

BENEATH

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Summary: Pat O'Toole has always idolized his older brother, Coop, right
up until the day Coop ran away from their home just outside Washington,
D.C. — now a year later he has received a package containing a digital voice
recorder and a cryptic message from his brother, which will lead Pat on a
strange and dangerous journey to the mysterious Community living beneath
the streets of New York.

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DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

Exactly one year to the day after my brother, Coop, ditched me, I got a package in the mail.

It came to the school, not our house.

The secretary handed me the package with a warning that I was never to use the school as my personal address.

I was going to tell her that I hadn't when I saw my name: Pat Meatloaf O'Toole, scrawled in Coop's familiar handwriting.

Meatloaf is not my real middle name.

I told her I would never do it again, grabbed the package, locked myself in a restroom stall, and tore the box open.

Inside was a handheld digital voice recorder, a supply of memory sticks, and a note written on a greasy hamburger wrapper:

Lil Bro, Pat, just turn the recorder to Play and I'll explain what you're supposed to do with this. DO NOT share with parents. This is just between you and me.

Your Big Bro, Coop

I made sure the restroom was empty and switched on the recorder.

Hey, Meatloaf, I know you're mad at me for splitting without so much as a good-bye, or a note, but opportunity knocked. I'm not sure what Mom and Dad told you, but while you were at school we had one of our discussions about my future. As usual, it was one-sided — a monologue, not a dialogue — and their plans for me did not include anything I was interested in doing . . . big surprise. So I packed my things and walked out the door while it was still open.

I would have called and explained, but you know my take on the whole phone thing. Then I was going to write you a letter, but the longer I waited the longer the letter got in my head. Pretty soon it was too long to write. Know what I mean? So I bought a second digital voice recorder exactly like the one I've been using in my travels and figured you and I could stay in touch on the little memory sticks that store the recordings.

And the truth is that I want to hear your voice, and I hope that you still want to hear mine. So consider this a slow-motion cell phone.

You'll be able to transcribe all this into one of those journals you're always scribbling in.

Epistolary. Remember that?

Now, memorize this address: PO Box 1611, New York, New York. Zip: 10011. This is where you can send the memory sticks when you figure out how to use the recorder. And it would be nice if you would respond soon so I know you got the recorder and that you're okay. Here's another address

you need to know: PO Box 912 at the post office on Elm Street. That's your private mailing address in McLean. You pass the post office every day on your way to and from school, so it shouldn't be a problem for you to pop in and check the mail. The PO box key is buried in the pot with the petunias Miss Flower planted in the backyard. I assume that Mom and Dad still haven't hired anyone to do any landscaping since the Flowers were fired. And I'm certain you haven't done any yard work, so the key should be there. Talk to you soon, Lil Bro.

Only Coop would think of something like this. That's how his mind works. But the recorder was a huge technological leap for him. I think this is the first electronic gadget he has ever owned.

The little recorder has a lot of functions. There's software with it too. I can edit the recordings, splice them together — like I'm doing now — then transcribe them in my journal.

A hybrid journal.

A collaboration with my brother.

The thumb switch on the side has five positions:

Play.

Fast-forward.

Rewind.

Record.

Erase.

Down the rabbit hole we go.

ONE
UP TOP

A LITTLE FAMILY HISTORY

... for my eyes ... I mean, for my ears only ... in order to practice with this recorder.

I don't think I'll send this to Coop, but I might change my mind if I don't sound too stupid.

My brother, John Cooper O'Toole, is five years older than me. And I'm not embarrassed to say that I have idolized Coop my entire life, from the day my baby blue eyes understood that the boy with curly brown hair, green eyes, and the idiotic grin always leaning over me was my brother.

I'm definitely not sending this to Coop . . .

Rewind . . .

I can get rid of the last words or . . .

Fast-forward . . .

Insert . . .

(I can insert things I forgot or want to clarify.)

Or I can keep it even though it sounds stupid, which I think I'll do . . .

Record . . .

Coop was not the child my parents expected.

I wasn't either.

But you don't get to pick your parents, and they don't get to pick you.

My parents *did* pick each other before Coop came along though, which is one of the unsolved mysteries of the universe.

Mom is an astrophysicist and former astronaut.

Dad is a molecular biologist and Nobel laureate.

Mom is always looking up. Dad is always looking down.

Neither of them looked at us much.

Mom wanted girls.

Dad didn't want kids at all.

Here's how Coop put it: With their combined DNA they expected filet mignon. When they opened the oven they got two pans of meatloaf.

Within months of Coop's abrupt departure, by mutual consent, my parents split up.

Mom is dating an old man with three young daughters.

Dad is dating a young woman with an old parrot.

WE ALL HAVE LITTLE QUIRKS

but Coop has more than most.

I think it's because he was born during a lunar eclipse.

December 24.

Christmas Eve.

Two weeks before he was supposed to pop out.

Dad raced Mom to the hospital and got snagged by the worst traffic jam on the 495 Beltway in Virginia history.

People simply stopped their cars in the middle of the highway to watch the sky.

Mom was furious.

But not at the motorists who decided to turn the highway into a parking lot.

It was the timing.

She wanted to see the eclipse just as badly as those who were blocking her.

Instead, she was lying on the backseat of their brand-new SUV in agony, trying to squeeze out her first child.

A boy.

Coop has a different take on his quirks.

Prior to his birth, Mom went on two space shuttle missions.

Coop believed that during the second mission . . . *something happened*. (He always whispered those last two words.) What *happened* was never explained.

From the day Coop was born he rarely slept at night.

The pediatrician assured my parents that Coop would outgrow this behavior.

The doctor was wrong.

Mom and Dad both worked, so they hired a full-time nanny to take care of him at night. And a second full-time nanny to watch him sleep during the day.

The nannies were sisters.

Identical twins.

Spinsters.

Camilla and Cecelia Flores, who didn't speak ten words of English between them. We called both of them Miss Flower because their last name was the Spanish word for *flowers*.

We suspected they switched shifts, covering for each other when necessary, sometimes working twenty-four hours in a row. It didn't matter to us because we couldn't tell them apart anyway — they were identical down to the moles on their upper right lips with three black hairs growing out of them. They were the same person split in two.

The Flowers taught Coop to flamenco dance when he was three years old.

By the time I came along he had switched to tap and never looked back.

Coop and I used to watch YouTube clips of the great tappers like the Nicholas Brothers, Leonard Reed, Honi Coles, Bojangles, Fred Astaire . . . Coop was as good if not better than all of them. He sometimes tapped for me and the

Flowers, but mostly he tapped by himself for himself. Several nights a week he'd drape his tap shoes around his neck, sneak out of the house, find a tunnel or highway underpass, and tap until dawn.

I asked him one time why he tapped.

"To keep my feet moving, Lil Bro," he answered. "You're not going anywhere if you don't keep 'em moving."

When I was nine and Coop was fourteen, Mom and Dad let the Flowers go. It was like losing two mothers at the same time. And it turned out to be a big mistake, because it left Coop and me on our own. But I'll get to that later.

Back to Coop's quirks . . .

He collects flashlights. (Hundreds of them from all over the world.)

He loves people but doesn't crave their company, sometimes staying in the house for weeks at a time. (I guess I better explain: Old people, young people, rich people, poor people, white, black, Hispanic, Muslim, Christian, whatever . . . he makes no distinctions. To him they are just people . . . none better, none worse than the other. I think people sense this in Coop, because they are attracted to him like moths are attracted to light. I don't know why this is. Something in the way he moves? Pheromones? I've seen complete strangers cross a busy street to talk to him. But the conversations are a little one-sided. Coop will nod, shake his head, frown, smile, and say only enough to keep them talking. When they walk

away Coop knows all about them, but they know virtually nothing about Coop.)

He has never worn a watch. (A minute, hour, day, or month are all the same to him.)

He has never sent or received an email.

He does not know how to drive a car.

He writes short letters to people he doesn't know on purple stationery in beautiful script and doesn't include a return address.

He does not talk on the phone. (Ever.)

He slept virtually all the way through school (and was late every day) but graduated with honors because he did his homework — at night — and turned in all of his assignments on time.

He was accepted to every university my parents filled out the applications to. He rejected all of them.

He has no close friends, yet everyone is his friend.

I thought that I was his best friend until he took off without telling me. I know that sounds whiny, but it hurt. I was really ticked off at him. It was worse than losing the Flowers. I was tempted to send a recording back consisting of just two words with an exclamation point. But that idea lasted about two seconds. I was too happy to hear from him to stay mad.

HERE ARE SOME OF COOP'S FAVORITE THINGS

Favorite activity: Three-way toss-up . . . tapping, reading, writing.

Favorite book: Another toss-up . . . *Dracula* by Bram Stoker, written in 1897, and *A Journey to the Center of the Earth*, written by Jules Verne in 1864.

He must have read both of these books a dozen times. And he read them to me when I was eight, giving me nightmares for months. Especially *Dracula*. Coop assured me that there were no such things as vampires. He said that the reason the novel had so much effect on me was because Stoker had chosen to write it in a style so realistic the story appeared to be fact. The technique is called epistolary, from the Latin *epistola*, meaning letter. The author uses fictitious diaries, letters, and newspaper articles to tell the story. But the nightmares continued, and bats still creep me out. What does an eight-year-old know, or care, about epistolary novels?

Just think what Stoker could have done with a digital voice recorder and email.

This is what I'm doing here in this journal . . . stringing together bits and pieces of information to make a story, each bead in the necklace made from different material.

Memory beads. Recorded beads. Newspaper beads. Letter beads . . .

Coop got me hooked on keeping a journal. He gave me my first one and said I should keep a diary and never let anyone read it, including him. He said showing someone your diary was like offering someone a slice of your soul. “Too many slices, Meatloaf, and pretty soon the plate is empty. No soul food left, Lil Bro.”

Which reminds me . . .

Favorite food: Tuna fish sandwiches.

Favorite drink: Water.

Favorite quote: “Listen to them, the children of the night. What music they make!” (Count Dracula to Jonathan Harker when the wolves howl outside the castle on Jonathan’s first night there.)

Favorite music: Anything with drums.

Favorite smell: Freshly turned dirt.

Which brings me to . . .