

“Covering all of the bases in this novel bent on conveying a deep love for the city and the people of Pittsburgh, Doug Rice ultimately makes our lives feel more dignified, loved, no matter if our local language and essence of being have become displaced. I’ve got no words for what Rice accomplishes. Just that, he beautifully brings to light everything in The ‘Burgh – and in places of the heart – that was done in the dark.”

—Ricardo Cortez Cruz, author of *Straight Outta Compton*

Here Lies Memory

A Pittsburgh Novel

by

Doug Rice

An Excerpt

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CHAPTER 2

Elgin, Johnny's grandfather, said he had no choice but to go blind. The world had been turning more and more blue to him, drifting in and out of focus, and he was tired of seeing, anyway. He had seen enough with his eyes and had done enough harm with his looking over the years, and all he had seen had done more damage to his soul than a lifetime of sins. He knew the time had come for him to forget, to forgive and to move on.

Elgin had seen the war in Vietnam. He had been a part of it. Had done his duty. Had killed men, had been told by Sergeant Joseph Anthony Badalamenti that "every man in all of America had the God-given and atheist-given right to kill gooks, to hunt them down and to kill them without thinking about it." Elgin and every other soldier in the platoon were told they had been given all the right they needed to burn down the trees of those heathens, to toss grenades into their tunnels, to reduce their villages to cinders, and to not lose sleep over any of it. And to never ask for forgiveness. "We are not doing anything wrong," Sergeant Badalamanti told them. "We do not need to be forgiven."

Young Elgin could not reconcile the beauty of Sergeant Badalamenti's name with the orders that came out of his mouth. The sergeant's sweet name was as close to a song as a man could get in those humid jungles. Any time Elgin said Badalamenti's name, even when he screamed it out in anger or in fear, he had to hold himself back from bursting into song, from singing that sergeant's name up to the heavens. Elgin asked him what he was doing out there in the jungle

with mere humans. "You should be in Carnegie Hall," Elgin told him. "You wouldn't even have to sing. You could just stand on stage and say your name, slow and subtle, and people would swoon."

Badalamente looked at Elgin with a quiet desperation, a kind of shy fear. "Just kill them, Private. Kill as many of them as you can," he told Elgin. "Keep your life simple." Sergeant Badalamenti looked down into the mud like he was only then seeing mud for the first time in his life. "Kill every single one of them, and then we'll go home, and we'll never see each other again, and we'll believe none of this really happened, and no one will know. We'll keep all we do here between us, between us and our nightmares and our maker."

In Vietnam, the enemy was anything that moved. Elgin shot leaves off trees; he shot birds in mid-flight. Only the stars and the moon survived in the night. And they survived because they moved too slowly for anyone to consider them to be enemies. One night, he watched a man shooting at ripples in a creek. Emptying round after round and that man saying, over and over: "They keep coming. I shoot them and I shoot them, but they keep coming." The point was to destroy anything that even slightly resembled life and to leave Vietnam uninhabitable, to make Vietnam an impossible place. Elgin had seen all of this and still sees it in his dreams, in his coffee, in streetlamps, in raindrops, in the whites of the eyes of people who wished he did not exist, people who never thanked him, not even once. He still coughs dirt from that war out of his mouth. Dirt from that many years ago continues to fill his lungs and to choke his breathing; occasionally, he spits blood, but thinks nothing of it. "Man lives long enough," he once told Johnny, "he's bound to spit blood or worse. Blood is bound to get angry at a man for the life he's been living. Blood done with you, before you done with it, and it just wants to escape. Skin can't hold a body back from bleeding."

After all the American bombs had carpeted the earth, Elgin moved in, humped down the trails between the trees in the tall grasses, doing clean-up, following orders, lifting wooden doors to underground shelters and, without looking, being told, "Never look, never ever look," then being ordered to drop grenades into those shelters and being told, "Never listen for their screams," being told to remember, always remember: "They're not people, they're not

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even human, they're gooks." Day and night, Elgin being told it was dangerous to forget that. Even as he lived through all that, he still believed in something that he could not name. At least he could not name it back then. He had seen all this fire and all this blood, still sees it everywhere he looks. He sees it in those places where he refuses to look; even with his eyes closed to the world, he sees it. And now he has grown tired of seeing anything at all.

Still, inside all those flames and inside all that noise, inside all the chaos of boots caked with mud and of corpses in bags waiting to go home, somehow, inside all that, Elgin was able to see the beauty of Johnny's grandmother, Thuy. Her beauty set his skin on fire, a slow blaze, burning his flesh and his muscle. It awakened him and reminded him that there still was still a place beyond all that fire and smoke. She rescued Elgin as much as he rescued her. He stole Thuy away from the fire and rain and mud, and brought her back to his home in America, to Pittsburgh, brought her to a wood-frame house in the Hill District, where they would live, and they would listen to R&B on WAMO late into the night, resting in each other's arms, drifting into sleep on that swing on their front porch, until, one cool autumn morning, she would give birth to Lehuong, a girl so beautiful speech got stupid around her, and Thuy would love Elgin and be loved by him, then, after all that, Thuy would die. Too young and too soon. She would be taken from this world, from Pittsburgh, from Lehuong, from Johnny, from Elgin, from that quiet wood-frame house on the hill, too soon.

Thuy's death tired Elgin out, exhausted him of seeing. What was left for him to see, anyway? An actor, against any form of logical thought, had become president of the United States of America. A man had walked on the moon for no apparent reason. One of the only experiences he lived through that made sense to him after Thuy died was that of his cherished Pirates becoming family, and those boys of Pittsburgh beating those Orioles from Baltimore, the ones who thought they were so high and mighty going up against those simple working-class boys from Pittsburgh. Those Pirates won that World Series, taught the world a lesson that the world did not want to believe, taught the world that money did not matter, that spirit and faith still mattered more than all the money in the world, that

simply playing the game as they did in the old days mattered more than riches. Elgin was just sad that Clemente missed it, and sad that Thuy and Lehuong missed it, too.

Elgin saw beauty so deep in the eyes of his wife, in the shape of her smile, and saw the wonder of a different kind of beauty in their daughter, who also died so very young, but Lehuong's beauty was in so many ways not of this world. She could never quite fit into the rhythms of daily life. She was constantly tripping, bumping into people. The world could not understand a beauty so complex, a beauty so strong, a beauty that limped. And when they died, their deaths emptied the world of truth. Losing such love did something to Elgin, to his eyes. Having seen such beauty, he lived the rest of his days in simple terror.

Not even a year after his mother's death, Johnny started running with the worst of the bad on the North Side, mostly along East North Avenue near Federal Street, and lately he had begun staying out all night, sleeping along the banks of the Monongahela River, living the life of one of those lost boys from Peter Pan. Elgin saw the marks in Johnny's eyes. He saw more in the boy's eyes than Johnny himself was able to understand. He knew what waited for Johnny, even though Johnny could not know, would never know, until he could not stop it from becoming true. Elgin knew all he could do was try to lift those marks from his eyes before they formed scars and blinded the boy.

So this night, this very last night of Elgin being able to see before going blind, was in some ways long overdue. For years, he looked forward to day after day of seeing nothing of what the world wanted to force him to see. But Elgin was no fool. He knew simply willing himself to go blind would not stop his memories or his visions or his night terrors. He knew those visions were inscribed on the insides of his eyelids, burned deep, napalm-orange deep into his muscles, carved into the grey lines that covered the palms of his hands. He knew those visions would stay with him and maybe even become stronger. He had been living with them for so long that they had become the biggest part of him. Elgin simply did not want to add to those old memories by seeing anymore of the goings-on of the outside world, any more of what was no longer there, of all that was being torn down and being celebrated as progress.

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Johnny walked into his grandfather's bedroom. Elgin was sitting, silent and still, in his rocking chair, reading the very last book he would ever read. Most of the letters on the pages seemed to have taken on a life of their own. Moving in uncertain ways, trying to find their passage to the end of the sentence or trying to escape the page, trying to find a different life, a better story, a safer place, trying to be left alone, to say no more than what they had to say.

Elgin lifted his eyes, but he could not bring up the courage to look directly at his grandson. He stared off to the side of his face, close enough to make him believe he was still capable of looking at Johnny if he ever desired to do so. Elgin survived Vietnam without blinking one single time. But looking at his grandson was different. He saw too much of Lehuong in Johnny's eyes, in his cheekbones, in his olive-stained dark skin. And Thuy haunted his expressions, struggling to remind him of his past, of his ancestors, so Elgin forced himself to look to the side of Johnny's face. Maybe the real reason he wanted to go blind was to no longer see the ghosts that attached themselves to his grandson's face.

"What are you reading?"

"Words," Elgin said softly and closed the book, holding his place with his thumb. "Words on empty pages," he smiled. "Words that want to tell stories, but I can't make much sense of them." Elgin began to push himself out of the rocking chair, but decided to remain sitting a bit longer. Johnny took a step forward to help his grandfather, but he stopped. He and his grandfather were both forever on the edge of moving back into each other's lives, but each time they moved toward each other something stopped them. They were trapped inside a perpetual hesitation.

"You sure it happens this way? You just go to sleep like any night, but you wake up blind?" He looked down at his grandfather's weathered hands.

"Yes." Elgin placed the book on the table beside his rocking chair. He pulled his thumb out, losing his place in the book. He would never finish reading it. He would never know what happened next or why all that had happened earlier in the book had happened. He would never know why any of it mattered, where any of it was leading. He would only know that middle passage, that moment of

stopping before arriving, before reaching the end. Like drowning. Not a drowning that puts an end to something, but one that remembers. Until that point, the book had been about another heartbroken saint lost in the forest, a man looking for a river in a dry pasture and wanting to grow roses in a soil that God had meant for something else. A man fighting demons, resisting the temptations of his wife, a man drifting in the vast desert of loneliness, living with hopeless memories of a time when he was not so alone, not so adrift. But all Elgin clearly remembered from his distracted reading was some woman named Ruth, or some other Biblical name, saying, "They're not savages. They're salvages." He had no idea what the woman meant. What she intended for the man, her husband, to understand, or what the woman hoped Elgin would understand by reading it. And there was some boy in the book, pressed into the sentences, a boy missing since dawn, and a girl, a young girl, forgotten. And the man in the book, the husband, Elgin couldn't remember his name, saying something about every woman's head or thoughts crawling with snakes. There was no trusting them. Women or snakes. They were all caught in the evil mysteries.

But Elgin refused to believe what that man said. He did not trust him. He felt the man was only saying things so that he could go on living his life the way he wanted to live it. Dead of truly seeing into that woman.

Johnny looked around the room, looked at everything he could look at in order to avoid looking at his grandfather. He was never one to hold his eyes still. "Impatient eyes move too fast." Elgin often lectured the boy. "Impatient eyes are blind. Too busy looking instead of seeing. Your eyes will always be disappointed. It's a sin the way you move your eyes. Butterfly eyes. You got to be patient." Johnny continued searching the room, seeking out a place to look without seeing too much of what even he feared he needed to see.

"How can you know for certain you're going to wake up blind?" Johnny asked. He stared at the slippers covering his grandfather's feet, doing all he could not to look into his grandfather's face—his mouth, his eyes, those wrinkles. He did not want to get too close to his grandfather's thoughts. He knew from his grandfather that any man who looks too long into one place is bound to see more than

he bargained for.

“You get old like this, and you know things. Your eyes end up wanting a life of their own,” his grandfather said. “They get tired of your life.”

Johnny shook his head. He wanted to walk over to his grandfather, but he stood still, remained frozen. Elgin looked at Johnny’s uncertain hesitation, his feet almost lifting off the carpet, his hands, restless, at his side. He looked at his grandson struggling not to cross his arms or to shove his hands into his pockets. “You got places to go, you go,” Elgin said. “I can manage.” He pushed his war-torn flesh out of the rocking chair. “I don’t want you standing around here, pacing the floors, if you got some other place you’d rather to be. Ain’t right for no one to be standing in one place when they want to be in some other place. Boys in school, they want to be graduated and off living their lives. They get a job, they want to be retired.” Elgin rubbed his tired eyes. “Maybe that’s what they mean when they say ‘life after death.’ Maybe that’s where life is hiding away. Life is waiting for us after death. You got to kill this life before you can come to understand you ain’t never lived this life.”

Elgin walked over to the window, each step more broken than the last one. “The afterlife. What’s that even mean? Gives people an excuse not to live this life, but this life is the only one you truly got.” Elgin placed a hand on the windowsill and pressed another against the windowpane. “You don’t see your grandma or your mother on these streets no more, do you, Johnny? You only hear about them in stories. Afterlife ain’t no life; afterlife is just an excuse. This is your life, boy. Ain’t no grand reward waiting for you. The reward’s here. You’ve been given a life to live. God didn’t want no one to be waiting for no afterlife. This life is the gift. Go do something with it. You’re killing too much time, Johnny. Imagine if you could hear time screaming in agony with all the killing of time people do?” Elgin looked over his shoulder toward Johnny. “It ain’t right to hurt time, let alone to kill it.”

Elgin slowly turned back to the window and stared out into the night. “It don’t feel so much like it’s the last time that I’m seeing Dinwiddie Street as it feels like it’s the first time I’m seeing it.” He wiped at his eyes with the back of his hand. “It’s the edges that are gone.

Everything just blends and turns blue. Most of the street has already disappeared.” Elgin stopped himself. Some sentences need to end; others should end before they begin. Suicide sentences that never say what needs to be said, sentences that kill themselves in the act of being spoken. Old shadows appeared, reflected, more against the window than in it. The shadows seemed to be both outside and inside, tired but patient with years of waiting. The shadows brought with them a light wisp of Thuy’s beauty, a moment of Elgin seeing her eyes once again. “The street’s just rags and bones and whispers,” Elgin said, “and when winter comes, it’s just cold and empty and wanting.”

Johnny remained standing at that distance, a truce of sorts that he and his grandfather had silently agreed upon the moment that Johnny’s mother died. He stood, safely away from his grandfather, looking at his back. His shoulders had shrunk; the old man’s ribs seemed to be caving in. He was collapsing in on himself. His body was getting tired all at once, like all those years were finally falling down on his shoulders and resting there.

“You could have fixed this, stopped it. You had that choice.” Johnny’s words came out angrier than he had meant them to be.

Elgin kept his back to Johnny, kept looking out through the shadowed window into this last night of seeing. “We all have choices. We’re making choices now, Johnny. Each word is a choice. Silence wants to be left alone, but we can’t leave it be, so we crowd it with talk. Word after word killing the silence,” Elgin said. “Each time we look at something, we’re choosing to look. We only see any damn thing because we make choices.”

Johnny stood his ground, refused what he felt was his grandfather’s invitation to start yet another argument about the way he was living his life, about all that he was throwing away. “But,” Johnny shot gently at his grandfather’s back, “how are you ever going to be able to find your way down to Jack’s Uptown or to the river? To Grandma’s grave? To Red’s?” Johnny kept his voice soft and low. “How are you going to be able to walk down to Red’s and back up the hill, when you’re blind?”

“Man wants a beer, Johnny, a man finds his way to it. That doesn’t change. I know men who climb out of their graves and stumble all over the city, most never find their way home, but they always find

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a beer.” He let out a laugh. Johnny smiled. “I still know where there’s beer, and I will know how to get there. Beer memory is ingrained. You know that. In this city, we’re all born knowing where beer hides. Even you got that in you. Man don’t need to see to find beer. You have faith. It’s what it means to be a man in this city.”

Elgin smiled in the direction of his grandson. He knew that what he said was no longer all that true. Pittsburgh was changing, had been changing, destroying itself to become something Elgin wanted nothing to do with. A decaying city trying to save itself by being something in the eyes of people not born in it. “I know how to feel my way through the streets,” Elgin continued, “It’s a miracle these streets are still here.” He placed his hands flat on the windowsill, leaned heavy on that old, wooden windowsill, and he took a deep breath. He pressed his forehead against the window. That window seemed to hold as much pain in it as was in Elgin’s memories. Years of people looking out that window, wanting something that could not be touched, or people looking up from the streets at the window, wanting to find their way in. Years of Elgin’s ancestors looking out that window and hoping.

“It’s dangerous,” Johnny said. He stepped forward, toward his grandfather, then sideways, then he took a step backwards. His body confused by what it needed to do, what it wanted to do, what it was required to do. “They’re not just streets anymore.”

“They’re no more dangerous for a blind man than for a man who thinks he can see. Half of what you think you see, you don’t see at all.” Elgin lifted his forehead from the window, nearly went so far as to turn around toward Johnny, but he kept peering out the window. “This is something I need, Johnny. You need to respect my wanting it.” Elgin nearly let out some kind of breath from his past. He leaned back in closer to the window again and squinted, looking for something he longed to see one last time. He wiped dust from the glass. “I need this. You needn’t worry. I won’t burden you. Blindness normally gets thrust on a man, gives him no choice. It’s better to choose blindness. Those kids in Vietnam screaming for their sight to come back, and God just ignoring them, and part of me being grateful it wasn’t happening to me, grateful I could see your grandmother, see the footprints, find a way to get back home. Another part of me

thought they were the lucky ones to be done with seeing all that I was seeing there, knowing everything I saw was becoming a part of me.”

“What if you change your mind?”

“I’ll have you see for me. How’s that?” Elgin took another breath, a deeper breath that Elgin often called on to reach into his soul, down into the man he was before the war, into the place of his ancestors. “And my hands. I know the kinds of things my hands can see. It won’t be the first time my hands guided me.”

Only a few hours remained before midnight. Johnny didn’t know if his grandfather would become blind at the strike of midnight or if a bolt of lightning would kill off the last of his grandfather’s seeing. He didn’t know if it happened slowly, while his grandfather slept. “How are you going to be able to watch baseball, or how are you ever going to dream or even know that you’re dreaming?”

“I’ve been watching baseball inside my head all my life. All those summers I lost fighting for whatever it was we were dying for, and missing baseball game after baseball game. I made it through that damn war by watching ball games inside my head. Imagining Clemente gunning down some fool crazy enough to try to score from third. Test the Great One’s arm. Or Clendenon stretching out at first. I got enough of them images inside my head. Once you seen what you’ve seen, you’ve seen it. No erasing it. No place to hide from what you’ve seen. Even when you think what you saw is gone from you, it’s still in you.”

Elgin stood up straight, stretched. He turned around to look toward his grandson. Their eyes met for a moment, but they both quickly looked away. He stared down at Johnny’s feet. Too often Elgin could only see all there was that was no longer here, Lehuoung’s dream of love or Thuy’s eyes, all that was dead and departed. Elgin only saw the haunting. He could not rest his memory and see the young boy standing in front of him. “Tomorrow will be no different for you, Johnny. You’ll have a blind grandfather. That’s all. Maybe a new story or two to tell. You close your eyes for a minute, then you open them. The world is still there. You close your eyes for years, then you open them. The world is still there. I’m just going to close my eyes until death parts me from this. The world don’t go nowhere. Your mother stopped seeing. She’s dead now. We’re still here, even

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without her seeing us. The world goes on.”

Elgin returned his gaze to the rapidly darkening world outside the window. Johnny found enough courage to take a true step closer to his grandfather. “A final moment of seeing, before the blue turns into darkness,” Elgin said. Johnny’s grandfather looked more like he was waiting to hear a sound, a cricket from his childhood, perhaps, than waiting to see some final miracle, some final magic. “In the morning, all this will be over.”

Johnny tried to touch his grandfather’s shoulder. His hand thinking back to some lost moment of innocence, remembering who he was when he was still a boy. “Seeing is nothing more than a hoax,” Elgin said. “There’s not much good to it.” He turned away from the window and looked over at a photograph of Thuy and him on their wedding day. Johnny followed his grandfather’s gaze. “It’s why I first fell in love with your grandmother, though. It’s God’s truth. Seeing is.” He lowered his eyes as if to pray with his eyes instead of with his voice, then he slowly lifted his eyes and looked one final time at the photograph before going back to staring out the window. He peered into the night, away from everything that was inside, peered at the empty, useless street.

“Maybe God should have made it that all men be born blind, so a man have to learn how to see, same way a man got to learn how to eat,” Elgin said. “Man learns to eat slow and careful, he learns to be grateful, attentive, with his eating, with all he’s putting into his body. Same with seeing. A man got to take his time with whatever it is that he’s looking at, so he sees what he’s seeing instead of what he wants to see.”

Elgin wiped at dust clinging to the windowpane, rubbed his thumb into that glass. “Imagine a world where a man got to learn to sit and listen to a woman’s voice to guide him out of his blindness. Create a world so that listening to a woman makes a man want to be near her. Make a man long to touch a woman’s soul, because he listens to her stories.” He leaned his forehead against the windowpane. “Imagine a world where seeing comes to a man slow, real slow. A man can’t even see a woman until her storytelling makes her become visible to him. Until then, any woman is invisible. Imagine a world where seeing starts out unfocused, then a woman’s voice focuses his

seeing. A woman coaxing a man's seeing out of him. Maybe that'll fix what's wrong everywhere." Elgin let out a tiny laugh. "Man wanders the streets, longing for a woman to give him sight. Such a world takes longer than seven days to create, takes more patience than even God had. Maybe that's the flaw with seeing. It speeds up desire too much, turns desire into lust."

Elgin closed his eyes. He kept them closed for a long while. He seemed to be practicing for his blindness. Held the darkness down below. After breathing with the dark, he opened his eyes and looked out that window again, kept staring out into the night, like Johnny was not even there. He looked out the window like he was trying to see if anything, if any tiny detail, had changed while he had his eyes closed.

Johnny remained quiet, even though he was tempted to remind his grandfather about the story Elgin's father, Clarence, had told him about the sins of the Garden of Eden and how Eve's storytelling and her desire for riches beyond her own sense of her self, about her desire for knowledge that would make her different than the woman God meant her to be, about how Eve's storytelling had dirtied up seeing for all mankind for good. "Once that kind of dirt happened, there weren't no turning back." Clarence told Johnny's grandfather that story to keep Elgin from falling prey to a woman's desires. "A woman telling you stories makes you want to know what you should never want to know," he told him. And Elgin told Johnny that story, but never told him why he needed to know it.

Elgin cleared his dry throat. "Your mother wanted to keep you blindfolded from the time you were born. She feared you'd be seeing and wanting too soon. But the way God created it, a man sees a woman before he talks to her. It's seeing that makes him do the wanting, but what a man truly needs to see ain't there for him to see. A man cries he loves a woman, body and soul. But all he wants is the body."

Elgin shook his head. "It's what I did, it's all I knew to do. I sat and looked at your grandmother until day turned to night and turned back to day. It's all we seemed able to do when we first met. Sit with each other in the quiet. But seeing your grandmother wasn't why I married her or why I stayed and wanted the staying to last until

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every human being on the planet took their last breath. It's not why I lived with her through her memories of those fires, all those bombs falling from the skies, all that flesh falling into the mud. Those nights of your grandmother whispering, 'Fuck you, America, and your war,' in her sleep. Her feet kicking at phantoms, at me, at the blankets. I wished I could have stayed awake all night and held her ankles. Helped her find peace. And her fists, so small and confused. Her fists waking me out of dreams. Bruising my tired shoulders. She suffered night terrors more than I did. Voices she heard more true than the ones I heard. Her dreams were never dreams. Sleep never sleep. And me wanting to do just one thing for her that made sense. If I could have just done one thing for her. Just one."

Elgin stopped to catch his breath, stopped to try to forget the pain that kept Thuy's body captive. "And no one in this neighborhood knew any of it; they just looked at your grandmother," Elgin went on. "That's all they could do. Looking is why every man in this neighborhood knocked on our kitchen door at all hours of the day, every day, even Sundays, year after year. It's why they waited behind trees for your grandmother and for your mother, too. It's why they chased your mother everywhere. Looking with eyes blinder than my eyes ever will be. It's what looking does. It turns you. It decays your eyes and makes you want . . ." Elgin looked back out the window, shook his head. "I can't say in words. There's words. I just don't have them. They're gone."

Johnny touched his grandfather's shoulder in the same way that people tap a burner on the stove with their fingertips, testing to see if the burner was hot. Then he rested his hand there. "But if it weren't for seeing, it would be something else, I guess. There's no stopping what gets inside a man's head once it gets inside there," Elgin said.

Johnny looked over his grandfather's shoulder, out the window onto Dinwiddie Street, out over the buildings to the city. There were more and more darkened houses on the street, abandoned and dilapidated houses that, at one time, had been homes. Broken doorways. Boarded-up windows. Broken glass in what little yellowed and burned grass survived the humidity of the dry summers in Pittsburgh. There were fewer and fewer streetlights, a sputtering one here or there. Cars with shattered windshields or sitting up on cinder

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blocks. Cars frozen in place by a boot. The few people who walked the streets at night did all they could to avoid being seen, darting from shadow to shadow.

“The streets,” Elgin said, still looking out the window. “All these streets have gone precious on me.”