

# THE HOUR I FIRST BELIEVED

a novel



# WALLY LAMB

AUTHOR OF *I KNOW THIS MUCH IS TRUE*

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FOR ANNA

A SERIES OF DEBILITATING STROKES and the onset of dementia necessitated the agonizing conversation I had with my mother in the winter of 1997. When I told her she'd be moving to a nearby nursing home, she shook her head and, atypically, began to cry. Tears were a rarity for my stoic Sicilian-American mother. The next day, she offered me a deal. "Okay, I'll go," she said. "But my refrigerator comes with me." I couldn't meet her demand, but I understood it.

Ma's refrigerator defined her. The freezer was stockpiled with half-gallons of ice cream for the grandkids, and I do mean stockpiled; you opened that freezer compartment at your peril, hoping those dozen or so rock-hard bricks, precariously stacked, wouldn't tumble forth and give you a concussion. The bottom half of Ma's "icebox" was a gleaming tribute to aluminum—enough foil-wrapped Italian food to feed, should we all show up unexpectedly at once, her own family and the extended families of her ten siblings. But it was the outside of Ma's fridge that best spoke of who she was. The front and sides were papered with greeting cards, holy pictures, and photos, old and new, curling and faded, of all the people she knew and loved. Children were disproportionately represented in her refrigerator photo gallery. She adored kids—her own and everyone else's. My mother was a woman of strong faith, quiet resolve, and easy and frequent laughter.

This story's been a hard one to write, Ma, and it got harder after you left us. But I had the title from the very beginning, and when I reached the end, I realized I'd written it for you.

(P.S. Sorry about all those four-letter words, Ma. That's the characters speaking. Not me.)

AND SO, THEY MOVED OVER THE DARK WAVES,  
AND EVEN BEFORE THEY DISEMBARKED,  
NEW HORDES GATHERED THERE.

Dante's *Inferno*, canto 3, lines 118–120

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THEY WERE BOTH WORKING THEIR final shift at Blackjack Pizza that night, although nobody but the two of them realized it was that. Give them this much: they were talented secret-keepers. Patient planners. They'd been planning it for a year, hiding their intentions in plain sight on paper, on videotape, over the Internet. In their junior year, one had written in the other's yearbook, "God, I can't wait till they die. I can taste the blood now." And the other had answered, "Killing enemies, blowing up stuff, killing cops! My wrath will be godlike!"

My wrath will be godlike: maybe that's a clue. Maybe their ability to dupe everyone was their justification. If we could be fooled, then we were all fools; they were, therefore, superior, chaos theirs to inflict. But I don't know. I'm just one more chaos theorist, as lost in the maze as everyone else.

It was Friday, April 16, 1999, four days before they opened fire. I'd stayed after school for a parent conference and a union meeting and, in between, had called Maureen to tell her I'd pick up takeout. Blackjack Pizza was between school and home.

It was early still. The Friday-night pizza rush hadn't begun. He was at the register, elbows against the counter, talking to a girl in a hairdresser's smock. Or not talking, pretty much. There was a cell phone on the counter, and he kept tapping it with his index finger to make it spin—kept looking at the revolving cell phone instead of at the girl. I remember wondering if I'd just walked in on a lover's spat. "I better get back," the girl said. "See you tomorrow." Her smock said "Great Clips," which meant she worked at the salon next door—the place where Maureen went.

"Prom date?" I asked him. The big event was the next night at the Design Center in Denver. From there, the kids would head back to school for the all-night post-prom party, which I'd been tagged to help chaperone.

"I wouldn't go to that bogus prom," he said. He called over his shoulder. "How's his half-mushroom-half-meatball coming?" His cohort opened the oven door and peered in. Gave a thumbs-up.

"So tell me," I said. "You guys been having any more of your famous Blackjack flour wars?"

He gave me a half-smile. "You remember that?"

“Sure. Best piece you wrote all term.”

He'd been in my junior English class the year before. A grade-conscious concrete sequential, he was the kind of kid who was more comfortable memorizing vocab definitions and lines from Shakespeare than doing the creative stuff. Still, his paper about the Blackjack Pizza staff's flour fights, which he'd shaped as a spoof on war, was the liveliest thing he'd written all term. I remember scrawling across his paper, “You should think about taking creative writing next year.” And he had. He was in Rhonda Baxter's class. Rhonda didn't like him, though—said she found him condescending. She hated the way he rolled his eyes at other kids' comments. Rhonda and I shared a free hour, and we often compared notes about the kids. I neither liked nor disliked him, particularly. He'd asked me to write him a letter of recommendation once. Can't remember what for. What I do recall is sitting there, trying to think up something to say.

He rang up my sale. I handed him a twenty. “So what's next year looking like?” I asked. “You heard back from any of the schools you applied to?”

“I'm joining the Marines,” he said.

“Yeah? Well, I heard they're looking for a few good men.” He nodded, not smiling, and handed me my change.

His buddy ambled over to the counter, pizza box in hand. He'd lost the boyish look I remembered from his freshman year. Now he was a lanky, beak-nosed adult, his hair tied back in a sorry-looking ponytail, his chin as prominent as Jay Leno's. “So what's your game plan for next year?” I asked him.

“University of Arizona.”

“Sounds good,” I said. I gave a nod to the Red Sox cap he was wearing. “You follow the Sox?”

“Somewhat. I just traded for Garciparra in my fantasy league.”

“Good move,” I said. “I used to go to Sox games all the time when I was in college. Boston University. Fenway was five minutes away.”

“Cool,” he said.

“Maybe this is their year, huh?”

“Maybe.” He didn't sound like he gave a shit either way.

He was in Rhonda's creative writing class, too. She'd come into the staff room sputtering about him one day. “Read this,” she said. “Is this sick or what?” He'd written a two-page story about a mysterious avenger in a

metal-studded black trench coat. As jocks and “college preps” leave a busy bar, he pulls pistols and explosives out of his duffel bag, wastes them, and walks away, smiling. “Do you think I should call his parents?” Rhonda had asked.

I’d shrugged. “A lot of the guys write this kind of crap. Too many video games, too much testosterone. I wouldn’t worry about it. He probably just needs a girlfriend.” She had worried, though, enough to make that call. She’d referred to the meeting, a week or so later, as “a waste of time.”

The door banged open; five or six rowdy kids entered Blackjack. “Hey, I’ll see you later,” I said.

“Later,” he said. And I remember thinking he’d make a good Marine. Clean-cut, conscientious, his ironed T-shirt tucked neatly into his wrinkle-free shorts. Give him a few years, I figured, and he’d probably be officer material.

AT DINNER THAT NIGHT, MAUREEN suggested we go out to a movie, but I begged off, citing end-of-the-week exhaustion. She cleaned up, I fed the dogs, and we adjourned to our separate TVs. By ten o’clock, I was parked on my recliner, watching Homicide with the closed-caption activated, my belly full of pizza. There was a Newsweek opened on my lap for commercial breaks, a Pete’s Wicked ale resting against my crotch, and a Van Morrison CD reverberating inside my skull: Astral Weeks, a record that had been released in 1968, the year I turned seventeen.

I was forty-seven that Friday night. A month earlier, a guy in a music chat room I’d begun visiting had posed the question, “What are the ten masterworks of the rock era?” Dozens of us had begun devising our lists, posting them as works in progress and busting each other’s chops about our selections. (I came to picture my cyberrockin’ brethren as a single balding fat guy in a tie-dye T-shirt—size XL when XXL would have been a better fit.) My masterwork choices were as controversial as the next guy’s. I incurred the good-natured wrath of several of my cyberbuddies, for instance, when I named to my list Springsteen’s Nebraska while excluding Born to Run and Born in the U.S.A. “Dude, as spokesman for the Boss’s TRUE fans,” a trash-to-energy engineer from Michigan messaged me, “I regret to inform you that you’re more f\*\*\*ed up than a soup sandwich!” I dished it out, too, of course, not always successfully. I learned that I’d deeply offended a professor of medieval literature by stating that the bloodline of the Backstreet Boys could be traced to that other vapid and

overrated boy band of an earlier era, the Beach Boys. The scholar asked if he could communicate with me privately, and I obliged him with my address. A week later, I received a FedEx envelope, postage paid by Princeton University, which contained an erudite (if unconvincing) eleven-page defense of the album *Pet Sounds*.

For weeks, listening and list-making had consumed me: Sgt. Pepper or *Songs in the Key of Life*? Aretha or Etta James? I'd saved my tenth and final berth for the unorthodox but always interesting Van Morrison but was having trouble deciding between Van the Man's elegant *Moondance* and his more emotionally raw *Astral Weeks*. Thus, that Friday night, the earphones.

But it was armor, all of it, I see that now: the TV, the open magazine, the aural review of my life, the keyboard chatter. I'd safeguarded myself in multimedia chain mail to prevent emotional penetration from Maureen.

A shadow moved across the carpet, and I looked up from *Homicide* to her. "Caelum?" her lips said. She was holding our wicker tray, two glasses of red wine counterbalanced by a lit candle. I watched the wine rock in the glasses while she waited. The candle was scented—spice of some kind. She was into Enya and aromatherapy back then.

I lifted my left earphone. "Yeah, give me a few minutes," I said. "I want to let the dogs out, catch a little of the news. I'll be up."

Maureen, her wines, and her defeated shoulders turned and started up the stairs. I could read *Mo* from the back, same as I could the other two. But reading and responding are two different things. "Look, don't just stare at the pages," I used to tell my students. "Become the characters. Live inside the book." And they'd sit there, staring back politely at the alien from Planet Irrelevance.

Maureen's my three-strikes-and-you're-out spouse and, as far as I know, the only one of the trinity who ever cheated on me. That lit candle on the tray? It's one of the signals she and I came up with back in Connecticut, back in 1994, during the sensitizing humiliation of couples counseling—those seven sessions we attended in the aftermath of her Courtyard Marriott fuck-fests with Paul Hay.

Whom I'd met a few times at her staff parties. Who was in our Rolodex. Come to think of it, we must have been in the Hays' Rolodex, too.

HELLO?" I SAID. ORDINARILY, WHEN the phone rang while I was grading papers, I'd let the machine get it. But the rain that March night had started making clicking sounds against the floorboards of the deck and the

dogs had come back inside wearing ice crystals on their backs. Nervous about Mo's driving home from tai chi on treacherous roads, I was half waiting for a call.

"May I speak to Maureen Quirk?" the woman asked.

"She's out," I said.

"Are you Mr. Quirk?"

"Yeah, but look. No telemarketing at this number. Take us off your—"

"Do you know who Maureen's out with?"

I uncapped my pen. Tore off a piece of some kid's blue book to jot down her number. "Excuse me," I said. "Who'd you say this is?"

She identified herself not by name but by association: she was Trina Hay's best friend. Trina was sitting right there next to her, she said, but too upset to talk on the phone. "We just wanted you to know, in case you don't know, that your wife's having an affair with Paul."

I said nothing for several seconds, but when I finally did speak, all I could come up with was, "Paul who?"

"Paul Hay," she said. "Trina's husband. Did you know they have a little boy named Casey? Or that Trina has lupus? Or that they're building a house?" Jesus, she was giving me the whole A&E Biography, and I was still on Paul Hay? Paul Hay? Where do I know that name from? Maureen's betrayal hadn't broken the surface yet. Or maybe it had, because my instinct was to kill the messenger.

"So what are you—some no-life chick's gotta borrow her friend's business?" I asked.

"This is my business, okay?" she said. "I'm Casey's godmother."

"You're fat, aren't you? You have a fat voice."

"Do you know who bought Trina and Paul the lot they're building their house on? Trina's father, that's who. The month before he died."

"Your options are limited, right? It's either Tina's problems or a spoon, a pint of Ben & Jerry's between your knees, and Touched by an Angel."

"Her name's Trina, okay? And my personal life is none of your business. Just tell your little slut of a wife that if she thinks she's moving into Trina's new house when it's finished, she's...she's..."

There was dead air for a few seconds, some muffled whispering. Then the avenger was back on the line, blubbering. "I am trying to stop your wife from destroying my friend's marriage. Okay?"

“Yeah, sure, Fat Chunks. Your Nobel Peace Prize is in the mail.” I can’t remember which of us hung up on the other.

I paced, muttered. Sent my students’ blue books flying and the dogs running for cover. When I realized the cordless phone was still clenched in my hand, I whacked it five or six times against the refrigerator door. My car keys were on the counter. I stared at them for several seconds, then grabbed them.

The trucks hadn’t sanded Bride Lake Road yet, but I kept mislaying the fact that the road was icy. Passing the entrance to the women’s prison, I spotted oncoming headlights and hit the brakes. The fishtail I went into nearly sent me crashing into the security gate. My heart thumped. My breath came out in short blasts. I remembered who Paul Hay was.

I’d met him a couple of times at her staff parties. Reddish hair, bearish build. We’d small-talked. He’d tried home brewing once, but it had come out watery. He liked the Mets. Maureen was nurse-supervisor at Rivercrest Nursing Home back then, and Lover Boy was in her pool of per diem LPNs.

The karate school where she took tai chi was in a strip mall near the Three Rivers depot. There’s a convenience store, a bike shop, Happy Joy Chinese, and Caputo’s Martial Arts. The plate-glass window was foggy. I got out, walked to the door, opened it a crack. Twenty or so little kids in karate suits stood with their hands clasped as if in prayer. “Bow to the master, bow to the flag,” the instructor said. Well, okay, I thought. She’s guilty.

I slipped and slid my way back home. No car in the garage. I fed the dogs, picked the exam booklets off the floor, picked up the phone. No dial tone; I’d killed it. Two Johnny Walkers later, she came through the door with Chinese food. “Hey,” I said. “How was it driving?”

“Not great, but I lucked out. I followed the sand truck all the way up Bride Lake Road. You eat yet?”

“Nope.”

She hit the message machine. Her J. C. Penney order was in, one of her first-shift nurses was taking a “mental health day” and needed a sub. She put on a pot of tea, set two places, and opened the cardboard containers. “Look at this,” she said. Her open palm was piled with soy sauce and mustard packets. “If someone consumed all this sodium, they’d have a stroke.”

“So why’d you drive across town to the other place when you were right next door to Happy Joy?” I said.

“Because last time you said Happy Joy’s too greasy.”

Which was true—I had. It was.

We spooned out the food. The kettle whistled. Maureen got up to get our tea. “What happened here?” she asked. Her fingers were skidding along the refrigerator door.

“What?”

“These dents?”

“Tell me,” I said. “Who gets on top, you or him? Or do you alternate?”

Okay, this next part’s hard. I’m not proud of the moo shu and orange chicken dripping down the wall. Or the fact that when she tried to leave the room, I grabbed her so hard by the wrist that I sprained it. Or the fact that she totaled her car on her way to her friend Jackie’s apartment.

She wouldn’t come back. She wouldn’t take my calls. Each day, I went to school, taught classes, endured staff meetings, drove home, and walked the dogs. I spent my evenings calling Jackie’s number on our brand-new phone. Redial, redial, redial, redial. When Jackie’s boyfriend warned me to stop calling or else he’d have the calling stopped, I said okay, fine, I didn’t want any trouble. I just needed to talk to my wife.

Next day after school, I drove over to the town hall and found out where Hay was building their dinky little shoebox of a house. It was out in the sticks, out past the old gristmill. I drove out there around dusk. The place was framed; the chimney was up. Overhead was a pockmarked moon.

I drove back there the next morning, a Saturday. His truck was there. He was up on the second floor. He squinted down at me, puzzled. I cut the engine. That’s when I saw it, in the seat well on the passenger’s side: the pipe wrench I’d borrowed from Chuck Wagner to tighten our leaky hallway radiator valve. It wasn’t premeditated. I’d meant to return that wrench for a week or more. But suddenly its being there seemed just and right. There was a fire in my head.

Six weeks after that moment, in a darkened classroom at Oceanside Community College, I would learn via an anger management class video about the cardiology, neurology, and endocrinology of rage—about how, as I reached for that wrench, my hypothalamus was instant-messaging my adrenal glands to secrete cortisol and adrenaline. How stored fat was dumping into my bloodstream for an energy turbocharge. How my heart

was pumping overtime, sending a surge of blood to my muscles and lungs in preparation for what that instructional video called “the evolutionary miracle of fight-or-flight.” That morning, I saw Hay and took the former option.

Took out his windshield. Took the wrench to his stacks of not-yet-installed Andersen windows. When he came flying at me, I took a swing at his head that, thank God, didn’t connect. He head-butted me, knocked me backward, gave me a cracked rib and a busted lip, a bruised tailbone.

They arrested me that afternoon. Hay got a restraining order. Maureen got me out of the house and would not let me take the dogs. We all got lawyers. Mine, Lena LoVecchio, was a friend of my Aunt Lolly’s. Her manner was brusque, her hairstyle a shellacked mullet. There were two framed posters on the wall behind her desk: the UConn women’s basketball team with their championship trophy and Kramer from Seinfeld.

“How come he gets to screw my wife and be the victim?” I asked Lena.

“It’s all about the wrench,” she said.

I tried to explain to Lena how I’d reached the point where there was nothing between me and the pain of my wife’s betrayal. She kept nodding, sad-eyed, her fingers stretching a rubber band. When I stopped talking, she said, “I’m your attorney, Caelum. Not your therapist.”

Pending disposition of the case, I took a mandatory unpaid leave of absence from teaching. Took Aunt Lolly up on her offer to have me come stay at the family farm with her and her don’t-ask-don’t-tell companion, Hennie. (It was April, and my aunt was as practical as she was sympathetic; I got room, board, and laundry service in exchange for plowing and manure spreading.) I took the deal the lawyers hammered out. In exchange for two hundred hours of community service, completion of the anger management class, and restitution on all that broken glass out at the Hays’ hacienda, I got the assault and damage charges reduced to misdemeanors. That meant probation instead of prison and a shot at qualifying for “accelerated rehabilitation.” It would be the judge’s call. If I got it and behaved myself for a year, my criminal record would be wiped clean and I could teach again. My case was on the docket for August the first.

I missed school—the kids, the daily grind. Had Melanie DeCarlo gotten into one of her dream schools? Had Mike Jacaruso gotten that soccer scholarship? When the Wildcats made it to the semifinals in basketball, I drove up to their big game against Wethersfield. Made the mistake of sitting