



Ben's life has been upended. He's leaving Atlanta. His mom's having a baby. He desperately wants a dog. Who said being twelve is easy? Read this story of friendship, faith, and finding God in the hard spaces of life.

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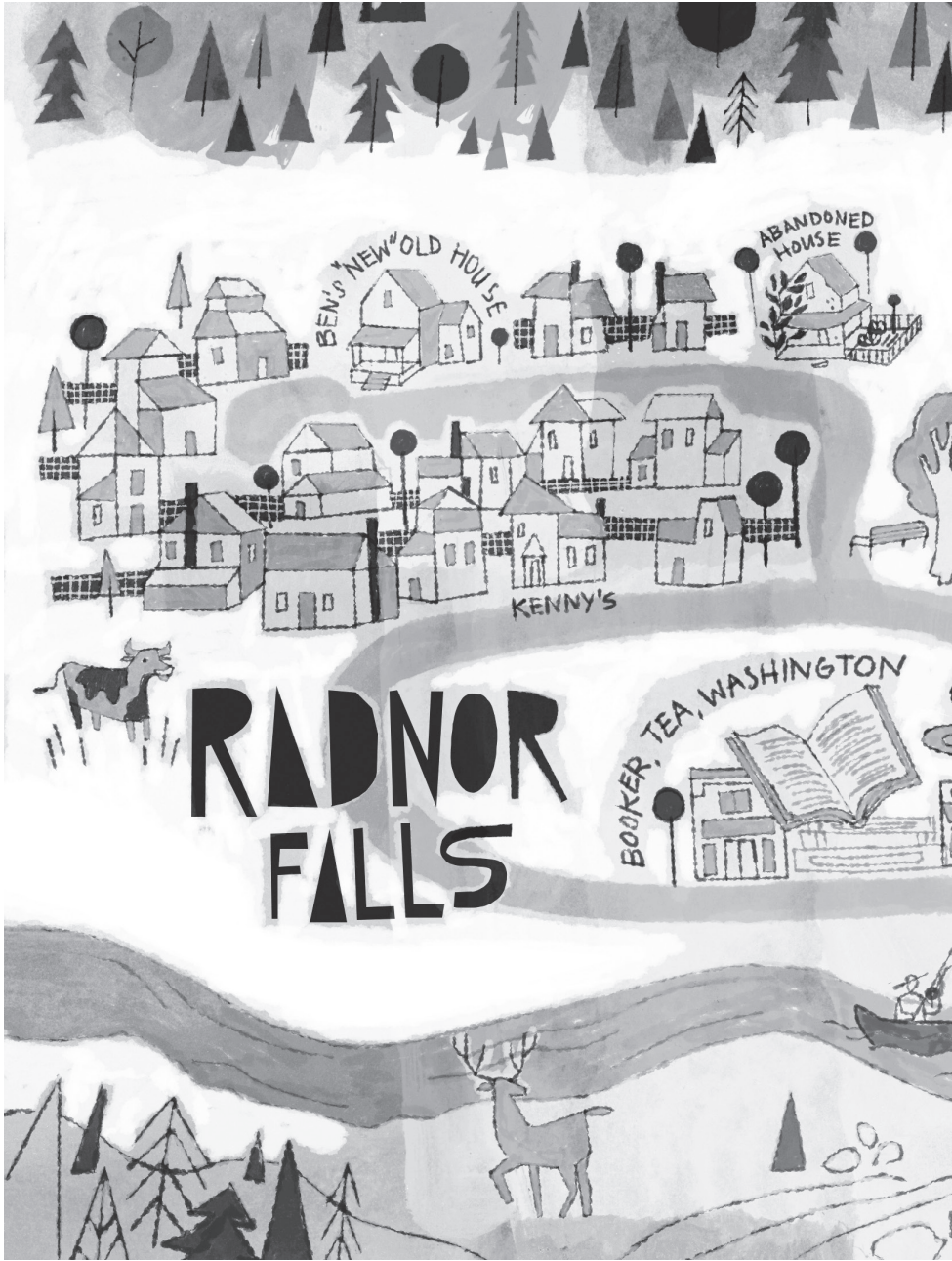
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RADNOR FALLS

BEN'S NEW OLD HOUSE

ABANDONED HOUSE

KENNY'S

BOOKER, TEA, WASHINGTON





Benjamin

“Tragedy-in-Three-Acts”

Washington

One day I’ll be an adult, and nobody will be able to tell me what to do. But today, I’m a nobody. A twelve-year-old, goofy nobody with absolutely no power. And that is why I have to leave everything I love and move with my mom and dad from the greatest place on earth to the absolute lamest place on earth: Radnor Falls, Wisconsin (population: five, or something like that). Who in their right mind leaves Atlanta, home of The Varsity, where you can order a quesadilla . . . as a side?

If this sounds like the start to a tragic tale, then you’d surely be right. Currently, my life is as tragic as Romeo and Juliet meets the Titanic meets . . . some other really, really sad story. And who is the star of this sad tale? Why me, of course, Ben Washington.

Benjamin “Tragedy-in-Three-Acts” Washington.

There are no Varsities in Wisconsin. I googled, and the only thing that came up was a bunch of high school varsity sports teams, and that doesn’t help me because, unfortunately, I have absolutely zero hand-eye coordination. No, seriously. One time my dad and I tried to play catch in the front yard. I lost a tooth, and my dad lost his glasses. We decided it wasn’t for us. We do lots of other things together, though. We play games and listen to music and watch movies—all things that are fun and cause little to no injury.

Dad’s pretty cool for a dad. I mean, he’s kind of a book nerd, and he’s a little corny. But he’s the best kind of corny, and he always slips me an extra cookie when Mom isn’t looking. He’s got impressive shoe game and even better taste in music. And if I have a hard day, he always takes me to get ice cream. So, all in all, the cool overrides the nerdiness, which he comes by honestly.

He’s the proud owner of a bookstore, Booker, Tea, Washington. That’s why we’re moving. My dad was an English literature professor (which basically means he taught people about stories) and now he’s taking over the bookstore to do the same thing. My dad’s Uncle Herbie left my dad his creepy old house and his bookstore. I never met Uncle Herbie, and after Dad grew up and went off to college, he didn’t see his uncle a lot. But Dad used to work summers at the bookstore, and Uncle Herbie taught him everything from *Arabian Nights* to *Zorro*. Ever since, Dad has been crazy

about books. I'm serious. In his office at the old house, books were stacked from floor to ceiling—books, books, and more books.

Even though Dad didn't spend much time with Uncle Herbie as an adult, he called him the first Sunday of every month to discuss the books they'd been reading. I think it must have meant a lot to Uncle Herbie. He didn't have any kids or a wife. He just had his bookstore and his customers.

I wonder if any of my new neighbors knew him. He passed away not too long ago. Dad was pretty sad. Uncle Herbie and the store meant a lot to him. It surprised Mom and Dad when they found out Booker, Tea, Washington and the house had been left to them. And it had shocked me that they even considered moving to Wisconsin to run the bookstore. But after a lot of praying and talking, my parents decided to make the big move.

I've never seen anyone so passionate about anything as my dad is about owning that bookstore. I don't get it. We have books in Atlanta. But it's nice to see him so excited.

I'm really happy for him. This is his dream come true. I just wish his dream didn't mean moving one thousand miles away from my friends and my school.

Mama says it's gonna be a great big adventure. But her eyes look a little bit like she wants to mean it more than she actually means it. Mama is expecting right now, which basically means she is about to have a baby. And by now, I mean it looks like that baby is ready to be toddling around and stealing my Cheerios.

BEN WASHINGTON IS . . . THE NEWBIE ON THE BLOCK

Why do people say “expecting” anyway? It sounds like you’re waiting for a UPS package to arrive. This is way more exciting than a UPS package. Expecting is more like waiting to open a Christmas present. Except instead of a toy or a video game, it’s a whole baby sister. How wild to think that there is a real-life baby in Mom’s belly. Thinking about it too long gives me the heebie-jeebies.

That being said, Mama is real cool. She’s much cooler than Dad . . . no offense to him. She’s an artist. You know that guy Picasso with the weird paintings . . . like the one that looks like a lady caught in a computer glitch? Yeah. He can’t hold a candle to Mama. Her paintings are bright and colorful and deep. I don’t really know what they mean. Dad says they’re abstract, and he’s a pretty deep dude, so they must be abstract.

What’s not abstract is this move tomorrow. That is a very sure and a very cold, hard fact. My room looks so weird without all my stuff in it. No more Zapblats posters on the walls. No more glow in the dark stars on the ceiling left over from when I was three and had a space-themed room. No more bright red bed that creaks when you roll over on your stomach. Just an air mattress, and rows and rows of brown cardboard boxes. Who knew you could fit a whole lifetime in twelve boxes?

Listen to me. I really do sound as tragic as the Titanic. Except for instead of a boat sinking, it’s all my hopes and dreams. What a bummer. And this is just Act One.



We’ve been driving to Wisconsin all day. Dad said a quick prayer for safe travels, and we were off. Leaving my hometown of Atlanta forever . . . or at least till spring break (which is basically forever)! Dad should’ve said a prayer for my attitude too. I feel my mood going as sour as a Warhead.

I’m bored. I already watched a movie and an old episode of Zapblats (the video game turned TV series, turned film trilogy, turned every other media form imaginable). Zapblats is about a human named Colonel Richard Blats who lands on an alien planet. He has to figure out who the good guys are and who the bad guys are and how not to get zapped by them. Never in my life have I felt more like Colonel Blats, heading to my very own alien planet.

After my Zapblats binge, I read my *Black Panther* graphic novel. I tried playing that game where you count in your head how many red cars are on the road—102, wait, 103. And I’m still bored. Dad started playing some old VeggieTales songs, and I tried to look annoyed, but sheesh, the man knows me too well. The classic song “His Cheeseburger” makes me crack up every time. I’m twelve, and this could ruin my whole reputation.

We’ve had to pull over like three times already because Mom has to go to the bathroom. She said it’s because she’s expecting. I think she’s just using it as an excuse to buy more snacks. I’m not

mad though. Bring on the gas station taquitos. I'm here for it. What I am mad about is the fact that I had to leave Atlanta.

Last night I went to my buddy Zion's house for our final sleepover for a while. I'm not gonna lie, I almost blubbered like a baby. It's all well and good when you're nine-and-a-half or even ten to let loose a tear or two. But at twelve? Now you know I cannot go out like that.

Zion and I did what we always do. We played some video games (including his older brother's 2K game we aren't supposed to touch). We played Nerf guns. We pranked his sister by putting slime in her bed—she beat us senseless with a pillow. It was beautiful.

When it was time for bed, we didn't even go to sleep. We wanted every last minute to keep on kicking as long as it could. Zion and I have been best friends since we were in diapers. Our moms are best friends too. They met in a church women's group for new moms and became so close they vowed to make their sons best friends too. In our case, it worked so well that we're almost like brothers. We're best friends for life. And now I have to move a million trillion miles away from him.

While eating pizza and playing the Zapblats video game, Zion asked, "Hey, Ben, are there black people in Radnor Falls?"

From what I've heard from Dad, and also from what I've imagined, Radnor Falls is small town vibes. I mean Podunk, USA. Dad says it's the kind of place where everybody knows everybody. Lots of grass and trees and horses and cows. Some of the people there

are even farmers. The size of the school is a fraction of the size of my school now. I bet they even have a milkman. It just seems like the kind of place where they'd have a milkman. I prefer store bought. Do you think the milkman will offer oat milk? I'm a little bit lactose intolerant. All in all, this new place is feeling like *Leave It to Beaver* vibes. And you know who wasn't in that classic 1950s TV show? Black people. Which brings me back to Zion's question.

I hadn't thought about it until this very moment. There's lots of black people in Atlanta. I guess I had just assumed everywhere else was the same.

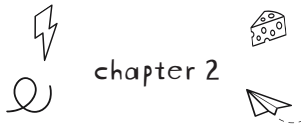
"I don't really know. Maybe."

"There probably are," Zion said quickly.

There was a long pause while I started to have my doubts.

Zion seemed to know what I was thinking. He paused the game and said, "Don't worry, Ben. You're gonna make a lot of new friends . . . but ain't none of 'em gonna be as good at Zap-blats as me." Then he pressed play and demolished me with his hulking horde of alien Zappadogs.

I hope he's right. I also kind of hope he's wrong. I don't really want new friends. I like my old ones. What if I'm not like anyone in Radnor Falls? Oh, well. Can't do anything about it now. Like I said, I'm a twelve-year-old, no-power nobody. All that's left for me to do is look out the car window at the long stretch of wind-mills doing their cartwheels over the fields and sigh.



chapter 2

Moving Day

We moved into our new house today in Radnor Falls, Wisconsin. I already hate it. First of all, it's so old. It's skinny and tall and crooked like my cousin Devonte. It's got two floors and an attic, which makes it feel like three floors. The outside is slime green, which is an odd color for a house. Apparently, Uncle Herbie didn't have very good taste in home decor. The porch stretches all the way across the front, complete with four rocking chairs. Mama is really excited about those rocking chairs. Definitely a grown-up thing.

The house sticks out like a lime in a carton of eggs. Almost every other house on our street is white with a perfect picket fence, perfect lawns out front, and mailboxes with perfect gold numbers. We don't have a picket fence. We have crab grass. Our mailbox is crooked. Our lawn is overgrown. And our house looks like ooze.

There is one other out-of-place house, though, that we drove by on the way to ours. It's two houses down from us, and even though it's the same color as the other houses, it looks like no



one has lived there for years. It doesn't have a fence like the other houses. Huge vines of ivy have taken over the left side of the house, and the porch sags in the middle. But the garden is perfectly kept. There are fresh mums just like the ones my grandma grows next to perfectly shaped green bushes. On either side of the sagging front porch are little figurines of woodland animals. Facing the house and the length of fields beyond it is a bench that looks freshly painted white. And at each of the feet of the bench are terra cotta pots with lilies in them. I know about this stuff because Grandma forced me to work in her garden the last few summers.

What kind of person tends to the garden of what looks to be an abandoned house?

Anyway, back to my house. The inside looks less awkward than the outside but not much. The floorboards are creaky, and the faucets are leaky. Mama said the house has character. If that character is from a scary movie about a haunted house and a clown child, then I'd have to agree. Mom and Dad let me pick my room, and I picked the attic. It's as cold as the tippy top of Mount Everest up there, but the room has a lot of space, so it's kind of like my own apartment. Zion would love it.

You know what would actually make this situation better? If I had a dog! I've been begging and begging Mom and Dad to let me have a dog. I've even named it already: Barkly. You can't tell me that's not the cutest name for a dog you've ever heard. Mom and Dad are not having it.

Mama said, "*Mmm-mm*, no, Benjamin. I'm not about to be changing a baby's diapers and cleaning up after a dog too! That's a no."

Dad was less straight forward. "I don't know, Ben. A dog is a lot of responsibility. Do you really think it's a good idea to add a dog to your plate when you're already starting a new school, making new friends, and becoming a big brother?"

Parents can be so creative when they are coming up with new ways to say NO, and yet, they have such an utter lack of imagination at times. I imagine this: Barkly and I playing fetch and going for walks and me sneaking him my vegetables at dinnertime. Sounds like heaven to me . . . and also a lot easier than having to make human friends. Dogs like everybody. People are fickle.

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On the other hand, if my only friend was a dog, that would probably get me sentenced to eating lunch alone at school till high school graduation. I cannot sentence myself to a life of tuna sandwiches alone in the bathroom. I hate tuna.

Zion called today to fill me in on what's going on back at home. Cory Feeny is having a birthday party this week at the pool. I don't actually know Cory that well, but I know I like birthday parties! I know I like cake! I know I like pools. I'm a simple man. Actually, that's not true, I'm an incredibly complex man. But that is beside the point.

The point is I missed a birthday party. I don't think my parents understand how much they are slightly ruining my life right now. I'm bored. I went to the kitchen to tell Mama as much today. She was unpacking the dishes from a big moving box. Mama has big, curly hair, Hershey's chocolate skin, and the straightest, whitest teeth I have ever seen. She looks like those people on toothpaste commercials. She's real beautiful—the kind of beautiful where you can tell she's pretty on the inside too. I think it's because she smiles so much. People just seem drawn to her and comfortable around her.

At that moment, though, Mama did not look comfortable. She had one hand pressed against her lower back to support her enormous belly, while she rummaged through the dishes with the other hand. When your mom is very pregnant and working very hard, it's probably the worst time to say . . .

“Mom, I'm so boored.”

I also forgot you're not supposed to tell parents you're bored.

She immediately whipped out a list of to-dos. "Did you unpack your boxes in your room?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Put away your clothes?"

I nodded.

"Did you hang up your Zapblats poster?"

"Yes, ma'am, I did, and I'm still so bored."

"I know just what you need, Benjamin." Then she just told me to take a break from unpacking and go outside, as if outside is a cure-all for boredom.

When I showed up back in the kitchen wearing all black, she rolled her eyes and smiled a little. "Boy, if you don't stop being so dramatic. What are you wearing?"

"I'm in mourning," I said.

She lifted a balled-up hand to her perfectly straight teeth and straight up started laughing. She howled at me. Ruthless.

I walked outside to the front yard, and I will say this, the weather was nice—slightly cool, but sunny. It's disgustingly hot in Atlanta in August, the kind of heat that feels like it might have you in its sweaty grips for all eternity. Stepping out of the house is like stepping into a burning hot skillet. Zion and I tried to fry an egg on the sidewalk the other day, and it kinda worked until this feral cat came along, gobbled it up, and ruined our experiment. But back to Radnor Falls.

I kicked some dirt around our yard for a bit. Radnor Falls looks very different from Atlanta. For one thing, there are a lot more fields here, and a lot more cornfields. Behind each house is a perimeter of land—just fields that go on until they hit a wall of trees and woods. Mom doesn't want me going back there by myself. Behind my old house was a bunch of other houses. Another thing that's different is I'm pretty sure I saw a cow fenced in one of the neighbors' yards. I don't know, maybe it wasn't a cow. It could be something else. I didn't get a good look at it. It's either a cow, a large pig, or a fat horse. Either way, those are not the pets you'll find in my old neighborhood.

I sat on the grass in the front yard. To my left was a cul-de-sac with the perfectly painted white houses. To my right, I could see more of those houses and the strange run-down house with the garden out front. It stuck out like a sore thumb. There was a story there, I just knew it. I lay down in the grass and crunched some leaves in my hand. That's another thing you won't find on the ground in August back home. It's by no means chilly here yet, but the leaves have already begun their turning, and some of them have already started to fall to the ground. I threw some of the leaves into the air and watched them drop like melancholy confetti.

As an orange one descended toward my shoe, I glimpsed someone out of the corner of my eye. I sat up. I looked again toward the run-down garden house a couple doors down.

An old man was taking a seat on the white bench. He wore

a red wool coat and chunky, brown boots. He looked about the same age as my grandpa, with the same kind of white, wiry hair. He wasn't white, but he wasn't black either.

The old man clutched something in a fist and raised it to his lips. He bowed his head low for a moment and covered his face with a hand. His shoulders started shaking. This did not seem like something I should be watching. He was for sure crying. I knew it was kind of rude, but I couldn't stop staring until he turned my way. I quickly lay back down in the grass hoping he couldn't see me watching him. There's nothing more awkward than someone staring at you while you cry.

I decided it was time to go back in the house. I wondered why the man was crying. Maybe he's in mourning too. Maybe his parents made him leave his friends behind, and he's never gotten over it. I get it, man, I get it.



I start school in a couple days—another joke on me, I guess, dropping me into a tiny new school where everybody already knows each other. Sixth grade is brutal enough. I asked Mama if I could homeschool this year and go to the new school next year. I thought it was a great idea—had a PowerPoint and everything on why it would work.

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She flat out said no. She said she is going to pray for me every day before I head out the door—like that is going to make up for me having to eat tuna fish in the bathroom until I graduate.

Lord, please explain to my mom that homeschooling is the only option because she is not trying to hear me out.

Like I said, the woman can be ruthless. I didn't push it. Guess I'll have to live in mourning a little longer.

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