



**He imagined the university
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stamped under his skin.**

Letterpress

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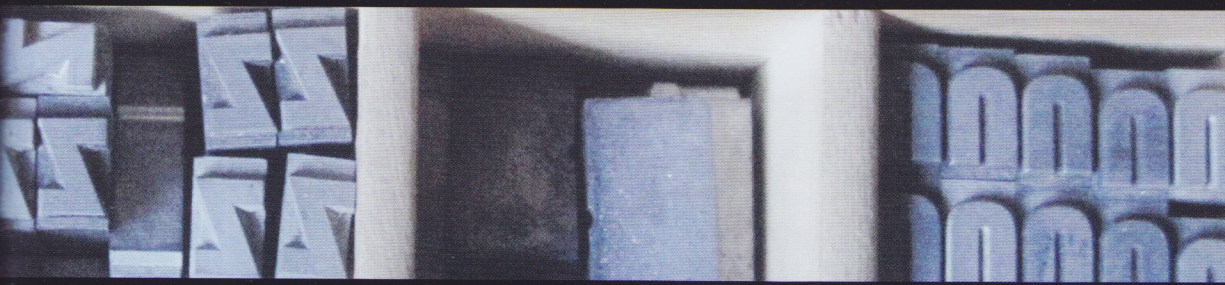
After they took Sophie away he remembered the first time he walked home with her, offering to carry her textbooks but she had none in her leather satchel and when he asked why, she said it was because they were full of lies. In her kitchen there was a small letterpress printer. The table was covered with newsprint and spattered ink stains, the scent of mystery and good luck. Her hands darted among the tiny letter pieces, arranging them in composing sticks and locking them into the frame. "It's a secret newspaper," she explained. "The others and I, we tell what's really happening." She handed him a freshly printed page, sent him a piercing glance framed by glasses too large for her face.

"What do you think?"

The idea of what could happen if he continued on such a path filled him with a rushing exhilaration and a quiet horror, like arriving at the edge of a vast cliff. "Are you afraid of anything?" he blurted out.

She gave a short laugh. "I'm afraid of almost everything. That's just being alive."

He'd never asked so many questions before he knew her. If he completed his studies well, he could be a high-ranking city official, follow in the legacy of his father and older brothers. But now, when he tried dutifully to sort his dry notes into essays, visions of the letterpress swirled before his eyes, and he was filled with the allure of new ideas snapping neatly and accurately into place.



"I'm finishing up our new project, the White Rose," she said. "We'll release it here, in the university atrium. We'll shake up everyone's minds. Can you imagine? A thousand papers floating down from the sky like letters from God."

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One morning when he walked his father to work, a familiar cream-colored page was clutched in the iron hand, and his heart leapt. "We found an insurgent," his father announced. "A student like you, printing terrible lies. We'll pick her up this afternoon as soon as she gets home."

He searched for Sophie frantically, to warn her. In the lecture hall she faded in so well he only caught up with her afterward, in a snatched few seconds while others swirled around them. She was holding a coin to catch the streetcar. He meant to say, "They're coming for you," to warn her not to go home, but what came out was

"I'll take you away from here. We could leave together, today." She rolled the coin in her hand and her eyes flashed from him, to her notebook, to the atrium. "I don't want to," she said, "I just couldn't," and he stood frozen while she swept around the corner, a stone skipping against the current of the stream.

He remained there for a few perilous minutes until he saw the streetcar go past without him, and his legs came free and he raced after it in panic.

When he reached her house, the windows had become jagged holes. Shards glittered on the sidewalk. The printing materials were ransacked, pieces of type spilling over the floor like jewels. Anything made of wood was burnt to wreckage. He cried out and a neighbor peered from behind a shutter. "She left before they came. A smart one. Grabbed all those papers."

Taking off for the university, he pounded along the street at a speed that pierced his sides. When he reached the atrium, she was standing at the top of the curving staircase, right against the balcony, with her

hair falling over her eyes in a curtain and her clothing stained with smoke. She opened her satchel and took out a handful of thick white papers freshly inked in black. For an instant she held them out and regarded him. He shook his head frantically, but she released them, tossing them outward in an arc under the atrium's soaring dome. She snatched handfuls and sent papers down again and again, and they fluttered to the ground like petals, like wings. Curious passersby crouched down, examining them in wonder until a whistle shrieked.

Two figures in black rushed up the staircase and seized her from behind. Her eyes told him she'd been expecting it. "Sophie!" he yelled, so loudly he expected them to grab him and take him away too, but as the seconds wore past and his thoughts ceased to echo he realized he hadn't spoken aloud at all, no one had heard him, his lips were sealed, he was invisible.

He turned on his heel and ran from the papers, from Sophie, from everything.