeons in the clubhouse at the farm, in the hours between our arrival and the communal lunch. In August, I had my birthday.

After that, seventh grade began: our rural school accommodated all grades, K-12, and so the transition to middle-school was one only of degree.

But what happened next was the catalyst for a wholesale transformation.

In the library, when you took the stairs up to the second floor, you entered the Media Lab. It was just four Apple IIe computers set on four desks arranged around a central pillar. There was a big dot-matrix printer, a wall of reference books and the librarian's desk. She had a basket where you'd put in requests for interlibrary loan, and an outbox where they showed up, as if by magic. One day in October, engrossed in a game called "Wizard and the Princess" I was startled almost completely out of my orange, plastic seat.

"Hey!" a disembodied voice called. I was shocked, because no one was ever up there in the lab, and if they were, it was usually someone like me: a shy nerd loathe to make any noise, let alone call out to a stranger. Her face shot out, freckled, bright-eyed, under a slash of dark hair. Even more awkward to me, she was a girl. "Can you help me?"

June had been sitting at the computer directly opposite me, obscured by the pillar.

I stammered out that I would, not knowing what was needed, and moved to her side in a somewhat spastic manner. A dark prompt obscured her screen. I knew at once what was needed, and helped her to find the appropriate disk in the box to swap into the drive to resolve it. Then I took over her keyboard, unable to help myself, and got the game moving.

June had already known how to do it, of course. She'd known almost everything, all along. This had been an excuse to

strike up a conversation; it was—due to my poor social development—something of a failure. After rendering that overbearing assistance I stopped abruptly and shuffled back to my own game without anything more passing between us than a nod. But weeks passed, and over time we developed a pattern of incidental chatting.

She found out many things that I had observed, about teachers, student cliques, parents, and the town. She elicited things from me I had never expressed to a single soul. She had come to school midway through the year, a rare stranger in this place, and entered a grade back of where she should have been by age, and two grades ahead of me (she was in ninth—already a high-schooler).

We met because we both avoided the lunch room (“It smells like wet gym socks!” she said), and preferred spending the noon hour in the library, playing computer games in the “Media Lab,” a pretentious name for what was just those four, already archaic computers—curved CRT monitors sitting on two floppy drives like cinder blocks, themselves perched on the body of the typewriter-like CPU, and upon which you could play *Wheel of Fortune* and *Oregon Trail*.

As the ice broke, I discovered that June was a crack squirrel-shot, and could carry her family across the prairie on a diet of wild rodent alone. She always risked fording the river, and never seemed to plan, whereas I catalogued my many barrels of salted meat and always laid in an extra yoke. Though she had moved here recently, June seemed to know a lot about our small Upstate New York village. We were very much off the beaten path, although within comfortable driving distance of the city.

Then it was noted for the beauty of its maples, which used to burst out with their deep reds in early fall—now global warming has made them all stumps.

There was a single burger joint on Main St. that did a slow business, where old farmers sat drinking bitter coffee in diner cups, and the occasional visitor was delighted to mix in fresh cream from a local dairy. It was one of only three restaurants in town.

“Did you know,” said June, “the bus used to stop there?”

“The school bus?” I said, puzzled.

“No—the Greyhound.” she said. I had had a vague sense there were other kinds of buses than the ones we rode every day. Buses not just for students but for all kinds of people. When she realized I didn’t know, she explained, “Haven’t you ever seen them—they have a slender dog on the side. Anyone can buy a ticket, and take them to many different places. This one went from Albany to Syracuse until they finished the new highway.”

The driver would get out to stretch, have a cigarette and chat with the locals. In the space behind the restaurant was a bowling alley that had closed in the early 80s. It didn’t have pin-setting machines, but relied on local kids to do it. I’ve heard from the kids, a dozen years older than me, how some bowlers would throw so hard you had to jump out of the way, and that others, like Mrs. Emilia Webb, would roll the ball with so little force that the ball might come to a complete stop almost a foot away from the lead pin. They said a coat hanger, twisted into a hook, couldn’t be seen from the other end of the lane, and in the shadows a spare pin or two might be helped down with its aid.

I have stood in the empty space back there, where the honeyed-wood was ripped up long ago. Nevertheless, something of an essential, communal feeling remained. Was it only some nostalgia brought on by the faint scents of old tobacco smoke and beer soaked into the rafters—maybe. By my late childhood, neglect had left all the buildings as faded as an old Polaroid; some even had the air of a tintype in their decrepit reality.

I have seen a daguerreotype of the bank from 1848 (by Samuel Morse), and absent the garish backlit sign, the building has not changed. The street was dirt then, and seemed wider. There were tall curb-stones in front of the fancier houses, to step up into carriages. There were four or five thousand inhabitants. There could be four-hundred now.

Main St. has lost buildings at a rate of one or two every few years. Usually to fire. (There had always been fires, but

their impact became more evident once any effort at rebuilding ceased.) Sometimes, for variety, we got an epic collapse instead: a long, slow rot of all internal components followed by total catastrophe. Some English fop had called the place Loudon's Grove when it was hard on the periphery of the colonies, and its lone citizens could be fairly regarded as "pioneers."

Improbably enriched by a trade of maple sugar and potash, then colonized by Scottish lawyers who had gotten plugged into Albany graft, the village finally incorporated in 1812 as Harmony Valley, sometimes called "The Happy Valley," on account either of the felicity of its richest residents or the lithium reputed to infuse its wells. Imagine: streets thronged with black-suited men and well-dressed women, to meet the grand entrance of Governor Clinton. Several Presidents too. The ones you'll hear television anchors swear never existed: "President Millard Fillmore? No, that's some kind of joke. Impossible."

And me? Imagine someone so caught up in stories from books that far from being a prime mover in some great action, they are barely an active participant in their own life; someone with so little understanding of their own character that they could not imagine it coming across as bad; someone who lives only for uncovering secrets; finally, someone who through it all has done one thing well: remain.

Picture the past, that time before, when the springs could be bitter cold, before so many trees died, and all the lawns; before the drones lit up the sky in the evening, lights like flashing stars; before the fires; before the big truck route change. Before the high-tension lines.

We are almost on the other side of it all.

We can almost imagine a past as vibrant and present as now. Even then, when we regarded pictures of the still, frozen lives of a generation before—faded, wreathed in darkness, flattened by a flash, in strange clothes and hair piled up—we thought them ancient, felt no connection to the incidentals of their lives, just as they, on their shag carpet in the den, with the fake wood-grain TV set, looked at black and white photos with deckled edges, and wondered that a time had ever been when

those photos were new. It was all very hard to believe. June believed in it all, though, and she asked me to, as well.

“WHAT ARE THEY LIKE?” she said one day, asking about my parents. After I had just shrugged in response, she said, “They must be nice.” They were. I loved them, but my home life was so simple, so easy, it was as if they had faded into the background. I realize now how hard it was for my parents to make that so.

“My parents,” she said, “have gotten religious.” She explained one day how they told her—when she had brought a rock crusted with fossils to show them—how God had put them in the shale, these brachiopods, crinoid stems, the occasional trilobite, even bones, had laid down the earth in strata, warped it, thrust up mountains from the sea, and eroded them to nothing, and otherwise had tempted man—with a special eye to geologists, I assume—to imagine an earth older than the 4,004 years since our eviction from paradise (a figure derived from the ages of all the patriarchs of the Bible, cross-referenced against recorded history).

“Total shit!” she said.

June cursed a lot. It excited me, promising the possibility of running amok, of breaking through; I was stuffy, too good, and I wanted to imagine letting go. I pretended to myself that I didn’t act on impulse at all, but in fact I had just entered the age of impulses. I would like to say that I perceived in her uncharted depths of cunning, despite her devil-may-care attitude, and some deep potential that I had to connect with. It’s more likely that she perceived something in me, some use, something I was good for. Not in a selfish way, nothing was ever selfish with her, even if I have thought so at times.

My curiosity about June grew until it felt boundless, but my wits were incapable of extracting much from her, and everything I discovered she handed to me. Were these discoveries like the dead mice and birds a cat brings to its human, or were they more like breadcrumbs left to guide a lost child home; or were they desperate flags waving from the deck, or smoke signals—dots and dashes spelling out S.O.S.?

What I picked up from her—inferred from hints and errant revelations—was that she had been home-schooled most of her life, that her family had moved here recently from Ohio, that she had a sister and a brother, that there had been, before she was born, another sibling who died in a house fire. Her father had been forced earlier that year, into changing jobs, so that her mother had had to take on work, nights, at the hospital. This is what had ended the home schooling, and raised tension at home to a high pitch. And last, that her “father” wasn’t her actual father, but only a man her mother had met named Tim. It was with Tim that the fervor for the gospels had arrived.

I knew these to be facts, could even feel some of them, but only at a surface level. I didn’t truly understand what it all meant—to be tense at home, to have a lost brother that was only ever a spirit, a name, a shadow from a place they shared that you knew only from rumor, where your own family had once dwelled without you.

How can we know anything without living it ourselves?

JUNE’S HOUSE, TO WHICH they had moved only in September, was a ramshackle, 18th century farmhouse. It had been the home of her maternal ancestors, most recently held by June’s grandmother. June’s mother had stayed away on account of a bitter feud between them, the cause of which I have not been able to discover. But on the grandmother’s death, with no last testament and no other heirs, the estate went to the daughter.

It had once been the seat of an extremely profitable farming enterprise, with goats, sheep, and cows. The house was originally built in the Federal style, then had great Greek-revival columns and a long portico appended. Various additions followed that doubled and tripled the size. The woodwork was impeccable, if eclectic, and the carriage path that brought visitors to the door made a leisurely arc to the house flanked by plane trees that cast their ragged bark on a trim lawn with a large stone fountain as its focus.

A prodigious barn stood behind the house, and it had been painted, ostentatiously, yellow with white trim, instead of

the standard, cheaper red. In the barn, dusty, stuffed full of acorns and chestnuts by enterprising squirrels, and partly covered by hay, remained the smart gig the young gentleman used to race from there into the village.

A village in incorporation, it had shown every indication, at its height, of first taking over the county seat, then growing to assume a mantle of importance, perhaps even becoming the capital. All on the strength of its situation on a main turnpike. You can guess the series of shocks that followed: first, the canal, which seemed to increase the importance of this star of the map with the traffic of its building, but upon opening, shifted the locus of transit away just enough to block the wildest aspirations of its populace. Then the railroad. And the turnpike diverted. Then a disastrous crop blight.

The fortunes of June's ancestral home followed those of the village: The fountain cracked, and stopped being repaired. The pastureland was sold, a parcel at a time. The animals, dying, were not restocked. The paint chipped of the wood. The siding underneath greyed. The great porch took on rot, and buckled. The pillars split. One wing was closed off as unheatable. The barn slumped. It took three generations to go from a respectable relic to an absolute ruin. So, now this was June's house and June's life.

She took walks in the woods that had grown over the old farmland. She took refuge in the hidden places of the barn. She found treasures she kept and wondered over. Her stepfather, Tim, rejected the overwhelming family legacy that inhabited the house like a malevolent force. But June learned things, discovered secrets, and these secrets made a place for her, let her recover the past, and stand facing the future with something of her own to grow.

The single, sparkling, most amazing thing I discovered about June was a fact about this home—about her farm: When she talked about the hayloft, and the old wooden farm tools hanging, or the chicken coop, or the copious raspberry patch; when she talked about the big, leaning porch and the layers on

layers of cracked paint, I felt a pang of recognition. It could be any farm. But did I know this place? I believed I did.

I began to ask her more specific questions, wary of tipping my hand and revealing myself as ridiculous. I had, in the past, made the mistake of too openly declaring my private thoughts through unfiltered statements and questions, realizing only after a shocked or derisive reply that I had shown something I shouldn't have shown of what was in my brain, what was in my heart.

It was in the afternoon, en route to Study Hall, after we passed Mr. Grimmon, one of the gym coaches who often oversaw middle-school recess, that it all came out. He was a small man with a big head, a tiny face, and long, thin nostrils stretched over a sunken nose. Mr. Grimmon had a face that looked like a skull. His beady, black eyes were shadowed in their sockets. His lips were always pursed into a small, black "o." A shag of dark gray beard and salt-and-pepper hair encircled his bone-pale skin.

"A cow skull," June whispered to me, "a cow skull grown into the fork of a tree."

That June should make this observation, and that I should have known the exact cow skull she meant, might not seem of that much moment. But what it meant for me, personally, I will shortly explain. What it meant to June I came to understand later. And what it meant to the world seems so fantastic that I myself hardly believe it.

It was Tiffany, on one of her visits to my modest little cabin far out past the weather stabilizers, on a particularly snowy day, all those years later, after the revolution, who pointed it out. She had, in a mysterious way, become someone of importance in this new world, yet she continued to see me, as if I were a kind of ward of hers—a favorite. One time she asked, pointedly, "What was it like, for you, then?" Meaning: before everything, back when we were all still so young.

FOR CHILDREN THERE is a thorough flattening of life. The adult sorts events into categories of significance, but for eleven-year-old me, whatever was in front of me was of the utmost

significance and to all else I was indifferent. One moment, strangers in the news from halfway around the world could be as vital and present as some happening in my immediate, actual life, then I would find myself fully invested a thrilling hover-car chase I was reading in an old Tom Swift book.

That year was a year of great incident, like all years, I think. Comprising incidents I've mostly had to look up. If I read them to you, you might say, "Ah, yes, I guess that was important," or, "How did we forget that so quickly?" Clinton inaugurated. Waco. The latter I remember for the way the fatal fire pixelated on the TV screen as I stood too close, a bright, rolling, artificial orange and red. The split of Czechoslovakia. The first Trade Center bombing. This I saw in the newspaper, only a black and white picture, smoke billowing out of a concrete car park.

To what extent were the events of that year part of the foundation of what was to come after? To a young boy they were little more than background, pictures tacked to the wall. What I have learned in preparing to tell this story is that maybe the child is right. Maybe things mean more and less than we make of them, and maybe it is precisely the things that touch us that touch the world.

I have been reading a lot in preparing to tell this story; for context, and also to more accurately sketch out the vast gap between what life was then and what life is now. Now, on the other side, and then, just at the lip of history, blend in my mind, with only a vast, dark crater in the center, that long period of misery, that coming of age.

To paraphrase one historian: by 2034, the big and small movements which had maneuvered American society into its present place of stability and shared prosperity had quiesced. We were, at last, living in equilibrium with the environment and with the balance of humankind.

It had meant a smaller, more insular focus. It had only come through a period of spirited revolt and much sacrifice. It had happened more quickly, by far, than anyone expected, as revolutions tend to.

Now we live as though we have always lived this way. We should not forget the past, but it is unavoidable. When you have been sick, stuck in bed, feverish, a headache so bad you can scarcely see, the day grinding forward gruelingly, minute by minute, and then the fever breaks, you suddenly open your eyes without pain. You have lost, in an instant, all connection to that terrible, sickly feeling, could not remember it if you had to. So much the better.

Or not. I find myself peering back over this past as if it were a void across which a ladder is stretched. There is purchase on the far side. I can see myself crossing over it to myself, rung by perilous rung.

AFTER JUNE'S COMMENT about the skull, I couldn't hold off any longer. I knew because June's house was also the farm where, in the summer, my friends and I were dropped off by our parents while they worked, to be cared for by an older woman and her daughter who had rented the empty place for a day-care. That is, before June and her family came back to live. I wondered, at once, with some dismay, if the summer arrangement, a defining fact up until that point in my life, could continue now that June and her family were there. The fact exposed in an instant an entire terrain we shared beyond the few computers on the second floor of the library.

"I know the one you are talking about!" I said. "In the tree, in the barnyard, just before the cornfield. You're living on our farm!"

"What do you mean 'your farm'?" she said, sharply.

I might as well have blurted out, "I love you," I was so mortified. I had inadvertently revealed something deep, a secret. Now I would have to explain.



Mr. Grimmon had a face like a skull.



It had started out of necessity, and a thunderstorm.

Praise for *The Happy Valley*

“Heavily immersive . . . A wistful work that reflects both the uncertain child and the nostalgic adult . . . A knotty, philosophical mystery dense with lingering regrets.” —*Kirkus*

“Fabulous and engaging . . . richly creative!” —**Glenda Burgess, award-winning author of *So Long As We’re Together***

“A thought-provoking exploration of the past, the future, and the worlds we construct for ourselves . . . *The Happy Valley* offers fascinating insights about the relationship between the past and the future, anchoring its philosophical musings in a personal story of rediscovery. To blend the abstract with the concrete, to mash-up genres with intention—neither is any small feat, and this novel pulls off the sleight of hand necessary to bring its distinct vision to life.” —*Independent Book Review*

“[A] trippy, ambitious debut novel . . . Reading *The Happy Valley* is not unlike the experience of opening a D&D game box . . . The novel itself cuts the aching solemnity of its melancholic atmosphere with childlike naiveté, wry self-awareness, and a refusal to take itself too seriously . . . Dense with historical and cultural references and perceptive insights into human nature on both an individual and societal scale . . . a poetic, delightfully inventive work of modern mythmaking.” —**Edward Sung for *IndieReader***

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“*The Happy Valley* is uniquely inventive, and must be lauded for its scope. With an ambitious number of genres at play, a host of captivating characters, and an innovative plot [it is] a well-written, imaginative work that will quickly draw readers into the mysterious narrator’s search for truth.” —*SPR*

“The story doesn’t just open. It grabs . . . From cards containing great power to the ironies of disparate forces that find themselves unexpectedly on the same side, Harnett’s juxtaposition of social

discord and angst are nicely done . . . The profound realizations experienced by the characters in this story will attract and captivate mature teens and audiences interested in the concurrence of past, present, and future . . . It's unusual to see this intellectual depth tailored for such a wide age range, yet *The Happy Valley* is such a creation. It should be included in school libraries into adult leisure reading collections, and ideally will be chosen by the kinds of book discussion groups that found many of the philosophical, social, and political components of *Cloud Atlas* worthy of debate . . . Powerful, gripping, and tempered by mystery and intrigue, *The Happy Valley* resides in a category of its own—that of a unique and compelling work of art that blends social and historical inspection with the trajectories of everyday young lives.” —**D. Donovan, Senior Reviewer, Midwest Book Review**

Playlist

This Spotify playlist, curated by [Toni Hacker](#), will give you a sense of the mood of the novel:

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/1643EYPh8lFb10hcKS4O51>

Ordering

The Happy Valley will be released on October 30, 2022.

Visit <https://thehappyvalleynovel.com> for more information on ordering the title, or order it [on Kindle from Amazon](#), or [get the paperback through Bookshop.org](#), or request at your local library or independent bookstore.

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