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Fall 2014 DEBUT FICTION SAMPLER

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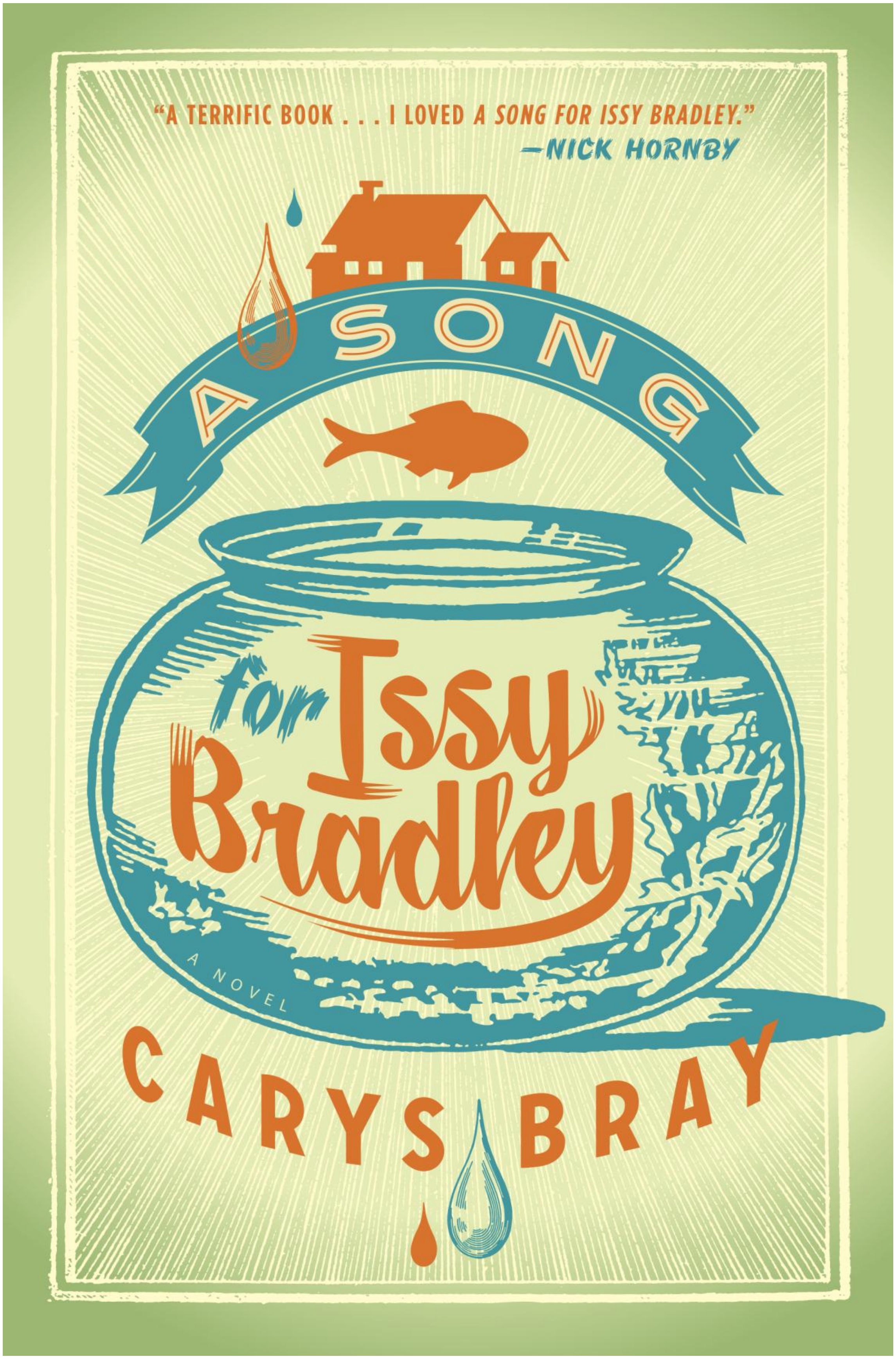

"A TERRIFIC BOOK . . . I LOVED *A SONG FOR ISSY BRADLEY.*"
—NICK HORNBY

A SONG for Issy Bradley

A NOVEL

CARYS BRAY

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A Song for Issy Bradley

A NOVEL

BALLANTINE BOOKS
NEW YORK

A Song for Issy Bradley is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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First Edition

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Claire dreams she is walking along a beach with the Lord. She cannot humble herself and speak nicely, so they progress in silence. The sand is hard and damp, puddled in places; its ripples bump her bare feet. They walk until He stops and presses a gentle hand to her arm.

"Please come back. I love you."

The words whisper along the tiny hairs of Claire's inner ear. Did someone sneak into the bedroom, touch her arm, and murmur, *I love you*? She lies as still as she can, in case someone is there, hoping to talk to her. If they think she is asleep they will go away and leave her alone.

She continues to feign sleep as she listens to the morning noises. The radiators pop and clank, a kitchen cupboard slams shut, and she hears the unintelligible rumble of voices downstairs. The room feels empty, the air undisturbed. When the children breathe they puff air out of their noses like little steam engines. She holds her breath until her stomach is tight and her ears are thrumming. Nothing. No one. She tries to relax, to unfasten the tension in her muscles and soak back into the mattress. Why did she have to wake up just as the Lord started to speak? She attempts to switch her ears off, breathes deeply, slowly, and imagines herself back on the beach. It doesn't work. Eventually she gives up and occupies herself with a thought that flutters through her mind like a little biplane, trailing a banner of scripture in its wake: *"Behold, I have dreamed a dream; or in other words, I have seen a vision."*

The front door closes and Claire hides under the covers for a little longer in case anyone returns for an overlooked lunch box or a forgotten PE uniform. Once she is certain no one is coming back, she unwraps her blanket cocoon. The room tilts as she stands and she holds onto the top rail of the bunk for a moment, eyes squeezed shut. Once the ground steadies she tiptoes along the landing to her own room, drags an old pair of sweatpants off the floor, and balances against the wall as she pulls them on. Then she heads back along the landing and down the stairs, tucking her nightie into the elastic waistband as she goes. Her coat is hanging on the bottom stair post; she takes it and retrieves her pink wellingtons from the shoe tidy.

She opens the door. The fresh air is cool and smells of composting leaves, mud, and damp wood.

She walks down the empty driveway, and when she reaches the gatepost, she looks back. She doesn't have her key; perhaps it doesn't matter.

The house is tall, narrow and slightly hunched. It's the mid-terrace in a squeeze of three 1920s mock-Tudor properties. There are two windows on each of the three stories, every one crisscrossed with lead squares, making the house seem short-sighted and elderly. The front door is chunky and paneled. Its black paint is peeling away in plastic-sharp shards. Ian's new slate sign hangs next to it, inscribed in white enamel: *The Place.* He ordered it before—in the summer. And when it arrived everyone stood outside and watched him drill holes into the brick while he sang a hymn: "*We'll find the place which God for us prepared, Far away in the west. Where none shall come to hurt or make afraid, There the saints will be blessed!*" The sign is a half-serious joke.

"This is the place," Ian says as he reverses the car onto the driveway, the same words the prophet Brigham Young is supposed to have uttered on entering the Salt Lake Valley with the Mormon pioneers. The sign makes Ian happy; he grins as he passes it. Claire used to think stripping the front door and painting it red would make her happy.

She heads in the direction of the beach. It feels strange to be outside and expose her waxy skin to the weather for the first time in weeks. She keeps going and eventually reaches the undulating road that divides the marsh. The road was built on rubbish, purportedly hardcore, but contractors illegally dumped uncompacted household trash into the open cavity during its construction. As the trash settled, the road sank and crested, and it waves through the marsh like a tarmac sea. Claire has always called it the Bumpy Road. Even on a beautiful day like today when sharp blue sky and autumn sunshine distract from the creep of winter, it's windy here.

At the top of the Bumpy Road there's a bird-watching viewpoint that isn't much more than a section of green fencing with peepholes. She peers through one of the holes. There's a board attached to the fence showing images of birds. She looks at the water and thinks she can see black-and-white avocets like the one pictured. It seems right to be surrounded by birds at a time like this. After all, birds have always been messengers and comforters; a dove helped Noah determine the end of the flood and a raven took care of Elijah in the desert. She thinks about the selfless swallow in *The Happy Prince* and the nightingale that sacrificed itself in order to create a red rose. Several seagulls fly toward the beach and she remembers another story about birds, the miracle of the gulls. It happened in Utah not long after the first pioneers settled. Crops were being eaten by locusts or crickets, something like that, and the pioneers prayed and prayed until flocks of seagulls descended and ate all the pests. People believe the Lord made the seagulls intervene and, as seagulls don't seem to be naturally helpful birds, perhaps He did. She follows the seagulls and crosses the coastal road to the parking lot at the edge of the beach.

The sea is still at least a couple of miles away, but she can feel the motion of its waves in her chest as she crosses the lot, and each undulation brings a small, unexpected surge of happiness. Overhead a swarm of starlings whips through the sky like feathery fireworks and as she stops to watch, a swell of emotion breaks in her chest and trickles from her eyes.

She walks past a couple of cars that probably belong to the dog walkers on the track ahead and an elderly couple in a camper van, drinking from Thermos flasks. She follows a slight incline to the Sandwinning Track. There's a bright, new warning sign at the gateway: *"Caution: Ribble Estuary Cockling."* She knows the tides here are dangerous; the sea sneaks behind people, filling imperceptible dips in the mudflats, rolling in like a lake, and there is quicksand. Just last week the front of the local newspaper carried the story of another rescue.

Her wellies scuff the stony track and she hears cars whoosh behind her as they race along the coastal road. It was much quieter in her dream. To her left, in the distance, the pier needles its way from the promenade out onto the bare sand. Inland, she can see the tips of buildings and the pyramid of steel suspension cables supporting the Marine Way Bridge. To her right she can see Blackpool. And if she squints she can see the thin curve of a roller coaster. It seems like she could walk there. People have tried and some of them have drowned.

The track is sandier now, damp and sticky, gritty, like cake mix. It's stamped with a network of prints. There are wide tire marks from cockling vehicles and thinner tracks from bicycles. There are footprints, paw prints, and birds' prints, some tiny, others surprisingly large, pronged like windmill blades. As she continues, the texture of the sand changes; it is speckled with a mosaic of broken shell pieces that draws her toward the sea like a trail of breadcrumbs.

She stops walking when she sees a discarded net. It's red like the little bags that hold oranges, and half-full of tiny cockles; silver bells and cockle shells—she remembers singing the nursery rhyme to the children. She prizes one open with her thumbnails and when it unlocks like a little mouth she thinks of the children again, of trying to insert toothbrushes past pursed lips. Inside the shell is a brown jelly splotch of clam. She lifts it to her nose, smells the sea, and then drops it.

As she walks farther she can hear birds calling. It's rockier underfoot and the track is strewn with debris that the sea has spat out. The sand grows muddy and it sucks at her feet, slowing her pace. A dog barks and she glances back. In the far distance, she can see the hill summit of Rivington Pike. She remembers stories where people built towers and climbed mountains in order to talk to God. Rivington must be more than twenty-five miles away, and apart from several railway bridges the town is flat. She could have walked to a railway bridge and she has imagined doing so several times in recent weeks, but this morning's dream has made things clear. When she woke she knew where her exchange with God should take place.

The dog starts to run toward her, shaggy hair streaming in its wake like wings. It's only a puppy, an animal that's bursting with mindless affection. It jumps up and wipes sandy paws on her coat.

"I'm so sorry. Down, Bingley, down!" The man squelches through the last patch of marshy track. He tries to grab the dog by its collar while it licks the rubber of his wellies.

"Who's a bad dog? You are, aren't you? Yes, you are! Oh God. He's got mud all over your coat." He ruffles the dog's floppy ears and attaches a lead to its collar.

"Don't worry." Claire's voice sounds rough and discordant. Her tongue is thick and the roof of her mouth is sticky.

"You'd better get it in the wash, or it'll stain. You turning back now?"

"I'm heading on."

"You want to be careful out here. Got a mobile?"

She hasn't, but she nods.

"Keep looking around. Make sure the sea's not snuck in behind you; the tide's a bastard!"

She raises her hand slightly to indicate goodbye and the man does the same. She watches him and the dog walk away for a moment. He seems to sense her gaze and he stops and turns.

"Lovely day for it," he calls.

She heads on, unbuttoning her coat as she walks. Her nightie has slipped out of one side of her sweatpants, so she untucks it and lets it fall to her knees. Ian would say the beautiful weather is a Tender Mercy, a manifestation of the Lord's capacity for reassurance and comfort. She hopes so, but it's hard to know. Ian believes the good things are heaven-sent and the bad are arbitrary. She isn't sure what she believes anymore. She keeps walking in the direction of the sea and suddenly, in the squinting distance, beyond the endless corrugations of sand, she thinks she can see its shimmer. She increases her pace, forbids herself from looking left, or right, or behind, and it soon begins to feel as if she is all alone in the world.

— 1 —

Birthday Boy

Jacob wakes up early. He isn't sure why at first and then he remembers it's his birthday, which makes his stomach tip like a Slinky. It's still dark, the thick kind that hides your hands from you. He lies quietly for a few moments, willing morning to get nearer.

"Issy, are you awake?"

He listens for a reply. The sound of his heartbeat pulses in his ears and he gives them a hard rub. The bunk bed creaks as he sits up to lean over the side.

"Issy. Issy."

Issy makes a little noise and the bed creaks. Not him this time; she must have turned over.

"It's my birthday, Issy!"

"I'm asleep."

"You're not, you're awake now. Go on, say 'Happy Birthday' to me."

"I don't feel good."

"I'm the birthday boy!"

"Shush."

"Happy Birthday to me! Happy Birthday to me!" He waits for Issy to wish him "Happy Birthday" and rubs his ears again—they are thrumming with the darkness. "I'm going to get up. Want to sneak downstairs with me?"

He climbs down the ladder and stands next to the bottom bunk. Issy's silence suggests she has slipped back to sleep, so he opens the bedroom door and creeps out onto the landing. He sneaks along the corridor and peeps his head around Al's half-closed door. There's no sign of life, so he sneaks a little farther. Mum and Dad have shut their door, and the stairs up to Zippy's room are too squeaky to risk. He turns back and tiptoes down the stairs, remembering to stand in the quiet places. He goes into the living room and switches on the television. He turns the volume down to number eight and flicks from channel to channel. It's too early for children's programs, so he finds the news. There's a clock in the corner of the screen: ten past five. He decides to watch a DVD.

His favorite cartoon at the moment is one from the Book of Mormon collection. It's the story of Ammon, who goes on a mission to the savage Lamanites. The Lamanites don't wear many clothes and they've got red and blue war paint on their chests and faces. They capture Ammon and take him to their king. The king is called Lamoni and he is fierce, with two long braids, blue earrings, and a feathery hair band. King Lamoni agrees to let Ammon be a servant, and he tells Ammon to look after the sheep. One day some wicked men come and try to steal the king's sheep. Ammon is completely brave. At first he uses a sling and some stones to shoot at the men like in David and Goliath, but eventually Ammon gets fed up with firing stones and he pulls out his sword and chops the men's arms off. Chop! Chop! Chop! Jacob slides off the sofa, steps over Issy's Cinderella beanbag, and rummages in the toy box for Al's old light saber. Chop! Chop! Chop! He chops along with Ammon and the Lamanites' arms break off like twigs. Serves them right! The servants take the arms back to the king in a bag, and he opens the bag and says, "Yes, these are arms, all right." The king thinks Ammon must be the Great Spirit, but Ammon says he is just a messenger. The king is so pleased with the bag of arms that he listens to Ammon's message about Heavenly Father. In the end, everyone is happy—except for the men with no arms, of course.

The story of Ammon is a true story from the Book of Mormon, which means it tells people something Heavenly Father wants them to know. Jacob lies down on the sofa and thinks about what he knows as the music plays and the credits roll: Stealing sheep is bad, swords are dangerous, and fighting might be OK if you do it for the right reasons.

Mum comes down just after seven o'clock.

"Hello, birthday boy. What are you doing down here?"

"I woke up and then I couldn't get back to sleep."

"You daft thing." Mum wraps her arms around him and gives him a squeezy kiss. "Let's make breakfast, shall we?"

They make pancakes. What an ace start to his birthday! Mum lets him crack the eggs. She doesn't get cross when the shells shatter into the mixture, and she does extra tosses before putting the pancakes in a dish in the oven to keep warm.

"Shall we sing a song, Mum? Shall we? I'll pick—I'm the birthday boy! Let's sing 'Here We Are Together.' "

Mum laughs. "Not that one, you always pick it! Tell you what, you sing while I finish doing this." She pours more mixture into the pan and Jacob starts to sing.

"Here we are together, together, together,
Here we are together in our family.
There's Mum and Dad and Zippy and Alma and Jacob and
Issy
And here we are together in our family."

Mum opens the oven door and slips the new pancake into the big dish. "Lovely singing," she says in the way she always does, even when he forgets the words and loses the up and down of the tune.

"Will you tell me a story now?" He climbs onto the kitchen table and sits with his bare feet resting on the seat of one of the chairs. He sniffs the burny smell of hot oil and feels a fizz of birthday happiness in his tummy. "Tell me the story of when I was born."

"Well, once upon a time, exactly seven years ago today," Mum begins, and she recites his story while she opens the cupboards to find syrup, chocolate sauce, lemon juice, and sugar.

She jumps when the telephone rings and Jacob climbs off the table and wraps his arms around her waist as she answers it. He billows his face into her pillowy middle, closes his eyes, and squeezes extra tight. He holds his breath and pretends his supersonic strength can stick her to the spot.

"Hello, Sister Anderson. No, of course you're not a nuisance."

Jacob knows what's coming next. If he had a big sword he could chop Sister Anderson's arms off and then she wouldn't be able to use the telephone.

"Well, it's Jacob's birthday. But . . . yes, of course, just a moment. I'll go and get him."

Jacob doesn't let go of Mum when she attempts to move. She tucks the phone under her chin and tries to unfasten his arms.

"Jacob."

He holds on, even though he knows it's silly, even though he knows he will make her cross. Mum pulls the phone out from under her chin and covers the mouthpiece with her hand.

"Stop it. Let go. Now."

"But what about my presents? Has Dad *got* to go? He's already missing my party, he can't go out now as well! Am I going to have to wait until he gets back before I can open anything?"

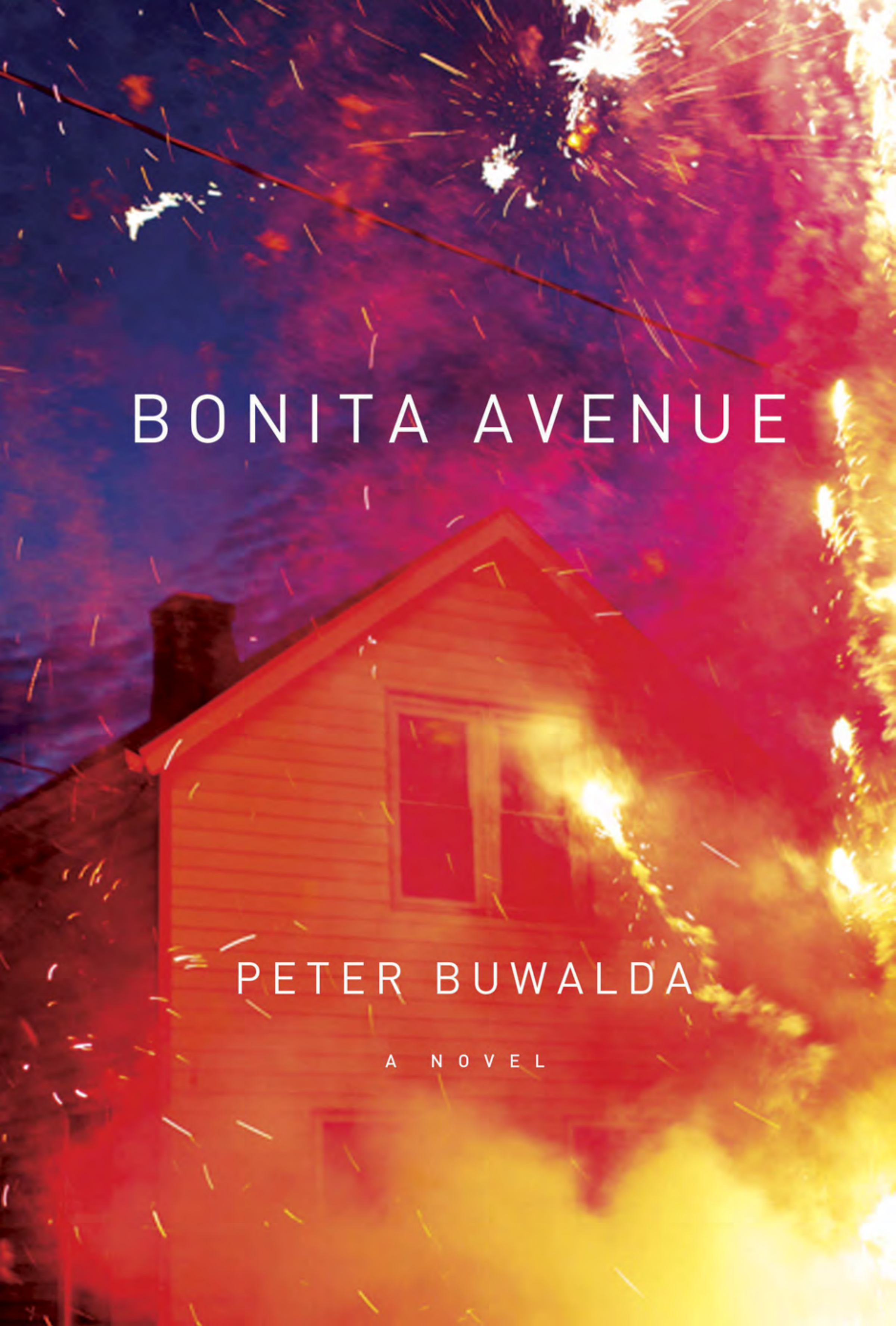
"Let go."

He lets his hands flop to his sides and stands statue-still, pulling his saddest face. But Mum isn't having it. She shakes her head, then goes upstairs.

It's suddenly lonely in the kitchen. Jacob hears the low rumble of Dad's voice through the ceiling. He suspects Dad is going to miss the birthday pancakes and he tries to think of something to make him stay. He knows *"Please"* won't be enough, because Dad likes to follow the rules. If he is going to stop him, he will have to come up with a bigger, more important rule than the one about helping people, a rule that will trump the saying Dad always repeats when he has to disappear at important moments: *"Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, my brethren, ye have done it unto me."* Mum has an easier way of saying the almost-same thing: *"Do as you would be done by."* Jacob thinks about the best way to persuade Dad—*"Inasmuch as you have stayed to eat breakfast with me on my birthday, you have done it unto Jesus."* But it sounds cheeky. He wishes Dad was the kind of person who would say, "No, I'm sorry I can't come. If it's an emergency, you must call the police or the fire brigade because today is Jacob's birthday." But he knows Dad isn't that kind of man because Dad has already said, "Of course I'll come to a missionary meeting on Saturday. I'll miss Jacob's party, but I'm sure he'll understand."

Jacob looks at the casserole dish of pancakes through the glass of the oven door and decides that after he has died and gone to live in the Celestial Kingdom, when he is actually in charge of his own world, he will make it a commandment for dads to stay at home on their children's birthdays. And if they don't, he will send a prophet to chop their arms off.

ISSY WAKES UP with achy arms. When she opens her eyes, they are full of lightning icicles. She tries to get out of bed and discovers that there isn't much breath in her tummy. She wonders if part of her has popped in the night, like a balloon.



BONITA AVENUE

PETER BUWALDA

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Translated from the Dutch by
JONATHAN REEDER

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First American Edition

“I’m a natural. I know, don’t blow your own trumpet, but that’s just how it is. Judo is a ruthless, cold-blooded sport. I’ve let myself be taken for a ride often enough in life and I’m naïve, but on the mat it’s another story. Then I’m a calculator.”

—Wim Ruska

“Y’know, I am to you what a gladiator was to the Roman citizen.”

—Sasha Grey

1

That Sunday afternoon in 1996, when Aaron let Joni Sigerius cajole him into going along to her parents' converted farmhouse in order to be officially introduced, her father offered him a handshake so firm that it hurt. "You took that photo," the man said. Or was it a question?

Siem Sigerius was a stocky, dark-haired fellow with a pair of ears that grabbed your attention; they were lumpy, they looked deep-fried, and Aaron's judo past told him they were cauliflower ears. You got them from chafing against coarse cotton sleeves, from letting the flaps get scrunched up between hard bodies and rough mats; blood and pus built up between the cartilage and the baby-soft skin. Not doing anything about it meant being stuck with hardened, swollen lumps for good. Aaron had a pair of perfectly normal, unblemished, peachy-soft ears; cauliflower ears were reserved for champions, for the monomaniacs who scraped themselves across a tatami night after night. You had to earn ears like that, man-years had gone into it. There was no doubt in his mind that Joni's father wore them as a badge of honor, as proof of hard work and manliness. Aaron used to dread coming face-to-face with a similarly ear-marked beast at a tournament; a cauliflower ear on the horizon was bad news, as a competitive judoka he was useless. To cover up the fact that he felt put on the spot, he replied: "I take photos all the time."

Sigerius's ears quivered. His cropped, frizzy hair lay like felt against his broad, flat head. Despite his wardrobe—suits or corduroy trousers and Ralph Lauren polo shirts, the garb of the employer, the arrivé—you'd never take him, judging from the ears and that buffalo body, for someone who ran a university, let alone believe he was the Netherlands' greatest mathematician since Luitzen Brouwer. More likely you'd picture a man with his physique at a construction site, or on a freeway at night in a fluorescent vest, trudging behind a tar-spreader. "You know full well which photo," he said.

Joni, her sister, Janis, his wife, Tineke, all of them in the spacious living room knew which photo he meant. It had been printed full-page about a year earlier in the newspaper serving Tubantia University, the small college whose campus was tucked into the woods between Enschede and Hengelo, and where Sigerius was *rector magnificus*. He was standing on the bank of the Amsterdam-Rhine Canal, wearing nothing but a necktie, spread-legged in the muddy, trampled grass, his genitals clearly visible under his cautiously rounded fifty-plus belly. The next day the photo had found its way into nearly every national newspaper, from the *NRC* to *De Telegraaf*, and ultimately even to the German *Bild* and a Greek daily.

"I have a hunch," Aaron conceded, wondering whether Joni had tipped off her father, or if Sigerius simply recognized him: the tall, bald photographer from the *Tubantia Weekly* who buzzed around the rector during public appearances like a horsefly with a single-lens reflex. The latter option, he thought, was more flattering, just as anyone on campus would feel flattered to be recognized by the charismatic man who at this very moment was crushing his hand to a pulp.

Simon Sigerius was, since his appointment in 1993, the Helios of Tubantia University, a blazing sun around which 8,000 students and hard-working academics orbited in calm little ellipses, surprised yet grateful that he would bathe *their* campus, of all places, in his warmth, and not the Binnenhof in The Hague, where he had turned down a plum government post, or one of the big American universities that vied for his favor. The first time Aaron had seen Joni's father was on television several years earlier, when he was still living with his folks in Venlo. The August following his final exams, something possessed him and his brother to become fanatical *Zomergasten* viewers, and one of those exhilarating, reflective Sunday evening marathon interviews was with a mathematical judoka—or was it a judo-practicing mathematician—anyway, a man whose "ideal TV evening" selection alternated video fragments of judo star Wim Ruska, edgy jazz, the Tokyo 1964 Olympics, and a Dutch comedian with documentaries about prime numbers and Fermat's Last Theorem. Aaron recalled a clip where a talkative physicist succeeded in giving sworn alphas like him and his brother the impression that they actually understood something of quantum mechanics. ("Richard Feynman," Sigerius said later. "We'd just buried him.") The man himself rubbed his stubbly jaw and talked about computers, about the universe, about M.C. Escher, as though to talk about anything else was a complete waste of time. Turns out he also judoed against Geesink and Ruska, but owed this television appearance mainly to the fact that he'd been awarded a Fields Medal, a distinction the host called the Nobel Prize for mathematics.

Since then Sigerius had grown into the national poster-boy scientist. Their rector would regularly, after a full workday on campus, pull up a seat on the evening news or a talk show and offer scientific commentary on current affairs, dazzlingly intelligent yet at the same time remarkably folksy, never a word of gibberish. As photographer for the *Weekly* Aaron was front and center when Sigerius set up shop in the university's administrative wing, and what his camera saw, everybody saw: this was exactly the man Tubantia needed. Just by being himself, Sigerius had liberated this overlooked and underrated university from its Twents timidity and inferiority complex. In his inaugural address he vowed to turn Tubantia into the Netherlands' premier research institute, a phrase that was broadcast that same day on the national news. He was a media magnet: no sooner had somebody uttered the word "university" than the cauliflower ears appeared on air, and *their* rector gave, on behalf of *their* university, his opinion on the competitive position of Dutch research schools, on girls' technical ability, on the future of the Internet, you name it. Sigerius just as effortlessly attracted top international scholars. Maybe it was a pity that the Fields Medal wasn't a genuine Nobel Prize, of course that was a pity, but his aura of mathematical genius still mesmerized investors in pure science, dyscalculaic MPs with education portfolios, communications giants and chip manufacturers whose labs sprang up around the university. And perhaps even schoolkids, they too recognized Sigerius's stubbly mug from TV; don't forget the precious progeny, each year the little brats had to be lured to that godforsaken hick town in Twente, how do you entice them, how do you hook them?

The pied piper of Tubantia, bare-assed in the daily papers. "Nice work," he said, and released Aaron's hand.

He'd taken the photo on a Sunday afternoon in Houten, just after they had finished rowing the Varsity, the traditional student regatta between boats from various universities. Blaauwbroek, the editor-in-chief of the *Weekly*, had assured Aaron that something special was on the cards: the Tubantia boat had an Olympic skipper on board as well as an oarsman with the Holland 8 Atlanta crew. Still, it was unusual for a university rector to sacrifice his free day to join a busload of boozing fratboys all the way to the

Amsterdam-Rhine Canal. During the minor events he observed Sigerius out of the corner of his eye; the man stood on the soggy washland grass between the bar and the wooden bleachers, surrounded by a rat pack of hard-core Siemsayers, fawning undergrads who went out of their way to claim the rector as their own. Sigerius appeared to take pleasure in these boys' company. He had sucked them out of their urban brownstones, they came swarming to the campus, hankering after a part-time job at the policy office or with public relations, flattering themselves on being invited to Sigerius's annual barbecue at his farmhouse. Aaron felt a pang of jealousy. Was the guy acting or genuinely enjoying himself?

Blaauwbroek's instinct was right: it was a historic Sunday afternoon for Tubantia. An "Oude Vier" from Enschede won the race for the first time in its 112-year history. Aaron was standing on the windy bleachers when the crowd around him roared, an explosion of hoarse cheers mixing with the crackle of plastic beer glasses. And because fratboys can always be counted on to do the predictable, the gang of fanatics down at the water's edge tore off their clothes and swam, stark naked, out to the boat—and at that moment he caught sight of the rector, who did the *un*predictable: Sigerius flung his half-filled beer tumbler into the grass and crossed the mudbank toward the water—Aaron had already clambered down from the bleachers, his camera lens followed the grinning rector as he removed his suit—everything came off, his shirt, his socks, his underwear, all except the necktie, a rowing tie, of course he'd let them foist a team tie on him, he was an honorary member of every club with a beer tap—and just before he broke into a sprint toward the canal to dive in after them, Aaron shouted his name, "Sigerius!," and snapped a photo of him from about four meters away, in all his glory.

Joni's dad was right, it *was* nice work, it was in all respects a fantastic photo. There was speed: his subject, filling the frame, stood on the balls of his feet, threw his arms into the air, and while his torso appeared to already be heading for the glistening strip of water in the background, his bellowing mouth and furious eyes looked straight at the lens. The late-afternoon sun floodlit his naked body, the composition seemed meticulously arranged: Sigerius's outstretched left hand pointed more or less in the direction of the boat off in the canal; like a stylized sporting photograph, it resonated with a Greek-Olympian buzz. But this was all photographer blahblah—why the newspapers scrambled to have it was obvious. Even before Aaron left Houten he spent a quarter of an hour squabbling with a PR girl from Tubantia University, who insisted the photo had to be run by her department for approval, which of course would never be granted. On the contrary, the next morning the editors treated him like he was Robert Capa. "You bet I'm going to print that photo," snorted Blaauwbroek. "It's going to the printer's in an armored car, and I'll guard the presses with my life if need be."

Since then the naked rector surfaced everywhere, blown up above the bar in the rowing club canteen, on a local debating society's T-shirts, on a poster announcing a massive summer festival on campus. Aaron saw him taped to dormitory bathroom doors. And, coincidence or no, Sigerius was increasingly the subject of wild speculation, in the fraternities on the Oude Markt, at parties in the campus housing. The rector was said to have traveled with Ruska through the Soviet Union and China en route to Japan, trashing Russian eateries on the way; he was purported to have been given electroshock treatment in an American madhouse after his big mathematical breakthrough; there were allegedly children from an earlier marriage who had come to no good. You only had to take a better look at the photo, and all doubt melted off the paper onto your lap. It was as plain as day that everything Sigerius's ears stood for just intensified as his body disappeared into an impeccable two-piece suit, mostly monotonous dark blue, sometimes light-gray pinstripe; the body, so crudely exposed, appeared surprisingly tough and sinewy, hard, unbreakable—"dry," to express it in sports terms. It was difficult not to have an opinion about that body, or about the clearly visible tattoos on the left side of his chest, over Sigerius's heart: Aaron recognized the inscription, in cheap, dark-blue sailor's ink, the pair of Japanese characters—"judo." It evoked conflicting reactions: in 1995, not only were tattoos relatively rare, they were downright tacky. But at the same time it tallied entirely with Sigerius's physicality, the apeman who would tip back his chair during meetings, balancing on the back legs until he had to grab the edge of the table, who rolled his shoulders loose like a trapeze artist during the coffee breaks, looking around to see if there was anyone who needed a thrashing before the meeting reconvened—murky keyholes through which the campus could catch a glimpse of another, discarded Sigerius, a thug, a he-man whose dream career had begun with two European judo titles, a fighter for whom the Munich Olympics should have been the highlight of his life.

In interviews they read that their rector was, like Ruska, tipped for a medal in 1972, but that a month before the Games, fate intervened: hungry for a custard donut, Sigerius crossed the Biltstraat in Utrecht, and just as the soft, creamy custard made contact with his mouth he was sideswiped by a motor scooter, whose metal footboard drove straight through his shin: *crack*, goodbye athletic career. What no journalist, no student, no scientist could get enough of was the idea that without that uneaten donut, the real miracle of Sigerius's career would never have taken place. The Miracle of the Antonius Matthaeuslaan, as he himself called it, after the street in Utrecht where for eight months he was confined to a bed in a tiny upstairs apartment, encased up to his groin in plaster. In the dark winter following the ’72 Olympics, as Joni’s father, bruised and broken, lay thumbing through a cardboard box of back issues of waiting-room magazines, he came across a stray exam booklet from the Dutch Mathematics Olympiad—a pamphlet full of uncommonly difficult problems for uncommonly brainy high-school students—and out of sheer boredom started scribbling sums in the margins. The next morning he was finished.

Exactly what happened in those twenty-four hours, which doors were flung open in Sigerius’s traumatized athlete’s head, is anybody’s guess, but the fact was that within three years he had graduated summa cum laude from the Utrecht Mathematics Department, produced an alarmingly brilliant doctoral dissertation, and in the early ’80s moved with his family to Berkeley, California. And there, at long last, he reached his Olympian peak. The Ramanujan of Utrecht forced a breakthrough in the “knot theory,” a branch of mathematics that attempts to understand the number of ways in which a piece of rope can be tied—there is no conciser, simpler definition of his work—which earned him the Fields Medal in 1986 at the quadrennial congress of the International Mathematics Union.

All this shot through Aaron’s mind when he recognized the woman sitting diagonally across from him. Despite her metamorphosis he knew straightaway who she was. There, next to a gum-chewing girl in the crimson uniform of some or other chain store, sat Joni’s mother. He was blinded by a stroboscopic shock of white light.

He had been jolted out of a dreamless doze, and although he was still sitting in the express train to Brussels—they’d already passed

Liège—his situation had altered drastically in the half hour he'd been sleeping. The carriage was now jam-packed, the evening light that shone through the windows appeared heavy, leaden, it was Belgian light, refracted and made turbid by the undulating landscape. Tineke Sigerius, he saw in a glance, leaned with her temple against the window and stared absently at the receding Walloon hills and single-steepled villages. His first reflex was to bolt, make a run for it, but his escape route was blocked by standing passengers—so to get up and move to the other end of the compartment was virtually impossible. His body acted as though it were racing up a steep slope in blind panic. He sat like this for several minutes, sweating, hyperventilating, exhorting himself to calm down, in anticipation of the confrontation.

Nothing happened. Whenever a bump or unexpected noise jerked Tineke Sigerius away from her vista, he felt her eyes glide over his jittery body without stopping. *She pretended not to see him.* They were in the same boat, he realized, she didn't want this any more than he did. Happenstance had forced her to sit across from him, she was glad to have a seat in the overfull Sunday evening train, and only once she'd settled in did she recognize him. She must have been relieved to see that he was sleeping, a lucky break that allowed her to catch her breath and devise a strategy. She had boarded in Liège, which surprised him more than that she was heading for Brussels. What was Tineke Sigerius doing in Liège? He hadn't seen or spoken to her for eight years, of course plenty could have changed since then. Maybe she and Sigerius had left Enschede, maybe Sigerius was a European commissioner by now and they had moved to Belgium. This coincidence struck him as overwhelmingly unfair. Perhaps they had split up and she was living here alone? Of course she'd have another son-in-law by now, a rich, successful one. Wallowing in self-pity, he fantasized that

Tineke was not on her way to Brussels after all, but to Paris, the city of her grandchildren, where Joni now lived and worked (her American adventure can only have lasted a couple of years, he guessed) and ran a family together with some or other French moron, a guy with a fat face, greased-back black hair, and platinum cuff links, he could just see him opening their lacquered front door, his welcoming arms spread out for his mother-in-law on the granite doorstep.

Or was he mistaken? He glanced briefly in her direction in the hope that his conscience was playing tricks on him. No, that was Joni's mother all right. But look how skinny she'd got, it was like she'd been halved; her surrealistically narrow hips were wrapped in brown slacks with a neat pinstripe, she wore a tailored jacket and under it a cream-colored blouse, on her feet were boots with thin, elegant heels that on the old Tineke Sigerius would have bored straight through the chassis of the train carriage. Her half-long hair was graying, not unflatteringly, and lay in a studied knot on her weirdly buckled head, which radiated something most people would call decisive, independent, and even sympathetic, rather than what he suspected even back when she was still his mother-in-law: ill-tempered, or downright nasty. And now it dawned on him: along with all that fat, the last bit of kindness had been boiled off, apparently for good. Although she had gained a certain femininity, the effect was undermined by an excess of loose skin around her cheeks and chin, by her baggy, pink-smeared eyelids that hung dejectedly over her lashes. She looked, in a word, bitchy.

Sigeriuses do not belong in Belgian trains, Sigeriuses belong at home in Twente, where he had left them nearly eight years ago. It was exactly to avoid this kind of encounter that he had skipped town. It wasn't the cuisine that had drawn him to Linkebeek, a hole in the wall just south of Brussels where, he'd thought until five minutes ago, a person could start afresh as inconspicuously as in Asunción or Montevideo. He had imagined himself sheltered and unseen, Linkebeek was a village where the trees outnumbered the inhabitants, every lopsided thing that human hands had built was concealed from view by rustling, crackling, snapping wood.

He stole a glance at Tineke's hands. They lay in her lap, strangely fine and bony, emphatically segmented. How many tables, how many chairs, how many chests had those hands produced by now? Joni's mother made furniture in a workshop behind the farmhouse, she did back then anyway, designer-ish and pricey interior furnishings that found their way into villas, offices, and stately canal houses across the Netherlands. Now, the one hand took hold of a finger on the other, one after the other, and gave each a little—bitter, he presumed—tug.

They had never hit it off, he and this woman. It didn't click. He thought back to the first time he and Joni slept at her parents' house; he, as usual, lay awake for hours on end, yearning desperately for Sigerius's wine cellar, and finally crept out of the narrow guest bed and down the open staircase, through the cool front hall and into the living room. From the kitchen he descended—routinely, he knew the way—the creaking cellar stairs and removed one of Sigerius's self-tapped bottles from the cast-iron rack, determined to uncork it at the kitchen counter and guzzle as much of it as possible in the hope that it would knock him out. But on his way back up the stairs he heard footsteps in the living room and had to duck back into the opening. Someone entering the kitchen, cupboards being opened and shut. Standing on his tiptoes, he peered over the edge, and what he saw was shocking and repulsive: he looked out onto a hideous back, a mountainside like you saw in nature films about South Africa or the Arizona prairies, but this was a mountain of flesh. It was Tineke. He counted six deeply pleated rolls of fat between her armpits and her backside, on which, halfway down, hung a sort of orange awning, which even with the best will in the world you couldn't call a "panty."

Joni's mother tore open a cardboard packet and poured its contents into her gaping mouth, half of it skittered off in all directions, chocolate sprinkles rained across the floor tiles. Once the package was empty she wrung it out, squashed it flat and shoved it deep into the trash can. He recoiled at the fleshy thud as she fell to her knees. She gathered up the spilt sprinkles with spit on her fingertips and palms. By then he had forgotten his cover, and as she sat there licking off her fingers she suddenly swung her head a quarter-turn and looked at him. "Hey," he said, once they had both got over the initial shock. "I was thirsty." She did not answer, she could at least have said, "I was hungry"; instead she hoisted herself up and stumbled out of the kitchen without a word, and only after he heard her bedroom door close down the hall did he return to his own bed.

And now? What could they possibly say to each other now? The train was too full, he reassured himself, for a scene, and he therefore tried to imagine how a controlled variant might proceed. So, Aaron, how are you these days? God, now that was one question he did not relish. He would rather continue his journey on the roof of the intercity than give an honest answer. He'd just spent the weekend at his parents' in Venlo—doctor's orders, just as everything he did was on doctor's orders. It was awful to have to admit he was sick, that he was tethered to neuroleptics and antidepressants. How do you tell someone you're a five-star basket case? How was he to tell this woman he was insane? That's me, Tineke: nothing but doctor's orders.

After the debacle in Enschede he worked briefly as a photographer for the better Brussels newspapers, but after a second severe psychosis in the winter of 2002 nearly did him in, he and his mental health counselors decided to call it quits. Since then he drove around in a VW van refitted as a photo studio, taking individual and class pictures of primary-school children in Brussels and its surroundings. He would trace a numbered silhouette of each group photo on a lightbox. On his meticulously maintained website, fathers and mothers and grannies and grandpas could order reprints by clicking on a variety of formats, frames, and captions. The rest of his time—the hours, days, weeks, months that other men his age spent breeding, chasing careers, or maybe even raising idealistic hell somewhere—he just loafed about like some retired geezer, shuffling up the mossy steps to the town square, buying a newspaper in a secondhand bookshop appropriately called Once Upon a Time, picking up his meds in the pharmacy across from the ancient sycamore. Sometimes he snacked on a satay in the bistro at the end of the square, and then shambled back to the ridge, scuffing behind an imaginary Zimmer frame, and allowed himself to be swallowed up by his oversized, mortgage-free house.

According to his doctors he was a patient who "identified and acknowledged" his own condition, which meant he took his capsules voluntarily and thus was capable of living on his own. But that was about it. He led an entirely aimless existence. His motivation in life was avoidance: avoid stimulation, avoid excitement, avoid motivation itself.

He looked at his knees. What if he were to spill the beans, right here in this chock-full train compartment? A detailed, concentrated, no-holds-barred monologue on his misery, on his psychosis-induced fears? A lecture, a short story, an epic poem on the immeasurable, irrational terror he had endured. The commuters hung cheek by jowl on their ceiling straps, no one could get away. If he really put his mind to it, if he were to wax eloquent, who knows, maybe the fear he described would spark over to his listeners, first to Tineke and the girl in the too-tight outfit, and then to everyone in the seats and aisles. And they would all be scared to death. His fear became everyone's fear. Frenzied panic, as though the Semtex in his noggin had gone "boom."

It clicked fine between him and Sigerius. In the winter of 1995 he had latched onto an intelligent, headstrong, beautiful girl named Joni, and this Joni turned out to be a full-blood Sigerius. Two months later, to his amazement, there he was paying a house call to this guy and his family. And then the thoroughly improbable happened: the man whom the entire campus sucked up to, the man whom he, the Venlo dropout, gawked at on the TV, *that* man extended him a calloused judo hand. And he accepted that hand, eagerly but also surprised. They became friends, and he took care not to wonder too often why.

Once a month, on a Saturday, he and Joni went to dinner in the refurbished farmhouse on the edge of the campus, a completely renovated white-stuccoed residence so utterly desirable that passersby slid "if-you-ever-decide-to-sell" notes through the letter slot in the dark-green front door. Although he teased Joni about her clingy attachment to her parents ("Now don't just call Daddy," he said when a blown fuse suddenly left her student flat pitch-black and deserted), he always enjoyed those visits. As they cycled out to the farmhouse, downtown Enschede would melt into the Drienerlo woods, which in turn flowed seamlessly into the campus, the backdrop for their four-year relationship. On those Saturdays, Tubantia seemed heavily pregnant. The humming meadows looked grassier than on weekdays, in his memory the wooded paths rolled gently, they cycled through an undulating landscape that smelled of pollen and where the ponds were self-evidently ponds. The shimmering water had collected at the lowest parts, just as hundreds of scholars and thousands of students had flowed precisely here in order to shine. You could hear their brains rustling, the fields and the trees and the berm seemed statically charged by the billions of bits and bytes that zoomed through the campus network under their feet. And when they returned home late in the evening, a prehistoric darkness enveloped the route, the gentle hills had become shallow dells, the greens and woods lairs for slumbering academic buildings. Applied Mathematics lay like a brontosaurus in its lake, the Tyrannosaurus rex of Technical Physics stretched up to the highest treetops, its slumbering head among the stipple of stars.

Sometimes they'd spend the night, and the next morning they ate warm croissants with marmalade and drank jumbo glasses of fresh orange juice Sigerius squeezed for them after doing his forty laps of breast stroke in the campus pool, with the music of the Bill Evans Trio, the Modern Jazz Quartet, Dave Brubeck in the background, easy-listening Saturday jazz, which, he said, worked like salve on their morning moodiness. "Can you turn the salve down a little?" Joni complained, but Sigerius ignored her. With a raised index finger and one eye shut, he would call out: "Listen!" His wife and two daughters fell silent, dutifully stopped chewing and concentrated, just to indulge him in something that bored them, and after about ten seconds Sigerius released them with words like: "Beautiful, how Scott LaFaro plays *around* Evans. Hear that? *Around* him. Yeah, *now!*, this, that meandering bass, listen."

"Dad, I *hate* jazz," said Janis, or Joni, or both.

"This! Unreal. It's up front and in the background at the same time, backup *and* virtuosic. I cannot turn this down. No way."

At moments like this, Aaron was the one—and this was the basis for their bond, the simple fact that he was a boy, and not a girl, although there are also certain breeds of boy that get the creeps from jazz, for whom jazz is a complete waste of time—who remarked how tragic it was that Scott LaFaro smashed himself up in a car crash, and that Bill Evans, after that dramatic loss in 1961, never found another bassist of that caliber, although Chuck Israels of course did come close, certainly on *How My Heart Sings!* And before he'd finished with his input, another heart sang: that of his father-in-law, who divided the world into jazz lovers and ignoramuses, and who had often announced, even in company, that he'd never met a young person so clued-up on jazz as Aaron, a feather in his cap that he not only left there but also, now and then, when no one was looking, stroked.

The Saturday evenings usually began in the sunroom, which was then spanking-new and, since the wall was taken out a year earlier, ran directly into the kitchen with its cooking island where Tineke prepared simple but tasty meals, after which they retired, arguing or joking, to the old living room, and Tineke followed, carrying a tray of buttered *krentenwegge* and jittering coffee cups, and Joni opened the cabinet doors concealing the so-called unimportant television, and Sigerius kept up his end of the bargain by not answering his cell phone for an hour. The times when Janis went off to meet friends at a café downtown (usually right after *Frasier,* watching the end with her coat already on) and Tineke and Joni decided at around ten to watch a Saturday evening film, and Sigerius would ask: "How 'bout some tunes?" and he would not say no but yes, and they would disappear like a pair of schoolboys with a bottle of whiskey to the "music room," a space on the ground floor fitted out with two dark-red Chesterfields, an expensive NAD amplifier and CD player, a Thorens turntable, and two man-sized B&W speakers on spikes and bits of NASA foam rubber that Sigerius had wangled from Technical Physics; and there, seated among framed photos of Bud Powell and Thelonious Monk and Bill Evans, they listened to democratically chosen records (with bilateral veto power), original American LPs that Sigerius kept in tall, narrow, waxed beechwood cabinets designed and built by his wife.

Boys' stuff, just like that judo of theirs. In the farmhouse entrance hung a blown-up photo of five hulking, bare-chested men dragging a tree trunk up a hill: Geesink, Ruska, Gouweleeuw, and Snijders, and there, second from the left, with the tensed pecs and cropped dark curls above the flat face, was Sigerius himself. The Dutch national judo team in training for a World Championship, it must have been '65 or '66. Geesink, coach as well as teammate, sent his line-up into the woods near Marseilles; according to Sigerius he was a slave driver, but when tree trunks had to be dragged uphill, he was out in front. Up on top, while the others lay gasping for breath, Geesink grabbed the trunk at one end and, palpitating, shoved it out in front of him ten or so times, tore the clothes off his steaming body and jumped in a mountain creek. "If we offered him a water bottle, he refused, thought it was a waste of his thirst," said Sigerius, who soon discovered that Aaron had practiced judo until he was nineteen; and when he learned that he was even a black belt, Sigerius coaxed him into taking it up again, first in the senior group he coached on Thursday evenings at the campus athletic center, and when Aaron had regained, as they say, his old "feeling," Sigerius asked if he felt like going for a dan exam together.

Judo is a strangely intimate sport. A couple of times a week for a good two years, he and Sigerius rolled around the judo mat in each other's arms. Intensive, concentrated hours with the gym entirely to themselves. Talk was kept to a bare minimum. They gave themselves one year to hone their throwing and grappling techniques, Sigerius going for his fourth dan, he for his second. Each training session closed with the savage bouts he often thought back on, even now. And after each session he climbed into bed, occasionally in her parents' guest room, next to Joni, Sigerius's painstakingly raised daughter, the apple of his eye, and then Aaron noticed that Joni smelled vaguely like her father—maybe it was the washing powder Tineke used, he couldn't say. And while he mixed pheromones—he was a messenger of bodily scents, a bumblebee that traveled between two bodies of the same make—he felt that his strange happiness was doubled in their careful lovemaking after the training sessions, their muted groans in Sigerius's guest bed, his hand sometimes firmly over Joni's warm mouth to keep her from waking his surreal friend a floor below.

The train rolled through Leuven. Tineke had closed her eyes, she pretended to sleep so that they would not have to acknowledge each other's existence. He admired her cold-bloodedness. He hadn't seen a single Sigerius since late in 2000, the year the shit hit the fan. Nevertheless they roamed stubbornly through his subconscious, he still had recurring dreams—nightmares mostly—of Enschede.

Twilight was falling, the sky was purple, silvery on the edge of the wispy clouds. He caught the reflection of his own bald head in the window. He felt himself become calmer, and somber. A village unfurled itself alongside a canal, a wafery moon hung curiously early in the sky. Soon he would walk home through the moldy dusk of Linkebeek. The deadness that awaited him, the cold, high-ceilinged rooms he had longed for back in Venlo. He thanked his lucky stars that it was Tineke who sat there ignoring him, and not Sigerius himself.

It had never been completely relaxed. In Sigerius's company he could freeze up, literally, becoming dramatically paralyzed: his jaws clamped shut, bringing about a barely controllable tension that spread from his neck vertebrae and his shoulders throughout his entire body. He was, for hours on end, a statue of himself fighting against total paralysis, desperately talking all the while, praying his voice would continue to function. If Sigerius were to give him a push during one of these moments, he'd have fallen over and smashed to bits like a Chinese vase.

He experienced their friendship as magical—before he'd come to the campus to take up photography, he had flunked hopelessly out of the Dutch program in Utrecht, was chucked out on his ear, and here he had wormed his way into the inner sanctum of the academic heart, just like that—but mendacious as well. He made out to be more than he was. It all started with the jazz. One Sunday at the farmhouse, not so long after their first meeting, they slurped hot coffee from narrow-handled mugs. Sigerius, distant, his mind on other matters, got up and went over to a hypermodern metal cabinet housing a record player and put on an LP. Jazz. Even before he'd sat back down on the long, pale-pink sofa next to his wife, Aaron recognized the music. He waited a bit just to be sure, but he was right: the theme, the round, slightly coquettish piano-playing, this was Sonny Clark, and the LP was called *Cool Struttin'*. He could see the classic Blue Note jacket before him, a pair of woman's legs strolling over (he presumed) a New York City sidewalk. Over Joni's and Tineke's heads he said: "Nice album, *Cool Struttin'*."

Sigerius, with his amazing morning stubble (it would take Aaron a whole week to cultivate such a shadow), opened his brown eyes wide. "*Cool Struttin'* is a *great* album," he said, his voice more strident, higher, as though a piano tuner had taken a wrench to it. "So you know it. *Cool Struttin'* is by far Clark Terry's best LP."

Clark Terry? Aaron got it at once: Sigerius was mistaken, he was confusing Sonny Clark with Clark Terry, an amusing gaffe, but he decided not to rub it in. It was hardly tactful to swoop in like a schoolmarm and rap your new father-in-law on the knuckles, but to just play dumb, no, he was too proud for that. “I’m with ya,” he said, “this was Sonny Clark’s best band, Philly Joe Jones, for once, holding back on the drums. Not going at the cymbals like a hooligan.”

Eyes like saucers, briefly, then suddenly shut. “Terry. It’s Clark Terry.”

“This is Sonny Clark on piano,” Aaron said, more decisively than necessary. “Terry’s a trumpet player.”

“You sure about that?” Joni asked.

Sigerius bolted up off the sofa and slid past his wife, his heels ticking as he marched over to the novel metal cabinet which, he learned later, Tineke had made herself. He pulled out the record jacket, glanced at both the front and back cover, propped it up next to the turntable and closed the cabinet. He returned, painfully slowly, to the sofa and sat back down.

“You’re right. Of course you’re right. And damn, I even saw that Terry in the Kurhaus. And in Boston too, later. Ladies, I’m going to have to watch my words from now on.”

That is precisely what Aaron did for the remaining quarter of an hour; Sigerius didn’t catch on that his knowledge of jazz was wafer-thin after all, that the Sonny Clark album was pure luck. He knew *Cool Struttin’* so well because of that pair of legs, he’d picked up the album at a flea market because of the jacket, it spent a few years taped to the door of his wardrobe, the vinyl disc collecting dust on the turntable. Sure, he liked jazz, but to be honest, his heart lay with blues and rock ’n’ roll.

But honesty was not his speciality. Now that Sigerius had promoted him to jazz expert, to someone with an encyclopaedic knowledge on, of all things, his own turf, to a kindred spirit, he had to put his nose to the grindstone. That same week he let a nervous guy in a black turtleneck at Broekhuis bookshop talk him into the *Penguin Guide to Jazz on CD*, a 1,500-page jazz bible that, according to the turtleneck, not only contained the entire history of jazz, but separated the wheat from the chaff with a handy system of stars. Across from Broekhuis, at the discount-book warehouse, he bought a biography of Miles Davis, a *Jazz for Dummies* and a book called *Billie and the President*. In his wallet he still had the business card of a retired dentist in Boekelo, a silver-gray man in red trousers who stood behind him one day at the campus record library and saw him check out a Bud Powell record. The man told him he had 800 original jazz LPs at home—American pressing, thick, pitch-black vinyl, sturdy cardboard jackets—"you can have them for a guilder apiece," at which Aaron nearly hit the ceiling tiles with fermented craving. "Give me a call," the man said, and he did just that, the very same evening, and he kept on calling him, twice a week at first, then twice a month, brief, hasty exchanges in which the man was always too busy, or he was about to leave for the States, or he was ill, or was about to be; "call me again soon," but "soon" gradually became more of an obstacle, a testiness crept into the exchanges—until Aaron stopped believing him. Stick your LPs up your retired old ass. But now he decided to take the plunge and cycled out to Boekelo, on the other side of town. He rang the bell at a seniors' apartment that corresponded to the address on the tattered card. A Turkish man answered the door.

So he plundered the record library and, when Joni wasn't with him, studied jazz history as if he had to program the North Sea Festival that summer. He perused the artist entries, concentrating first on the big shots who got the most pages—the Parkers, the

Ellingtons, the Monks, the Coltranes, the Davises—and after that, the rest of the ’50s jazz greats: Fitzgerald, Evans, Rollins, Jazz Messengers, Powell, Gillespie, Getz. He listened to all their records, jotted down biographical particulars in a notebook, etched it all in his memory, Blue Note, Riverside, Impulse!, Verve, Prestige. It was like his former studies, only that fucking *Kapellekensbaan* had taken him three weeks and *Giant Steps* just thirty-seven minutes and three seconds. Books had dominated the first half of his 1990s, he read like a maniac, entire evenings, at bus stops and in waiting rooms, when he lay awake at night: tallying titles, keelhauling oeuvres, five years of forced labor to recoup his humiliating comedown in Utrecht—now it was “mission accomplished” in just five *weeks*. Then he knew it was safe to go back in the water. Another five weeks later, he stood next to Sigerius in De Tor listening to the Piet Noordijk Quartet, sipping whiskey and putting his faith in a silicone-implant jazz knack.

A snow job? Sure it was. But they all lied there in that farmhouse. It was a family of prevaricators. Although he knew this was a lame excuse, he told himself that all of them had secrets—Sigerius, Tineke, Joni, him, they all had something they kept under wraps. How long had he not known that Janis and Joni weren’t Sigerius’s real daughters? Long. And they’d have kept him in the dark forever if they could. Never a word about the actual family make-up. Sometimes he had the impression that they’d forgotten it themselves.

It was at least a year before Joni told him, during a weekend in the woods in Drenthe, that her “procreators” divorced when she was five. More than the news itself, he was surprised that she waited so long to bring up something as relatively ordinary as divorced parents, but she was so dead serious about it, uncharacteristically earnest, that he didn't let on. They were staying in a secluded clapboard cabin about twenty kilometers south of Assen, and the cloying romanticism of remoteness and a wood-burning stove apparently gave her that little extra incentive to share. During a crisp winter walk in the woods she challenged him to guess which of her parents was the "real" one: Come on, Siem or Tineke? Good question, he said, but in fact it was a piece of cake. Sigerius, of course.

"Why d'you think that?"

"Just because. It's a wild guess. You don't look much like him, but not like your mother either. You're both athletic. Athletically built too."

In truth, they didn't look at all alike. Sigerius was dark and swarthy, had eyes like cold coffee, he looked like a gypsy, almost sinister. His beard growth would make an evolutionary biologist's mouth water. Joni, on the other hand, was fair and blond, butterflyish, had a face so smooth and symmetrical that Sigerius couldn't possibly have had anything to do with it. And yet he detected a common denominator: their drive. Father and daughter possessed the same bold go-gettiveness, couldn't tolerate dallying or doubt, could not abide sitting on the sidelines, especially when someone else—he, for instance—did just that. Joni, like Sigerius, was smart and tough and decisive. Maybe it was genetic.

"So you think Siem is my real father because I'm not fat."

He'd never really given it any thought, he realized, there had been no reason to. "Yeah," he said. "No . . . Also the way you interact. You and Siem are in cahoots, you can see that within ten minutes. Janis is a mama's girl. You're more like your father."

"But Janis and I are blood sisters. So there goes your theory."

"Just tell me then."

"So you think it's Siem?"

"Yeah. That's what I think, yeah."

"Wrong," she sang, laughing. She kicked some dead branches and rotting remains of fallen leaves, as though the gravity of her disclosure evaporated at once because he'd been off the mark. She didn't say so, but her odd excitement told him she was glad he'd guessed Sigerius; he even suspected she would just as soon have left his illusion intact. And he had to admit feeling a bit disappointed—it was a pity there were no genes at play—but of course he didn't let on either. Maybe Joni felt the same way, because even before they had returned to the clammy cabin her high spirits had dissipated into an inwardness he had not seen in her before.

While he silently warmed up chocolate milk on the two-burner stove and she sat on the moth-eaten sofa with an old issue of *Panorama* on her lap, leafing through an article on skating, he thought about the natural easiness with which she and her sister called Sigerius "Dad." They said "Dad" with a teasing or admiring smile, wheedled him with "ple-e-e-e-ease Daddy" in his ear when they wanted something, groaned "Da-haaaad" when he irritated them. When he asked her about it, she said with a certain pride that it had been like that since day one; from the day in 1979 when Siem Sigerius and Tineke Profijt married at city hall in Utrecht—without hoopla, without tuxedo, without Rolls or Bentley, without a reception—they had addressed their stepfather as "Dad." She was six, Janis was three. From that day on, Joni called herself Joni Sigerius. Her real surname, Beers, a word that she only grudgingly revealed, had been encased in cement and dropped to the bottom of the Vecht River.

Later, back in her student flat, she showed him ochre-brown Polaroid photos of an implausibly tiny Joni, her head sprouting two intensely blond ponytails, a surprisingly ordinary-looking little girl, an almost homely six-year-old, sticking out her tongue as she hung on the leg of a youthful Sigerius—the leg of her new father, who had let his beard grow wild. Her mother, still trim, not skinny like now, but just trim, in a sober dark-green pants suit, the snot-nosed Janis cradled in her arm, wore large brown sunglasses in all the photos because an ophthalmologist had scraped a cold sore from her left eyeball a week earlier.

To make short work of their past, mother and daughters accompanied their new chieftain to America, to Berkeley, where Sigerius had been appointed assistant professor in the Mathematics Department. Not there, nor at any subsequent campus, did Joni Sigerius raise the matter of her biological father herself. Aaron had to press her just to learn the man's first name. "Theun." "Theun," he repeated. "Theun Beers. OK. And what did he do?" Her real father was a traveling salesman in tobacco articles, the nameplate on their front door said "smoking accessories" and behind two small doors in the tall china cupboard were cartons of cigarettes, arranged by brand, that Beers had acquired surreptitiously and sold duty-free to smoke-logged characters who appeared in their living room at all hours, usually after Joni's bedtime, to place their gravelly voiced orders. Her father often only got home after nine, he ate his meatballs and schnitzels in salesmen's cafés and roadside diners. Even at the weekend they seldom saw him, she said, because then he rehearsed or performed with his band, a not entirely unsuccessful blues band where he sang and played guitar.

"Blues? Did he make any records?"

"How should I know? I think so, yeah."

(*Blues?*—he would have given anything to race off to his house on the Vluchtestraat to pore through his three editions of *Oor's Pop Encyclopaedia* in search of Theun Beers. A blues band, Jesus, *now* she tells me. And sure enough, the next day he found, in his oldest encyclopedia, under the heading “Netherblues,” a three-line piece about Beers and his band: Mojo Mama, “blues-rock formation with lead singer and guitarist Theun Beers, who enjoyed a brief cult status”; once “Utrecht’s answer to Cuby + Blizzards,” cut “three LPs of varying quality,” was “famous primarily for its live act.” When he read this he pictured Tineke as Joni’s mother, a groupie, at about the weight she was today, flower-power hat, platform shoes, sitting backstage on big Theun’s lap.)

Although uncles at birthday parties liked to joke that Theun never had to say “I’m going to go get some smokes . . . don’t wait up,” he had vamoosed long before the divorce, leaving a heavily pregnant Tineke and a toddler behind. She could never remember him even sleeping in the same house, which of course couldn’t have been true, but never mind.

“Do you ever think about him?”

“Never. Only during this kind of conversation. Only if somebody asks if I ever think about my real father do I think about my real father.”

The times he pressed her on that mantra of hers, if he asked “but *why* don’t you ever think about Theun Beers?,” for instance when they were at his place watching *Long Lost Family* on TV, she assured him that it was not out of pique, or out of vengeance, or some kind of reproach, and no, she hadn’t “suppressed” him; the fact was that her begetter had simply disappeared out of her life without leaving a single impression behind, and that was that.

On the last day of their weekend in Drenthe, rather late actually, it was such an obvious question, he asked if Sigerius had also been married before. “Yeah,” she said drily. They had just giggled their way through a dolmen museum and were cycling side by side along a bike path parallel to a provincial road. He slammed on the brakes of his rental bike. “Why didn’t you say so earlier? Why don’t you ever tell me stuff?”

“I’m telling you now, aren’t I?” she shouted, without stopping. “And he’s got a son too.”

“Say *what*?”

“He’s got a son.” Without getting off, she did a wobbly 180-degree turn and rode back to him. “A son named Wilbert. Wilbert Sigerius.”

“So you and Janis have a stepbrother?”

“If you want to call it that. We never see him, he leads his own life. Just like us.”

He bombarded her with questions, but she couldn’t or wouldn’t tell him much about this Wilbert, except that in her youngest days she had been his downstairs neighbor. (“Downstairs neighbor?” he cried. “OK, explain.”) She told him a complicated story that took him a while to get straight. In the early ’70s the two families had lived on the Antonius Matthaeuslaan in Utrecht, Sigerius with his first wife, a certain Margriet, and their little boy, that’ll have been Wilbert, at number 59B, the upstairs apartment. Below, at 59A, lived Tineke with this Theun and their two young daughters.

She remembered the fights between Sigerius and Margriet above their heads, altercations they could literally follow word for word as they sat at the kitchen counter, she and Tineke, with Janis in her high chair, eating sweetened yogurt, just as she recalled Wilbert’s menacing tirades, frenzied, thunderous stomping, Margriet’s histrionics. Within a few years, that neighborliness culminated in the classical three-way marital drama: Tineke and Siem, she downstairs and he upstairs, fell in love and were caught in the act by Wilbert’s mother, that Margriet woman, although Joni wasn’t privy to the details.

“Adulterous swine,” said Aaron.

Prior to the marital meltdown, the racket-making ruffian from upstairs would often traipse through their house to the paved courtyard out back, trampling strawberry plants and knocking over pots. He smelled of sweet soap. After the divorce, Wilbert came to see them just once, she seemed to recall. When Sigerius took them with him to America, that was the end of that.

In the photo album from that period Aaron spotted an overgrown gnome with jet-black hair, the same widely spaced, inky eyes as his father and unpleasantly full lips, insolent as hell, you could just see it. Only later did Joni tell him that he had been the neighborhood bully, a boy who easily terrorized even the older children. Forced them to eat toads he’d caught. Fabricated small bombs with petrol he had siphoned out of parked cars, peed through old people’s mail slots. Coerced the daughter of people up the road into stealing money from her mother’s wallet. Joni’s only first-hand memory of Wilbert’s antics concerned one warm evening when he showed up with one of his cohorts, having found the downstairs front door open, and suddenly stood there in her bedroom. They each carried an enormous green rubber boot, probably Sigerius’s rain boots (when he was still just the upstairs neighbor), that they’d filled to the brim with sandbox sand. The boys poked a yellow PVC pipe between the bars of her bed, goaded her into crying, and when her three-year-old mouth went wide open, they dumped the sand over her face. The grainy taste, how the sand found its way into her throat like a fist, clammy, cool, and dark in her eyes and nose. She’d nearly choked, she said.

A freight train rumbled along the parallel tracks. Startled, Tineke opened her eyes, and for two deafening seconds she stared at him. In Venlo he had taken his oxazepam, but he could feel that the straitjacket around his heart muscles needed an extra tug. So much was evident in those serrated blue irises: condemnation, contempt, disappointment. Arrogance. With a shudder she folded down the collar of her jacket and closed her eyes again. He collected saliva in his cheeks and wriggled his wallet out of his back pocket. Focusing on Tineke's closed eyes, he slid out a strip of oxazepam and pushed two tablets through the foil. The girl in the red shop uniform watched him, it was the first time she deigned to look at him, she stopped chewing momentarily. A thin line had been traced around her lips with black make-up pencil, vulgar, dated, "a black-belt blowjob," Joni used to call it. He put the pills in his mouth and sent them, riding on the gob of spit, off to his stomach.

Not long after Joni's unbosoming, he and Sigerius were sitting at the corner of the long bar in the athletic center's canteen, both of them slightly woozy from the hot shower following their usual Thursday evening training, he with a mug of beer and a cigarette, Sigerius on tonic water as he still had work to do. His father-in-law was casually dressed: a pristine baby-blue lambswool sweater over a button-down shirt, calves bulging inside ironed corduroy trousers, his wide, loafered feet resting on the bar stool, against which his corpulent leather gym bag leaned like an indolent beast. Every few minutes Sigerius raised his hand to greet a passerby. Aaron felt the slight awkwardness of being in the company of the rector in public.

The canteen was large and 1980s-bleak and reminded him of the Pac-Man playing surface, half-wall cement block partitions that prevented the potted plants from getting enough light, foosball, and two pool tables. The low-rise flannel-upholstered seating units were empty at this late hour, chlorine fumes from the indoor swimming pool somewhere in the belly of the sports complex mixed with the odor of deep-fried bar snacks and the linoleum floor. They recapped their training session, chatted about the university, about the Student Union, which was a thorn in Sigerius's side, this is off the record, he kept saying. Aaron had been beating around the bush for a few weeks, but now he said: "By the way, Siem, d'you know, I had absolutely no idea you have a son."

Sigerius was in the middle of a gulp of tonic water. He set his glass down on the bar, wiped his mouth and after a few seconds' silence said: "Well, well. So she told you. Couldn't keep it under wraps forever."

"I was really surprised. I had no idea."

"Are you shocked?"

"A bit. A bit. It's kind of unexpected, of course. You're all such a happy family. I'd never have guessed."

"I completely understand. I really do. It's no joke either."

Aaron, struck by Sigerius's grave tone of voice, chose his words carefully. "Now yeah . . . ," he replied, "these things happen. Statistically speaking. Every day, in fact."

Sigerius rasped his hand over his stubbly chin, he took a deep breath and exhaled through his nose. "That's kind of you," he said, "but I don't think that's true."

"Divorce isn't common?" Aaron asked, surprised.

"*Divorce?*" Sigerius grimaced at him, his ears trembled with surprise, but his eyes suddenly went tired, he aged on the spot. Grinning, he plucked a loose hair from his sleeve and let it flutter to the floor. Then he stared straight ahead, as though he were weighing something up.

"Aaron," he said, "I'm not sure what you're getting at, but I'm talking about manslaughter. About a brutal murder that the lawmakers oblige us to call manslaughter. The bastard killed a man.

He's been locked up for four years already. You didn't know that part, did you?"

It was nearly eleven at night. About ten meters away the beanstalk behind the bar stood rinsing glasses, his shirtsleeves rolled up; with the exception of two sweatsuited chinwaggers at the pool table, the canteen was empty. Everything they said reached into the pores of the cement blocks. The brief silence he was forced to drop was a thing, a heavy object. A murderer? Blushing, he said: "Siem, you're joking. Please tell me you're making this up."

"I wish I were." In a forced attempt to remain offhand in the face of certain details of his life, Sigerius told him about his one and only offspring, a guy about Aaron's age. Nothing to write home about. A life of misdemeanors, drug abuse, relapses. The very same Wilbert whom Joni had so dispassionately described became in Sigerius's version a criminal who had twisted himself like a corkscrew into a life of wretchedness. One weekday in 1993 Wilbert Sigerius hit rock bottom by beating a fifty-two-year-old man to death. "The Netherlands is a wonderful country," said Sigerius. "If you're determined to be a bad egg, there's a great big professional circle of friends ready to help you. Whoever doesn't have the balls to just get out and work, but does have a criminal record, is given a nice subsidized job."

He sounded unexpectedly bitter, and a damn sight more conservative than usual—this was clearly a way-too-close-to-home scenario, an issue that made him heave his liberal principles overboard. Aaron was glad Sigerius did not look at him, perhaps out of shame, so he could let his own emotions cool off, that usually worked best; he was overcome by a strange exhilaration that consisted partly of delight, grateful to be taken into another's confidence, and partly of discomfort with this sudden intimacy. It felt as though they were dancing across the canteen together.

"They gave him a pair of overalls and a decent salary, so he had somewhere to show up in the morning with his lunchbox. After grief followed by even more grief that we won't go into right now, he was given the chance to start over again—what more could a person want? At the Hoogovens steelworks, of all places. An excellent company, tens of thousands of Dutch men and women have earned an honest living there for the past 100 years. A sporting chance, you'd say. But the first spat he gets into, the kid picks up a sledgehammer and beats his direct superior, a foreman looking forward to a gold watch from the head office, flat as a pancake. I sat in the public gallery when the prosecutor described what various witnesses had seen. What happens to a person when you bash them with a four-kilo sledgehammer."

Sigerius wet his mustache by pulling his lower lip over it, pressing it flat with his thumb and index finger. Aaron did not know what to say. This was no run-of-the-mill disclosure. It was a fucking bombshell. He thought he knew a thing or two about Sigerius, he thought he understood what this man, whom he looked up to despite desperately trying not to, had dealt with his entire life, understood the ranks of success his life had maneuvered along, the essentials of that life, and now he discovered he knew absolutely nothing. (That sensation of ignorance, he realized later, was something he should have just got used to: it was the story of his life in Enschede. He never knew anything.)

"Eight years," Sigerius said loudly; the bartender, quite a bit closer to them now, was scrubbing the draining racks. "The prosecutors demanded ten plus mandatory psychiatric treatment. But he impressed them at the psychiatric observation clinic . . . yeah, there, he did well," and here he lowered his voice, "entirely compos mentis. My son is not at all stupid."

As though it were a stiff drink rather than tonic water, he put the glass to his lips and drained it. He set the empty glass down with gentle precision on the broad cherrywood bar.

The train slowed down, the suburbs of Brussels slid into view, the passengers standing in the aisle peered out, craning their necks at the gray, haphazard urban sprawl. Tineke, who had reopened her eyes, brought a small mirror and dark-red lipstick out of a red-leather handbag, painted her wrinkled mouth with a steady hand, repacked the accessories and stared, scowling, at a point just between Aaron and the man next to him.

Wilbert Sigerius. He had never met the fellow, after all these years the fascination had long since faded. Still, it occurred to him that everything he had found out about her stepson over the course of his Enschede years must have been just as awful for Tineke as for Sigerius. She had contributed two healthy daughters, girls to whom they had given a wholeheartedly devoted, not to mention an indulgent and privileged, upbringing; Joni and Janis had both grown into outgoing, stable, at times maddeningly rational adults. Sigerius, on the other hand, had saddled her with that viper.

The train trundled into Brussels Central Station and shuddered to a halt. The crowd in the aisle moved slowly toward the still-shut doors: waiting quietly for salvation, a hundred silent heads in isolated prayer. Tineke didn't budge. He could just as easily stay in the train until Brussels South, although there was a train to Linkebeek from Central as well. The girl removed her chewing gum from her black-lined mouth and reached across Tineke's lap toward the metal rubbish bin. Then she stood up, brushed against his left knee and joined the current of disembarking passengers. Now

Joni's mother stood up too and, her back to him, removed a tartan roller-suitcase from the luggage rack. Seen from behind, with those slender, pointy hips, he would never have recognized her.

He impulsively decided to get off, he wasn't sure exactly why. Should he let this complete coincidence simply evaporate into nothing? All he had to do was stay put, and the meeting wouldn't even have taken place. His heart pounding, he left the train, the stony smell of the platform filled his lungs. Almost against his will he pursued Tineke, maintaining a five-step distance, as she trotted up the stairs toward the central hall. Once in the light-brown marble open space, she set the valise down on its back wheels and dragged it into the bustle. Just inside the main entrance she took a cell phone from the pocket of her maroon wool overcoat, punched in a number, and started to talk. He saw her step into Brussels, gone, and again he hesitated.

Instead of returning to his platform, instead of *not* living, he ran after her, into the open air. He scanned the shadows cast by the streetlamps. She was not part of the throng at the intersection leading to Brussels' Grote Markt. He walked to the edge of the sloping sidewalk and looked around. There she was, she had turned right onto the Putterij; quickening his pace, he closed the dark gap of twenty meters, and before he knew what he was doing he placed his hand on the heavy fabric of her coat. She stood still and turned around. She looked surprised, startled. Her meticulously made-up skin covered her jaws and cheekbones like wrinkled paper.

"Tineke," he mumbled, "I . . ."

"I beg your pardon?" she asked kindly.

"Tineke," he said, more forcefully this time, "I don't know if this is the best . . ."

This time she really looked at him, he could see she focused. She stuck out a hand that briefly touched his arm, as though that extra tactile assistance might help. “Weren’t you sitting across from me just now in the tr—?” Her face changed again, she raised her droopy eyelids as far up as possible, her mouth became an astonished, scarlet “O.”

“Aaron!” she cried, “of course! Aaron Bever. But my boy, what . . .” She let go of the handgrip on her suitcase, it toppled over. She took a step toward him, grasped his shoulders, and gave him two kisses. Over her fragile shoulders he saw a car pull up to the curb, a sporty dark-blue BMW that flashed its headlights twice. She turned and waved. When she looked back at him, she said: “We’re in a hurry. I have to be going. But Aaron, I absolutely didn’t recognize you. You’ve . . . changed. Enschede was so long ago . . .” She clutched his lower arm, looked straight at him. “Oh dear . . .” she said, “but how are *you* . . . things turned out so badly . . .”

He was too flabbergasted to reply. Any moment the door of the BMW could swing open and Sigerius would come walking their way. He gasped for breath, felt dizzy. Since he could think of nothing else to say, he stammered: “Say, Tineke, how’s Siem? Is that him?” He gestured feebly at the impatient car.

She let go, just as abruptly as she had grasped him. She took a step back, her face slammed shut like a lead door.

“*What?*” she spat. “You must be joking.”

“No,” he said. “Why?” He felt his eyes go watery.

“You rotten kid,” she said. “What do you want from me? What are you doing here? Are you stalking me?”

The car door opened. A small man of about forty-five got out, his wavy black hair and trimmed beard glistening under the street lights. They looked at each other. The man, who in an unnerving, aggressive way was not Sigerius, smiled politely. Another car swerved around them, honking, and behind the BMW a minibus switched on its flashers.

Tineke reached for the handle of the passenger door.

“You don’t know?” she said. “You really don’t know, do you?” She laughed awkwardly, her face a scrawny grimace of disbelief. “Siem is dead.” She shouted so as not to be drowned out by the traffic din. “We buried him in 2001. Seven years ago. Or are you just taking a dig at me?”

“No,” he said.

Then she got in.

MICHAEL CHRISTIE

IF I FALL, IF I DIE

A NOVEL

If I
Fall,
If I
Die

A Novel

MICHAEL CHRISTIE

Hogarth
London/New York

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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First Edition

For my mother

Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up
Fostered alike by beauty and by fear
—WILLIAM WORDSWORTH, *The Prelude*

I lived on dread—[she wrote]
To those who know
The stimulus there is
In danger—other impetus
Is numb—and vitalless—
—EMILY DICKINSON, "770"

The Inside Out

1

The boy stepped Outside, and he did not die.

He was not riddled with arrows, his hair did not spring into flame, and his breath did not crush his lungs like spent grocery bags. His eyeballs did not sizzle in their sockets, and his heart's pistons did not seize. No barbarian lopped his head into a blood-soggy wicker basket, and no glinting ninja stars were zinged into his throat.

Actually, incredibly: nothing happened—no immolation, no bloodbath, no spontaneous asphyxiation, no tide of shivery terror crashing upon the shore of his heart—not even a trace of his mother's Black Lagoon in his breath.

Somehow Will was calm.

The day's bronzy light, shredded by a copse of birch, tossed a billion luminous knife blades onto the front lawn. And he dared to continue down the walk—where he'd watched hundreds of deliverymen stride to their house bearing fresh food for them to eat and new clothes for them to wear—with the paving stones granular and toilet-bowl cool under his naked feet. Venturing out into the unreal arena of his front yard for the first time in his memory, he discovered only early summer crispness in the air—this Outside air—its breeze slaloming through the jagged wisps of his cut-off shorts, in and out of the straps of his Helmet. Will had felt this same air sweep through the window in New York on those rare occasions he opened it, despite how it worried his mother, but something was sapped when it came through. He'd never immersed himself this way, not since his memory got impressionistic and gauzy as if it had been transcribed by a stenographer in full Black Lagoon.

Will was Outside because he'd heard an odd bang while painting a six-foot masterpiece his mother had commissioned for London, a composition she twice in passing compared to Mark Rothko, who was a genius painter, just like him. At first he'd thought another bird had struck the big picture window in Cairo. Will once watched a blue jay—he'd identified it with the bird book he used as a drawing reference—palsying there in the ochre dirt beneath the glass, its neck canted grimly as though trying to watch an upside-down film. Blood rimmed its eyes and its beak was shattered like an egg ready to be peeled. It had thought it would go for a nice flitter through Cairo, over the burnt-orange velour loveseat, through the high, bright cavern of the hallway where Will's masterpieces were hung, past dim London with its ravine of bookshelves and credenza display of his sculptures, over the staircase with its twin railings she'd installed on either side (for safety), and pick off some food scraps around the slow cooker in Paris. Had its mother never warned it about glass? Will had wondered, sitting there fogging the window until the creature finally stilled and Will startled himself with a sob, both of pity, and of thankfulness for their safety Inside. Nothing ever died in their house—except for bugs, lightbulbs, and batteries. Outside, however, was another story.

Though his mother feared pets, other creatures had more successfully entered their home. He'd found trickles of ants in the basement, mouse turds peppering the pantry, and crews of flies sprinting across the windows. Rogue moths snuck through the door when Will opened it for deliverymen, their wings powdery and fragrant like the makeup that sat unused on his mother's long teak dresser in San Francisco. He'd cup the moths in his hands, feel their desperate clatter between his palms, then cast them through the only unscreened window in Venice.

Sometimes people had come. Once the furnace was repaired by an ancient man who smelled of pastrami and wood smoke. And for a time the paperboy would leave his strange, grubby shoes by the front door and play LEGO with Will on the carpet in Cairo. At first it was thrilling, until Will noticed the older boy's proclivity for breathing exclusively through his too-small nose and building only uninspired bunkerish structures, mixing colors together like an architectural test pattern. After a few weeks, Will stopped answering the door when he knocked, telling his mother that he didn't need friends because he was an artistic genius. "Don't toot your own horn," she'd said, smiling.

Of course he'd considered going Outside thousands of times—as he'd considered executing a standing double backflip or walking around with his feet magnetized to the ceiling or chainsawing a trapdoor in the floor—but had never dared. Even when he lobbed their garbage bags as far to the curb as he could manage from the front foyer, or watched shirtless neighborhood boys plow their BMXs through the meaty summer heat, he'd never been sufficiently tempted. Mailmen over the years had asked why he and his mother were always home, and Will often replied, "Why are you a mailman?" with one raised eyebrow, which usually shut them up.

The real reason was that he was her protector. Her guardian. From herself. From it: the Black Lagoon. It wasn't like he was trapped. The doors were not locked. She made no rules, issued no commandments, decreed no penalties, and exacted no punishments.

Staying Inside was something he'd invented, intuited, for her sake, to keep her from falling so deep she'd tremble and explode and weep all her tears and go dry and insubstantial as the dandelion fluff that occasionally coasted Inside like tiny satellites. He'd always known that if fear took her for good, he'd be left treading water forever in the ocean of life with nothing to buoy him.

But birds usually made a different sound against the window, more sickening and soft, like a strike from those plush drumsticks used in marching bands, not the sharper bang he'd heard. In a gust of curiosity, Will had set down the fan brush he was using to texture a block of mustardy-green acrylic paint, then removed his smock and slipped out the front door as easily as entering a long-neglected wing of their house. He hadn't actually expected catastrophe, or a bloodbath, but with little to compare to, hadn't ruled them out either. Wordlessly she'd taught him that the Outside was built of danger, of slicing edges and crushing weights, of piercing needlepoints and pummeling drop-offs, of an unrelenting potential for suffocation, electrocution, mayhem, and harm. So today a generous portion of him was left mutely astonished that, so far anyway, the Outside was nearly pleasant.

Thrilling himself with his own daring, Will moved now from the concrete out into the grass, grotesquely alive beneath his feet—a carpet made of salad that he half-expected to grip his toes and hold him fast. Luckily, his Helmet would safeguard him if he tripped or a branch dropped lethally from above. After some painfully prickly searching in the cedar bushes, he found it, the source of the bang: a husk of charred matter that resembled a tiny exploded wasp nest, smoking faintly like the humidifier his mother put in his room in the winter. The dirt was blackened around it, the air charred and sulfurous, and it occurred to Will this was some kind of bomb.

Now he glimpsed a figure dart around the side of the house, boy shaped, something heavy looped over his shoulders, and Will wondered if he'd been hurt somehow by the explosion. Will followed him around the corner, passing the strange dryer vent fuming with the startling Inside smell of fabric softener and warmed clothes, *their* clothes, and had just rounded the rear of his house when he toppled, a nuclear drill of pain boring between his temples, a masterpiece film of neon spindles whirling through his eyelids. Some diminished part of his mind registered a demonic shrieking, and he realized then that the noise was being squeezed from his own lungs. Desperately, he shaped the sound into an anguished plea for his mother but knew she couldn't hear him with her Relaxation Headphones on. Amid the murk of agony he gathered the sense that something had struck his forehead and fallen to his feet. He tore open his eyelids. A purple crystal. The sun dazzled it before Will's vision was again welded shut, this time a stickiness there. Still moaning, he bent, felt for it in the grass, and closed his hand around the rock.

"You'll be fine," a nearby voice said.

Will attempted to again pry open his eyes, but a stinging honey had sealed them. He stumbled forward with his hands lifted in the Outside air, baffled, sobbing, afraid to wipe his face for fear he'd make his mortal wound worse.

"Here," the voice said, and Will sensed fabric against his face. He took it and pawed at his gluey eyes, prying them open to find a delivery boy, tucked behind the aluminum shed that Will had never entered. The boy had a green garden hose coiled around his shoulder and was about Will's height and age, with stringy bangs that licked at eyes flitting everywhere except upon Will. His brown skin was the tint of the milky tea his mother often drank in her reading chair, balancing the cup precariously on the wooden arm—her most dangerous habit. In his hand was a target slingshot, the kind with thick rubber straps and a brace running up your forearm, a forbidden item that Will had ogled in catalogues for as long as he could remember.

"I didn't even pull it back halfway, so you'll live," the delivery boy said smiling, the sudden warmth of his face momentarily soothing the ache of Will's probable skull fracture, which he could already feel opening like a pistachio.

"You really think I'm going to live? Like, for sure?" said Will, woozy with blood loss and imminent death. "I've never heard anyone say that before . . ." Will pulled the boy's shirt away for a moment, and more blood licked his eyes.

"For a while, anyway," the boy said, shrugging. "But sorry, I thought you were someone else."

"Who? The person who set that little bomb out front?" Will said, secretly wondering if the Black Lagoon could possibly be after this boy as well.

"Yeah," the delivery boy said. "Among others." He unshouldered the garden hose and dropped it to his feet. Will now saw that his smooth chest was festooned with a solar system of a hundred milky scars.

"Oh, are you hurt too?" Will said. "Did the bomb get you when you were delivering our new hose?"

"I'm fine," the boy said casually before scrambling over to peek around the corner of the house like a soldier in a firefight.

Will followed him closely to examine his injuries. "Then how did you get those scars? Did the Outside do that to you?" The delivery boy turned and regarded Will as if he were speaking some cryptographic language, and Will wondered whether the infinite Outside air had tarnished his words somehow.

"What's your name, kid?" the boy said, returning behind the shed, keeping his eyes fixed to the tree line near the creek behind Will's house.

"Will. What's yours?"

He paused, and Will was about to ask if he was okay again. "My name is Will too," the boy said.

"Really?" Will said, tickled by the coincidence. "Are you hiding from someone, Will? Do you have your own Inside you can go to? If not, you can hide here. We could eat some of my mother's bread and look at my masterpieces."

"You live here?" the boy said, puzzled, tipping his head back toward Will's house. "I thought this place was empty."

Will tried not to think about his house. How disturbing it looked from the Outside, how shabby and finite. "Just me and my mother," he said. "But this is my first time in the backyard," he added. "I used to be afraid of going Outside, but now I'm mostly not."

"That's great, Will," the delivery boy said, "Really great. But you *do* need to be careful out here. It can be dangerous. You should probably play it safe and go back inside and not tell anyone you saw me? Like your mom or anything?"

"Oh, I'm definitely not telling my mom about this," said Will, pointing at his forehead. "I only came out because I heard that bang out front." It was then he realized that the garden hose at the boy's feet was old and worn. "But you weren't delivering that hose, were you?" Will whispered conspiratorially, approaching him to lean in close. "That was already ours, right?"

"Anyway, it was good talking to you," the boy said in a businesslike voice, jamming his slingshot into his shoelace belt and striding out into the backyard, exposing a lithe back just as baroquely scarred as his front. "I'd better get—"

"—It's okay, you can have it!" Will interrupted, too afraid to follow him out into all that grass, astonished by how bravely he swam through the ocean of the Outside. “The guy who does our garden usually brings his own anyway. I’ll just order another one.”

“That’s real good of you, Will,” the boy said, returning to tentatively pick up the hose. His eyes drifted up to Will’s Helmet. “Too bad I didn’t aim a little higher,” he said with an odd smirk. “But you can keep my shirt. And maybe I’ll see you around.”

“Does this mean we’re friends?” Will called out as the boy paused near the back hedge and glanced over his shoulder. Will could see his belly undulate evenly as he breathed.

“Whatever, sure,” he said.

“But someone is still trying to catch you, right?” Will said. “Aren’t you scared?”

The boy cocked his head. “You were serious when you said this was your first time outside, weren’t you?”

Will nodded.

“You know what?” the boy said, smiling again. “I was wrong when I said you should go back inside. There’s nothing to be scared of out here.” Will realized then that this boy’s brave, bright face was a light he wanted to shine upon him forever. “Look, I bet your head has already stopped bleeding.”

Will pulled the shirt away and saw it was chocolate brown.

“See?” the boy said. “Nothing can really hurt you, Will.” Then he vanished into the ferocious-looking woods.

2

When Will returned Inside, the air in Cairo was thick as cream and stunk of couch crevasse. He gagged and ran to Venice, where he blotted his forehead with gauze to find that the actual cut was tiny: a single pit, like a one rolled on a die. Luckily, it hadn't swelled and was high enough to cover with his bangs if he wore his Helmet tipped forward, which he did, both to protect his wound and to conceal it.

He hid the blood-blackened shirt—featuring a skeletal sorcerer wielding an electric guitar—down in Toronto, then returned upstairs to draw a cup of water from the sink in Paris. Slurping, he forced himself to sit, fighting to slow his breathing, while watching steam belch from the lid of the slow cooker—the only culinary appliance his mother could abide other than the breadmaker, because it couldn't scald them, and it rendered food sufficiently mushy to eliminate the always present danger of choking. If ever Will stopped chewing while at the table, even if only pausing before flooding his mouth with milk, she'd leap up and start whacking his chest with her forearm.

By the big chrome clock he knew she'd be just starting Side B of her Relaxation Tapes. She'd been doing them daily in San Francisco for a month now: donning the huge creaky headphones that swallowed her ears, the opaque Terminator shades that assailed her eyes with light, rendering her deaf, blind, oblivious. He couldn't imagine two hours of anything even denting the obsidian shell of the Black Lagoon, but Will cherished this new time away from her supervision. He'd tried the apparatus on once when she was in the bath, but the blinky light show and left-right pan of surf made him fall asleep and then immediately pee himself, which his mother did sometimes when she supremely lost it, but that was more the Black Lagoon's fault, not the Tapes. Regardless, it seemed to Will somehow simultaneously depressing and thrilling that his entire Outside ordeal had lasted a total of nine minutes.

After dinner, Will was wearing his Helmet along with a hooded wetsuit, standing on a chair, and reaching into the stratosphere in London while his mother cowered in the doorway, her blonde chin-length hair framing a pair of dark, insectoid sunglasses. She was snapping her blue elastic band against the velvety inside of her wrist.

"You sure you're okay?" she said, which actually meant, like most things she uttered: *be careful.*

"It's fine, Mom," Will said, vaulting to his toes, which made his forehead throb. He grasped the lightbulb and twisted, unsure if it was turning or only slipping through the rubberized gloves of his wetsuit. Like all their earthly possessions, they'd ordered the wetsuit from a catalogue, and he'd since drawn numerous ice cube–laden baths to test it. He hadn't tried shocks yet, but the idea was that the rubber insulated against those too.

“I don’t know what I’d do without you,” she said, her face tied in a wince.

“Sit around in the dark talking to yourself?” he said, and she smiled.

For weeks she’d worried over this dead bulb in London. She usually had deliverymen do it, but after meeting the boy, Will had begged her to let him try. There was still a moon launch’s worth of preparation, including highlightered diagrams she’d taped to the fridge in Paris. If Will were older, she’d probably make him wear a condom, which was like a penis scabbard she told him about for making sex with vaginas safer, but more boring.

She’d been right about one thing: the Outside was indeed steeped with danger. His encounter with the boy had confirmed it. But the Inside could be dangerous too. Besides getting sling-shotted by the amethyst (he’d classified the purple crystal with his encyclopedia), Will had nearly died twelve times in his life—four she knew about, each of which had incited weeklong Black Lagoons. When wet, the tub in Venice got slick as mucus, and Will once almost died from a Helmetless slip that dropped him violently to his butt, which was why they only took baths (they used to share baths but they stopped because of vaginas). Another time he crashed while riding the exercise bike. Once he overdosed on four extra-strength Tylenol. Then he ate yogurt expired by a whole week. Later, he choked on a chicken finger that he tried to push down his throat without chewing—like a boa constrictor, because he just learned about them.

But electricity was one of the premier Black Lagoons: the pain and paralysis, the way it lurked in the walls, everywhere and nowhere, unreasonable, invisible as fear itself. Though his mother stuffed safety guards into every unused outlet, Will had once shocked himself by allowing his wet thumb to linger on the plug of his tape player. He returned to himself across the room with his tongue buzzing and spectral in his mouth. He never told her. Events like that could pack her off somewhere permanently demented.

"Hey, these blades are actually made out of wood," Will said, now with a good grip on the bulb. The fixture was also a ceiling fan, except she'd long ago hired an electrician to disable this function because if it came unmoored it would cut them to shreds.

"They once made airplane propellers with wood, you know," she said, with another snap of her elastic. "Think one of those wouldn't hurt?"

"I guess it would," said Will.

The bulb turned, and he hated the metal-on-metal sensation, an ungodly grind like chewing sand. The fan rattled a little, and she emitted a clucking sound somewhere between *Oh* and *No*. At the climactic instant the bulb pulled from the socket, she fled the room, and Will couldn't help but feel let down. He nearly yearned for the shock that would blast him from his perch in a hail of sparks and fire, a display he figured the boy would admire, torching Will as dead as the blue jay he'd watch die in the smelly earth so long ago.

That night, after their stew and smoothies, she made him a banana split with BRAVERY scripted along one of the banana halves in chocolate syrup, and he imagined that it wasn't for the lightbulb, but for his covert trip Outside. During their usual bedtime cuddle, he worried for the whole twenty minutes that she could smell his wound or somehow detect the Outside on his clothes, even though he'd changed his cut-off shorts, took two separate baths, and was wearing the wetsuit to bed, which she disliked because she said it made him sweat like a squash player, and he could perish of dehydration.

His mind veered to the day's venture: the wind sashaying around him, the birch trees shaking as though in applause, the gently smoking bomb, the boy's kind, welcoming face, while the preposterous sky flew upward beyond all measurement. He was overtaken with a drowsy urge to describe it to her, this dreadful miracle of the Outside and most of all the boy: Other Will. Even if only whispered in her sleep-blocked ear, Will wanted to somehow administer this information to her like some awful medicine, then watch her vanish into a hurricane of Black Lagoon, the hellish aftermath of both his dangerous venture and the more troublesome concern of the Outside being inside him now, like a stain. But the idea charred him with guilt. And as sleep wafted over from the continent of her body, warm and unlimited beside him, he dreamed of the amethyst striking his forehead again and again, of his own candy-apple blood on his hands, and of the boy repeating that revelatory, heart-stopping sentence—*Nothing can really hurt you, Will*—as if it all had something to teach him, as if it were something he ought to try again.

Relaxation Time

How easy it is for a life to become tiny. How cleanly the world falls away.

The subway platform in Toronto. That was the first. Will was a toddler then. Even today, “safe” in her bedroom, Diane still couldn’t summon the incident in her mind without panic spreading in her like laughter through a crowd. She knew she’d brushed against true madness that day because it was huge and blunt and screaming.

She’d blamed the city, its wilderness of signs and traffic and sounds, its flip book of faces and lightning storm of a million brains. So she packed up their apartment and moved Will north to Thunder Bay, where she’d grown up, where she hadn’t returned since her twin brother, Charlie, died at the grain elevators when they were twenty-four.

A year had been the plan, time enough to rebalance herself, perhaps make a film, something personal, experimental, short. She still owned the old house, the one she and Charlie had saved for. Though she was the last surviving member of her family, other than Will, of course, she’d never stored the nerve to sell it.

In Toronto Diane bought a car, something she’d never owned, a robin's-egg-blue Volkswagen Rabbit. She and Will set off in the morning: fourteen hours northwest that they split into two days because after the seventh hour Will was visited with unbearable silliness and wild irrationality. As they pushed northward, bugs left increasingly phlegmatic blotches on their windshield, and spindly, undernourished trees crowded the road as though trying to mount it, get roots into it, and in this manner escape. They tracked the CBC as its signal lived and died, resurrected town to hamlet to town, while the high, rusty channels dynamited into the roadside granite offered the impression of descending into a mine.

Initially, she dreaded the drive. The ratcheting fear could have resurfaced out there amid all that tree and rock. But she was fine behind the wheel, tranquil even. She sang to her old tapes as Will clapped his orange-sticky hands.

They found the house in neglect and disarray, ten years of woolly grain dust on every lateral surface, everything just as she'd left it, even a few plates in the sink, waiting to be washed for a decade. Her father was never one for photos or memorabilia, but she kept a few things: the old dictionary that had so obsessed her brother after their mother died, some of her own sketchbooks and charcoals she put aside for Will, as well as her father's old work boots—the rest she drove to the Salvation Army.

She always preferred to work in a frenzy, to dash herself upon the rocks of a project—this was how she'd made her films—so during Will's naps she cleaned, vacuumed, polished, painted, plastered, tore back wallpaper, and even sledgehammered half of a wall, swooping about on the skating rink of caffeine, coaxing the house into something that her brother wouldn't have recognized. In a kerchief and some old jeans, she suffered the August swelter and fought the feral yard all the way back to the creek, where Charlie once pulled a thousand silver smelt in one night with just a net and a flashlight. A moving truck brought their furniture, Will's toys, her cameras and books.

The work did her good, and this was a period of reprieve.

It was driving that allowed it back: a grocery run, stopped at a light while traversing the highway, Will strapped into his car seat like a babbling astronaut. When the green came, she shifted her foot, and they bucked then heaved to a halt. She pressed harder, yet the vehicle remained unmoved. Behind her a truck honked unkindly. She peered under the wheel to find her boot planted squarely on the brake.

Then the rushing heart and tingling digits, same as on the subway platform. How could she have confused the two most fundamental controls of the vehicle? Most unsettling was how easy it had been: they were both pedals, so close together, one a golf club and the other a door stopper—yet essentially indistinguishable. And what if she'd done it the other way around? Pumped the gas and jackrabbited onto the highway and the fury of logging trucks and snarling pickups piloted by jumpy, half-drunk hunters? What creature would she find belted into the burning jungle of death and fluid and steel that would remain of their car after the trucks had finished with it?

At first she simply avoided the highway. Routine trips took hours, but she didn't mind. She kept to side roads and residential streets. Houses were a comfort. She'd use their phones if necessary. If what was necessary? Using the phone, she assured herself, plenty of good reasons for that.

Rather quickly, more rules established themselves. No roads over a certain speed limit. No night driving. Then no left-hand turns. She hugged the shore of the right lane, never risking her car in the path of an onrushing vehicle—that leftward leap of faith enough to burn her again with panic.

Each night her mind burbled with the close calls of the day, the inadequate traffic bylaws, the numbers and speeds and physics of it all. And after weeks of this she perceived driving for what it truly was: an impossibly complicated and lethal activity. One that required reserves of faith, confidence, and sheer stupidity that she would never possess.

After she sold the Rabbit and learned that Thunder Bay's public transportation system had died the slow death of depopulation and underfunding, she and Will took taxis. The old trifecta of grocery store, library, and bank they could complete for less than fifty dollars in fares. For a while she'd been able to trust the proven expertise of these old men in mustaches and hats, immigrants mostly, because how could one possibly last as a cab driver without caution? And weren't these soft-spoken men mostly poor? Weren't their cars their very livelihood? Wouldn't a crash scrape the food from their children's plates? What better reassurance was there?

Will was three by this time and loved taxis. He asked the men questions with partially pronounced words that only she understood. "What means that?" he'd belt out, pointing at their CBs crackling with dispatches. "Yes, good," the men would say, nodding.

But soon she found herself advising the drivers where to turn blocks in advance, checking and rechecking their gauges, reminding them of speed limit changes while peering between the headrests out the windshield, blotting the driver's sightline with her alert face. They would glance at her in the rearview with their bushy eyebrows and try to smile.

After she could no longer abide the taxis, her ordering from home began in earnest. She discovered that with the right mix of ambiguity and persistence—"You see, sir, due to a severe condition I am unable to visit your store"—everyone in town delivered: the grocery store, the library, the pharmacy. Just say "severe condition," and deliverymen leapt into their trucks. She was surprised by how easy it was, how efficient. They went through a checkbook a week—good thing they delivered those too. She and Will were free to take walks and do artwork and not be stuck dragging a cart through the shrink-wrapped gore of the meat section every Saturday.

Then the outside closed upon her like the aperture of a camera.

The front yard was more of a decision—a calculated avoidance of risk—than anything imposed upon her. While shoveling slush from the driveway, she found herself casually worrying that the panic would return, and by the time the dangerousness of this vein of thinking registered upon her, it was already there: the revving heart, the icy sweat, her throat constricting. She left the job unfinished and fled inside, where the symptoms instantly subsided. With no handy explanation this time, no subway doors, no crowds, no city, no mishandled car, only the snarling shovel and the tight cold and her breath a soft crystal in the air, she knew the panic no longer obeyed laws it once respected and would seize any opportunity she allowed it to decimate her. So after that day she would not venture even a few steps from their front door to where she knew it lay in wait.

Then, as she was picking up carrots, coal, and various items that four-year-old Will had used to personify a snowman, it visited her in the backyard, same as the front.

And if she could venture into neither yard without meeting a tempest of dread, how was she to leave? And how to let her son play in the yard if she couldn't go out to retrieve him? What if a stray dog came? Or, God forbid, a man?

So they stayed inside. Thankfully, her son was so obsessed with building and painting and his constant tumult of inquisition that he never seemed to mind. Both Will's father and his uncle Charlie had been solitary boys, content with books and models, words and drawings. It was almost relieving, this simplification, and there followed some relatively peaceful, untroubled years.

Then, around Will's seventh birthday, it came in. She was folding laundry when the air was sucked from the basement, the way water withdraws from the shore before a wave. Terror like lungfuls of knife-sharp fumes choked her, and her mind tumbled. She was on hands and knees when she reached the stairs to claw her way out. She didn't imagine anything truly harmful down there, no ghosts or stranglers, just the immovable fact that panic came for her was enough. She ordered Will a stool and taught him to do the laundry by drawing him a diagram of the controls. She ordered another and placed it at the foot of the freezer.

But the most regrettable by-product of staying inside was losing the capacity to face another human being. The micro-rhythms of conversation, the dance of facial mimicry, the fencing match of eye contact were lost to her once she fell out of practice. She soon ceased answering the door—another chore Will assumed with gusto. She grew lonely, but this, too, dropped away. She no longer yearned for people, other than Will, of course. She sated her social impulses with films, music, books, consoled by the fact that no matter what, the actors and characters could never see how hermetic she'd become, how far she had fallen.

At times she'd considered leaving. Pulling on her olive duffle coat and tramping outside. Perhaps bringing an umbrella. How strange it would be. “Hello, I've lived next to you for eight years, nice to meet you.” Yet there was never reason enough. She'd always believed that the day she left would be the day she was required to. How that could ever happen she could not say.

If only they could manage to escape, maybe she'd leave the whole mess here behind in Thunder Bay. Back to Toronto, or a fresh start somewhere else, Paris perhaps. Arthur's generous support checks, which surfaced each month in her account as predictably as tides, would bankroll anything she could dream up. But that would mean an airplane—the anticipatory preamble: tickets, packing, waiting, and searching, then the imperativeness of actually stepping through those awful retractable tunnels and finding her seat, with a whole plane watching in judgment. She half-considered hiring some amateur anesthesiologist to put her under for the journey, but she feared needles, and the effects of drugs, and dreamless sleep. Since passenger ships no longer served the Great Lakes (she'd checked), they couldn't even take a boat.

Besides it wasn't that she *couldn't* leave, Diane reminded herself. She was refusing to. Her terms. Years of the *Thunder Bay Tribune* and American news shows had proved what fresh horrors the world invented each day. As far as she could tell, there wasn't much of the Thunder Bay she'd known left. Its industries gone, just strip clubs, strip malls, taverns, and hockey rinks remained—the old Eaton's department store now a call center. The houses were still all aimed at the lake like faces to a coronation, eager for some great arrival, even though the lakeboats had stopped coming and the storefronts downtown, once strung with garlands and signs and teeming with families, were now mostly shuttered and vacant. But it was the knocking of grain-ship hulls from the harbor she missed most—now there was only a spooky quiet over an overgrown industrial ruin that reminded her of Tarkovsky's *Stalker*, a film she'd nearly memorized in college that seemed made for her alone.

No, she and Will were stuck, like the pilgrims who'd built the frames of their houses from the planks of their ships. All they could do now was decorate.

3

Before Will's trip Outside, he'd always given thanks for what their house provided. They filled their lungs with the air of its rooms, drank from its faucets, and were powered by its outlets. They warmed themselves in the abundance of its furnace and cleansed their filth in the waters of its tub.

Lightbulbs popped, went dead, were changed. This was repeated. The vacuum whorled galaxies in the carpet and seasons transpired in their windows like plotless movies. Plants reached from their pots to taste the sun. The fridge murmur-whined in complaint if you opened its door, yet, nobly, it never quit. The dishwasher whooshed plates new as the furnace huffed warm air through the teeth of its vents.

Will and his mother lived as indistinguishably from the house as its appliances and furniture, its lumber, drywall, and brick, dousing time with activities and art. Days were spacious and never ending. Will painted masterpieces while she played guitar or thwacked paperback pages in her reading chair. They scoured flyers and transcribed codes for what they needed from catalogues—A, B, C, D . . . AA, BB, CC, DD—and the very same things materialized in the arms of deliverymen. Once, a teenager from the grocery store returned with a replacement egg for one he broke, pulling it from behind Will's ear like a magic trick.

Will signed their clipboards with a swashbuckling replica of his mother's signature, and the deliverymen tousled his hair and asked why he wasn't in school. "Home school," his mother would say, bending around the corner from Paris in one of her threadbare, translucent tank tops, acting as if she hadn't come to the door because she was cooking, not because she was afraid to touch the doorknob. "Lucky duck," they'd say with a conspiratorial wink he knew was more for her, because she frowned.

Will and his mother reigned over their private kingdom with the Black Lagoon as its border. It decreed where they could go, how deeply they could breathe, what shapes their thoughts could assume. It reminded them that the Outside world was dark, pitiless, futile, transpiring only in the windows, in their books and films, in the TV they seldom ignited, that there was no true world but their own. It was perfect.

Until it wasn't.

In the weeks after his jaunt Outside, a clutch of nine minutes Will had rekindled over and over with perfect dives of fragrant memory, the house seemed infiltrated, altered, both unfamiliar and familiar, disgusting and comforting, like a wetsuit he'd been wearing for a year.

Since then, Will could muster no desire to paint masterpieces or sculpt or even sketch during Relaxation Time. Maybe it was an attempt to emulate Other Will's bravery, the way he moved through the ocean of the Outside as though he'd been born there, or maybe his spirit had infected Will somehow, emboldening him. But each day, as soon as the headphones were clamped over her ears and the glasses set over her eyes, Will would descend into Toronto to satisfy a new hunger.

His first Destructivity Experiment involved the G.I. Joe figures that had survived the great toy cull of a year previous, when his mother solemnly phoned the Salvation Army, and an annoyingly cheerful man came to cart Will's childhood away. His mother had already loathed ordering the ammunition-laden figures in the first place. "We just got this stuff," she said. "But that's okay," she added quickly. "You're really developing lately." Will wept when the man plucked his boxes from the foyer, all his soldiers finally sent off to die. "Killed by the Salvation Army," he said later, and her laugh spat coffee on the table.

Down in Toronto, with the windows open to vent fumes, he burned the remaining figures into napalm-attack survivors with a barbecue lighter he'd secretly ordered and hidden behind the furnace. They burbled above the flame as drools of plastic slipped from their arms, legs, and—when he'd built the nerve—their faces. They released a purple-black smoke that stuck in his nostrils and pushed his head into somersaults. He shaped the little corpses with popsicle sticks, sculpting mutants, severing their elastics, and undoing the screws that bound their bodies, reassembling them in unholy configurations. Next he managed to start the ancient lawnmower and ran them over, flinging the soldiers across the unfinished basement, leaving gory gashes in their already mangled appendages.

After a month of Experiments, Will had amassed a plethora of important Destructivity data:

- You can smash a snow globe with a ball-peen hammer and be disappointed that the glass is actually plastic and the snow actually ground-up Styrofoam.
- You can laminate anything by winding it in plastic wrap before a five-minute tumble on Cotton in the dryer.
- You can microwave a lightbulb for nearly twenty beautiful

seconds as it turns in there like a pink comet before it finally goes supernova.

- You can safely remove your Helmet and whack your head repeatedly on the drywall, weaving an orange velvet into your vision, before you manage to leave a dent.
- You can cover a wall dent by hanging a masterpiece over it and claiming that you need the work at eye level to properly appreciate it.
- You can simulate immortality by sticking a rubber-handled flathead screwdriver directly into the outlet and only trip a breaker.
- You can ride the laundry basket down the carpeted stairs like a mine cart four times until it catches and ejects you to the bottom, where you strike your elbow and it swells red as a hot-water bottle.
- You can safely light the fluff on your sweatpants with a barbecue lighter and send flame rolling over your legs like poured blue water, leaving a crispy black stubble.
- You can halt a fan if you thrust your hand into the blades bravely—only when you hesitate will your knuckles be rapped.
- You can stick the chilly steel tube of the vacuum to your belly and generate a hideous yet painless bruise, and these pulsating circles when placed carefully can form an Olympic symbol that lasts well into a second week.

Of course his mother's catching wind of any of this would mean a cataclysmic Black Lagoon. But she didn't. Like Will, she was a genius, yet she was also naive. Because everything wasn't only making. When he was a little boy, Will's mother urged him to paint masterpieces of trees, houses, and doe-eyed animals, and then it was impressionistic splatters and loosely patterned blocks of color. But he knew now it had all been meaningless. In his true heart he'd rather draw a fight, a war, a chemical spill pulling the flesh from the bones of the villagers. He torched bugs by magnifying the noon sun that throbbed through the window in Cairo, not because he enjoyed pain, but to witness what would happen, to grasp it. And what was the difference between making something and making it come apart? Painting a masterpiece was also destroying a canvas, sculpting was wrecking a good rock, drawing dulling a good pencil forever.

Even though his Destructivity Experiments charged him with daring, he still couldn't bear to sleep alone in New York—which was supposed to be his bedroom, though he used it as a studio. A single bed would be like a house without a furnace, a body without blood, and without the clean whoosh of her breathing beside him, Will could never settle.

After her Sessions she baked him fresh bread in the breadmaker, read page-turners, or strummed folk songs, her small, white-tendoned hand flexed at the guitar's neck, always seeming too small to corral the thick strings. For someone afraid of everything, she was most fearsome on the stool at the counter in Paris, the stretchy phone cord coiled around her thin arms, where she'd arrange the week's complex schedule of deliveries. Sometimes, when arguing about an overcharge or when met with an outsized incompetence, she'd hold the receiver away from her face and stare at it, her dark eyebrows flexed in disbelief, as though the object itself had betrayed her.

But even when the deliveries went smoothly and Will didn't have accidents, there still remained Black Lagoon traces in everything she did. If he said “Mom” as a leadoff to something, she’d instantly answer “Yes?” stricken with alarm, as if he were about to inform her of their recent death sentence.

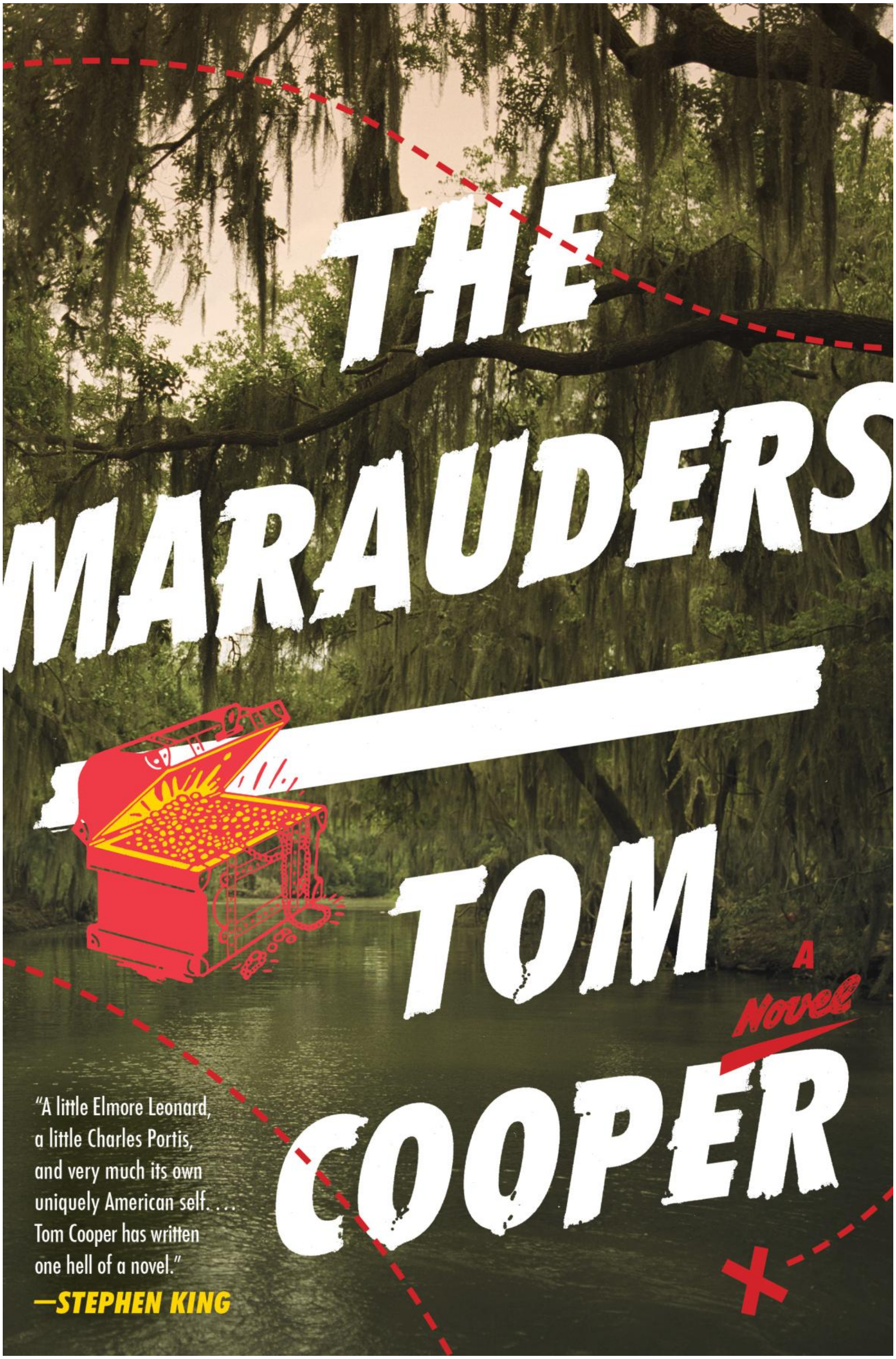
He knew the textures and temperaments of their house just as intimately as he did hers. She’d archived his detailed architectural blueprints along with his masterpieces in Toronto. They’d always called the kitchen Paris, his studio New York, their bedroom San Francisco, the living room Cairo. She told him it had been his idea when he was young, yet he couldn’t remember having it. He did recall that she’d insisted on naming the basement Toronto, which seemed to please her, maybe because that’s where she’d grown up, even if the Black Lagoon never allowed her down there. Will did the laundry and fetched arm-numbing frozen loaves of her bread from the deep freeze.

Sometimes other rooms would temporarily close off to her. She’d avoid one for as long as a month, take the long way around. Will loved when this was Paris, because they’d be forced to order in, and he could talk her into off-limit, choke-prone foods like pizza or Chinese. When it was San Francisco, Will would pick her outfits from her closet, mostly shift dresses she’d crudely sewn or floral tank tops and elastic-waisted jeans, and they’d sleep on the couches in Cairo and wake in a whirlpool of sun from the big window. Luckily it was never the bathroom, called Venice, because she couldn’t pee in the sink, as Will did sometimes as an Experiment, because even though she was a mother, she had a vagina, which couldn’t aim. Then, inexplicably as seasons changing, the Black Lagoon would relent, and she’d return to the foreclosed room as though nothing had happened.

Still, the Black Lagoon would never surrender the Outside. Will sometimes pictured their house surrounded by crackling electric fences and froth-mouthed Dobermans, sheer cliffs falling from their doorstep to an angry sea. Though he'd never been in a church, he imagined they shared similarities with their house: keeping certain things in and certain things out.

After a day of Destructivity Experiments, Will would try to arrange himself casually on the couch, limbs flung loosely, face careless as a boy who'd never been Outside, who didn't have a friend who fired slingshots and feared nothing, who wasn't already changed forever and only felt counterfeit and hollow. Later, while crunching into a piece of toast he'd puttied with butter, a flavor he knew as well as that of his own saliva, he couldn't suppress the creeping suspicion that staying home was somehow unnatural, something people didn't do unless they were certified cloistered wing nuts like Ms. Havisham or Boo Radley—characters in long books she'd read him that she enjoyed more than he did. He'd always thought his mother was enacting something heroic, like a knight or a navy SEAL, but also something complicated, like how the Vikings had a woman-god called Frejya, who was the god of Love, War, and Beauty all at once, which throbbed his brain to think about.

Everyone went Outside, Will concluded. Everyone leaves. That's easy. Only true warriors and heroes could overcome this weakness, could fortify the stronghold, sit tight, wait it out. But now that he'd felt his gooseflesh stand in the Outside air; now that he'd tempered himself with the true danger and beauty of the backyard and gathered unforgettable data with his Destructivity Experiments; and now that the scab on his forehead had grown dark as beef jerky and started to chip at the edges, Will knew that even though he was her guardian and her only son and their blood was the very same crimson hue, he'd never be as strong as she was.



THE MARAUDERS

A Novel

TOM COOPER

"A little Elmore Leonard, a little Charles Portis, and very much its own uniquely American self. . . . Tom Cooper has written one hell of a novel."

—STEPHEN KING

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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First Edition

THE MARAUDERS

THE TOUP BROTHERS

They came like specters from the dark maw of the bayou, first ghostly light in the fog, then the rasp of a motor: an aluminum powerboat scudding across lacquer-black water. From a distance the figures looked conjoined, Siamese twins. As the boat drew closer the bodies split in two under the moth-flocked floodlights. One stood fore, the other aft: the twin brothers Reginald and Victor Toup. When they were kids even their mother had trouble telling them apart. That was long ago, half their lives, and now their mother was dead. Shot through the temple in New Orleans's Roosevelt Hotel before their father turned the gun on himself.

Tonight they motored under a three-quarter moon, thirty pounds of marijuana hidden under a tarp in the bait well. Reginald trolled the boat and Victor crouched on the prow, surveying the bayou through night-vision binoculars. They'd made this run so many times they could tell you things about the swamp that no map could. You rarely came across anyone out here. Not after dark, not this far, not outside shrimping season.

This of course was the point.

A flicker of motion ahead drew Victor's eye. On an islet a half mile distant a small light bobbed and shimmied like fox fire before sputtering out.

Victor held up his hand and Reginald cut the engine and lights. They were plunged into dark, moonlight banded across the water, the only sounds the insects and frogs singing in full chorus, the soft slap of waves against the hull.

"What?" Reginald asked.

Victor said nothing. He peered through the glass and waited. Reginald stepped behind him, black rubber hip boots creaking. Side by side, the brothers' resemblance was uncanny. The same side-parted black hair and hard-bitten faces, the same mineral-gray eyes full of cunning. The same way of leaning slightly into the night, torsos angled stiff, like bloodhounds scenting a rumor of prey. But there were differences, slight. Reginald had the beginnings of a gumbo paunch but Victor did not. Reginald had no tattoos, but Victor had them on his arms and on the side of his neck: the head of a gape-mouthed Great White shark, a mermaid and trident, a spiderweb in the crook of his right arm, a black widow spider in the middle.

Any other differences between the twins a man would have to delve deeper than the surface to discern.

For a time nothing moved. Stars were strewn horizon to horizon, bands so tangled and thick they looked like white paint flung on a black canvas. Ursa Minor and Cassiopeia and Orion like puzzles you had to make out.

Victor shifted on his boots and adjusted the focus of the binoculars. The light winked on again, skeltering among the trees.

"Thinks we left," Victor said.

"Who?" Reginald asked.

Victor didn't answer, only watched. Anchored a hundred yards from the islet was a ramshackle shrimp boat, on the islet shore a beached pirogue and a Coleman lantern dimly glowing. A man in hip boots waded in the bracken, sweeping a metal detector coil over the ground. In his other hand was something that looked half scoop, half shovel.

The man heard something in his headphones and halted. He passed the metal detector coil a few times over the same spot and then dug for a minute with the shovel-scoop. He stepped to the shore edge and shimmied the shovel in the water and hunkered down, sifting through the dirt like a gold panner.

Victor lowered the binoculars and shook his head.

“Tell me,” Reginald said.

“A guy,” Victor said. “Digging holes.”

“Why?”

“Fuck should I know? Burying his wife.”

Reginald took the binoculars from Victor and squinted through the glass. “Got a metal detector,” he said.

“Know him?” Victor asked.

“I’ve seen him. I think.”

“Metal detector,” Victor said. He shot a scoffing breath through his nose. “I’ve seen it all.”

“What’s he, with the oil company?”

Victor didn’t answer. He unshouldered his semiautomatic Bushmaster and got the man’s face in the crosshairs of the reticle scope. He looked in his late forties, early fifties. Deeply pocketed eyes, shaggy hair winged out from beneath a yacht cap. And look, he was missing an arm, in its place a prosthesis.

“Missing an arm,” Victor said.

“I know who that is,” Reginald said.

Victor asked who.

“The redhead? Crazy big tits. Got stoned at our place a couple times. Renee?”

“Reagan,” Victor said. “Oh, yeah.”

“Reagan. That’s her daddy.”

Victor lifted the rifle again and squinted through the scope, his finger resting in the curve of the trigger.

“The hell you doing?” Reginald said. He’d always been the more diplomatic of the two, Victor the more hotheaded. Maybe it was because Victor was the firstborn, the alpha, a full hour longer in the world than Reginald. This was one of Reginald’s theories, anyway.

“Too close for his own good,” Victor told Reginald.

“We’ll talk to him.”

Victor could squeeze the trigger right now and the man’s life would be over in an instant. He’d done it before. Out here. But he lowered the rifle and said, “Luckiest day in his life, son-bitch doesn’t even know it.”

LINDQUIST

His arm was missing. Lindquist was positive he'd left it in his pickup two hours before. He wasn't in the habit of misplacing his thirty-thousand-dollar myoelectric arm or of leaving his truck unlocked, catchwater bayou town where everybody knew everyone or not.

A few other pickups sat under the bug-flurried sodium vapors. Nothing else but cypress lisping in the night breeze, a bottlefly-green Buick bouncing on the blacktop past Sully's bar. But Lindquist kept looking wild-eyed around the oyster-shell parking lot as if his arm had wandered off on its own volition. As if he might find it standing next to the blue-lit tavern sign, thumbing a ride.

Lindquist went back into Sully's. Sully was wiping the bar with a hand towel and peered over the top of his wire-frame glasses. At one of the back tables three men were gathering cards and poker chips, and they looked up too.

Lindquist stood in the doorway, lips pressed in a thin pale line, some dark emotion building behind his face like a storm front. "Somebody took my arm," he said.

"Took?" Sully said.

"Stole," Lindquist said. "Somebody stole my fuckin' arm."

A stymied silence fell over the room, for a moment the only sound the jukebox: a Merle Haggard song, “I Wonder If They Ever Think of Me,” playing faintly. The men glanced at one another and shook their heads. Finally one of them, Dixon, began to laugh. Then Prejean and LaGarde, the two other men at the table. Their teeth flashed white in their sun-ruddied faces and soon the narrow pine-planked room filled with their laughter.

“Screw you guys,” Lindquist said.

The laughter stopped as quickly as a needle lifting off a record.

“You joking?” Dixon asked.

Lindquist joked a lot, so it was hard to tell.

“Probably left it at home,” Sully said.

“Like hell,” Lindquist said.

“Call Gwen,” LaGarde said. “See if you left it at home.”

Lindquist stared stiff-jawed at LaGarde. LaGarde put his hands on the tabletop and looked down. Gwen was gone, had been for months. Most likely she was at her parents’ house in Houma, where she usually fled when she and Lindquist were arguing. She always returned after a few days, but not this time. The men didn’t know the full story, but the gist was probably the same. A quarrel about money, about bills, about their daughter, about God knew what.

Sully stepped from behind the bar and the men got up from the table. They searched under stools and chairs, kicked open bathroom stalls. Then they went outside and canvassed the lot. Lindquist stooped and peered under the trucks. Dixon went to the edge of the lot and passed his boot back and forth through the sedge. Prejean did the same on the other side. LaGarde walked out to the blacktop and looked in both directions.

Afterward the men stood under the sodium lights, batting mosquitoes from their faces.

“Why didn’t you just wear it?” Dixon asked Lindquist.

“You wear it in this heat,” Lindquist said.

Twenty minutes later the sheriff arrived. Villanova. He picked up his khaki cowboy hat off the passenger seat, got out of the cruiser, sat the hat on top of his mastiff head.

The men stared, faces malefic in the red and blue bar-light.

Lindquist told Villanova about the poker game, about how his arm was missing when he returned to his truck. Villanova fished a small spiral notebook out of his shirt pocket and scribbled down the names of the men who'd left earlier. Lindquist insisted whoever took his arm had to be a stranger. A lowlife drifter so drug-addled and devoid of moral compass he'd steal a prosthetic arm from someone's truck.

"And you're sure you didn't leave it home," Villanova said.

Lindquist narrowed his eyes. "You leave your arms at home?"

Your thirty-thousand-dollar arm, he wanted to say. Without his wife's insurance from her job at the bank, Lindquist could have never afforded the prosthetic or the months of physical therapy after his accident. And even with Gwen's insurance, Lindquist had to pay fifteen grand out of pocket, money he put on a high-interest credit card he paid only the minimum on every month. A debt he'd take to his grave, but he couldn't exactly shrimp with a five-dollar hook arm from Kmart.

Villanova wrote something down. "You have the serial number?"

"The serial number?"

Villanova pinched the bridge of his nose. "The serial number for the arm, Lindquist."

Lindquist shook his head.

"Well, you can always call the doctor. Call wherever you got it. That might make sense."

The men scattered their separate ways, Dixon and Sully back into the bar, LaGarde and Prejean off to their trucks. Lindquist stood beside his truck door, jangling through a wad of keys. A full minute passed before he found the right one. Then for another half minute Lindquist jabbed the key around the lock, scraping metal. Finally he scrunched one eye closed and slipped the key inside.

Villanova watched from across the lot. "What you doing?" he asked.

"Driving home."

"Like hell. You're drunk."

Lindquist squinted at Villanova, head listing as if to music only he could hear. "Just a little," he said.

"It's late, Lindquist. Get in the car."

For a time the men were silent as Villanova drove along the trafficless two-way. They passed a palmetto grove, a field of saw grass. A nighthawk winged across the moon, its silhouette like an emblem on a coin.

"Knock knock," Lindquist said.

"Still at it with your jokes, Lindquist."

"Knock knock."

"Loses an arm and tells knock-knock jokes."

"Anita."

"Anita who?"

"Anita big ol' pair of titties in front of me."

Villanova shook his head. The police radio popped and hissed with static.

"So you all were playing poker," Villanova said.

"Yeah."

"For money?"

"What you think?"

"That's illegal."

Villanova kept both hands tight on the wheel, both eyes on the road.

"Knock knock."

"It's late, Lindquist."

Villanova didn't need to ask him for directions because he knew the way. He'd driven Lindquist home from the bar a few times because he was too wrecked to drive himself.

"You worried about the oil?" Villanova asked.

Lindquist said he was. Everybody in Jeanette was. Hell, folks were in a shithouse panic.

"Could be better than they're saying," Villanova said. "But I got a feeling it might be worse."

Soon Villanova bumped onto a gravel driveway that cut through wild privet to a brick ranch house with a gray-shake roof and satellite dish. A birdbath, its basin filled with scummy water and leaves, stood in a dead flowerbed.

Awkwardly, Lindquist reached his left arm across his lap and opened the door.

"You okay, Lindquist?" Villanova asked.

Lindquist stooped and looked into the car. "Yeah. You?"

"Yeah. Favor? No crusades just yet."

Lindquist nodded.

"Got your keys?"

"Yeah."

"Check for me."

Lindquist took his keys out of his jeans pocket, jangled them, gave Villanova a thumbs-up.

"Still know how to use them?"

"So long, Villanova," Lindquist said. He shut the door and stepped aside as Villanova turned the car around. He watched the taillights jitter like fireflies down the driveway, one pair and then two and then one again when he squinted an eye.

Lindquist opened the front door, flicked on the light, sniffed. A sweet-sour stink, of rancid bacon grease and chicken fat, wafted from the kitchen. And the den was littered with grease-mottled takeout bags, empty beer cans, month-old newspapers still in their cellophane bags. Lindquist wondered what his daughter, Reagan, would think if she dropped by for a visit, what his wife would think if she came back.

Like that was going to happen.

He moved to pick up one of the bags but his arm wasn't there. He went to the kitchen and got an Abita out of the refrigerator and then he sat at the cluttered dining room table. Bills, all months overdue. Mortgage, credit cards, diesel, insurance. And books stacked four and five high: *The Story of the American Merchant Marine. The Pirates Lafitte. The Journal of Jean Lafitte. The Pirate Lafitte and the Battle of New Orleans. Biogeochemistry of the Wetlands: Science and Applications.*

Among the books were time-yellowed maritime maps as stiff as parchment, marked with red felt-tip pen in Lindquist's hieroglyphic hand. A metal detector lay across the table with its circuitry box open and its wiring sticking out. Gwen used to bitch when he left these things on the table, but now he could keep them where he goddamn well pleased.

Lindquist leaned on one ass cheek and took out a Pez dispenser from his pants pocket and flicked the head. Donald Duck spat out an oblong white pill: Oxycontin, whittled by Lindquist with a pocketknife so it fit perfectly into the dispenser. With the bottom of his Abita bottle he pummeled the pill on the dining room table until it was crushed to dust. Then he plugged a nostril with his forefinger and leaned over and snorted the powder, tipping his head back and rubbing the dust off his upper lip.

Lindquist unfolded one of the maps over the table, a fraying map in hachured black and blue ink of the Barataria, its serpentine waterways and archipelagos of barrier islands. Over time Lindquist had made his own adjustments to the cartography, crossed out cheniers succumbed to time and tempest, drawn new islands and hummocks sprung up overnight. One was shaped like a tadpole, another like a paw track, another like an Egyptian udjat. Over some of the islands he'd drawn X's, over others question marks.

He uncapped a purple felt-tip pen with his teeth, studying the map, marking over one of the islands. He reached for his beer, but his right arm still wasn't there. He dropped the pen and clutched the bottle, thinking of the last thing Gwen had told him before she left.

You're in a bad place, she'd said. *You need help.*

Lindquist finished his beer, went to the refrigerator and got another, sat back down at the dining room table and opened his laptop. In Google he typed *Jean Lafitte* and pulled up more than a million results. Then he typed in *Lafitte* and *Barataria* and got nearly two hundred and fifty. He typed in the words *treasure* and *gold* and *pirate* and then he typed in other search terms until he stumbled upon a treasure-hunting board where men—only men—had posted their metal detecting stories. One of the posts showed pictures of brass mushroom buttons and musket balls and doubloons, another a War of 1812 artillery button, another yet an 1851 Officer's Eagle Sword belt plate.

He was still at the kitchen table drinking his beer and browsing through the treasure pictures when his e-mail pinged. He opened up the new message and read it.

TO : LINDQUIST007@gmail.com

FROM: Youredead98989898@gmail.com

WE KNOW WHO U R. WHERE U LIVE. U TRESSPASSING PRIVATE PROPERTY. THIS IS UR ONLY WARNING.

Lindquist's heart kicked and his body went rigid. He sat for some time at the dining room table wondering what to write. Then he typed one-fingered. "WHOSE THIS?" He tapped the delete button several times. Rewrote the original message. Hesitated. Hit send.

He waited, the only sounds the ticking house timbers as they sighed out the heat of the day, the thumping of moths against the windowpane. The faint white hum of the lightbulb filament in the ceiling fixture.

Lindquist's e-mail pinged again.

TO : LINDQUIST007@gmail.com

FROM: Youredead98989898@gmail.com

STAY AWAY FROM THE ISLANDS, FUCKFACE.

WES TRENCH

Midnight. Wes and his father followed the trail from their house toward the harbor. Even from a quarter mile distant, through the palmetto brakes and waist-tall swamp grass, they could hear singing voices carrying through the marsh, the faint quick-tempo strains of zydeco music: the blessing of the shrimping fleet. For the past five years Wes and his father had forgone the ritual, waiting until Father Neely was done blessing the boats until they journeyed to the docks. Wes's father was still angry at God about what happened to his mother. They both were.

One of many things they never spoke about.

It was dark except for the beams of their flashlights skeltering across the ground, the cherry of Wes's father's cigarette. His cotton-white hair, high and tight. Above them a cloud-dimmed quarter moon gleamed through a lacework of live oak branches. They followed a bend in the trail around a stand of sand pine and crossed a rough-board footbridge over a creek. A black snake sidewindered across the water and slipped inklike into the bracken.

Now Wes could hear the grumbling of boat engines, the wheezing stutter of an accordion. The clickety-clack of a washboard, a boat captain shouting orders at his crew. "Don't lay them nets there," said a man with a salt-cured voice. "Starboard, asshole, starboard."

One of Wes's earliest memories was of making this trip through these same woods. On an August night like this, breezeless and heavy with the scent of loam. His father was sprightlier then because this was before his chronic backaches, before the shrimping hauls got smaller and smaller, before all his hair turned white.

Wes's mother held his damp hand in hers as they followed his father in the dark. He could feel the cold metal kiss of her wedding ring.

"How many shrimp you gonna catch, Daddy?" Wes asked.

"Know Mount St. Helens?" his father said.

"Naw, sir."

"Mount Rushmore?"

"Naw, sir."

"You know Miss Hamby, your math teacher with the big ass?"

Wes's mother told him to hush.

He was happier then, Wes's father. Hopeful. They all were.

It was around this time, maybe a year or two later, when Wes came home from school and found a midnight-blue Schwinn waiting for him in the driveway. His father had hauled in a three-ton catch, ridiculously lucky, and bought the bike, new, on a whim.

And later that night while his mother washed the dishes Wes saw his father come up to her from behind and put his hands on her hips. She turned around and they kissed with their eyes closed, something he saw only once or twice before and once or twice after.

Wes didn't know this then, but he knew it now: whoever said that money didn't buy happiness was a damn fool. A damn fool who'd never been poor.

On the other side of the bridge Wes and his father followed the trail up a slippery rise. They stepped over a lichened footlog and saw the harbor lights glimmering through the pines. About thirty or forty people stood on the docks, their silhouettes against the amber lights of the pier. Ship captains and crewmen stood aboard skiffs and oyster luggers, filling bait wells with ice, untangling trawling nets. A few of the boats were already entering the bay, their Christmassy red and green pilot lights glinting on the horizon.

Wes's father flicked his cigarette into the bushes and they stepped onto the dock. In the harbor parking lot a few folding tables were set up with crockpots of gumbo, paper plates, plastic spoons. Transistor radios droned in competition, one playing a pop station out of New Orleans, another an AM talk show out of Baton Rouge. A big-bellied old woman was boiling crabs in a gas-lit kettle. A hunchbacked man fingered the mother-of-pearl buttons of his wheezing accordion. Another man scraped his vest frottoir with rusty spoons.

Wes had known these faces his whole life. They were captains and crewmen, crabbers and trappers. In May they shrimped for pinks and in August for whites. In the fall some of them went after alligators and oysters. And they were the sons and daughters of captains and crewmembers, still too young to help on the boats. The heavyset wives with harried faces and graying hair. The grandmothers and grandfathers with rueful eyes and worried toothless jaws.

"Hey, Bobby," a man said to Wes's father. He had on yellow waders and pulled a cigarette pack from his shirt pocket and tapped the bottom with his gnarled forefinger. He lipped the cigarette.

"Where the hell you been, Davey?" Wes's father said.

"Daytona," Davey said. "Workin' on one of those charter boats for a bunch of rich Florida fucks."

A few years ago Davey had worked for Wes's father, but he quit and joined the crew of a bigger boat when the hauls got smaller and smaller and when the price of shrimp went down. A bigger boat meant a bigger paycheck. Wes's father didn't begrudge him the fact. He knew how hard it was scraping by in the Barataria and probably would have done the same.

"You like it over there?" Wes's father asked.

"Yeah, it was paradise," Davey said. He lit his cigarette and scrunched one side of his face against the smoke. "Just about gave all this up," he said, gesturing across the bayou at the boats shambling out of the harbor, at the bent trees brooding over the water.

At the end of the dock a bare-chested little boy pissed gleefully into the bayou. When he finished he zipped up his camouflage shorts and hopped barefoot like a monkey back to his mother. Wes was about this boy's age when he started coming out here to the harbor. Young enough to remember the air of festivity that once presided over these first nights of the shrimping season. The fais-do-dos, the Cajun dances. Those were better times for everyone in the Barataria. Before the bayou started grubbing out smaller and smaller hauls of shrimp. Before the oil spill. Before Katrina.

Before Wes's mother died.

"Any word yet?" Wes's father asked.

"Couple of guys already radioed in," Davey said. "Shrimp look thin. Early yet, though."

"Oil?"

"Everywhere."

Davey looked at Wes. "How you doin', podnah? Thought you'd'a gone Ivy League on us by now."

Wes forced a grin and shook his head. College, he already knew, was pretty much out of the question.

"Boy, is that gray in your hair already?" Davey said.

"A bit, yes sir," Wes said. Just after his sixteenth birthday, the gray had begun to pepper the sides of his head. A little at first, but every time he got his hair cut there were several new grays and Wes guessed he'd be as white-haired as his father before he turned thirty.

"You two come on over to the house for supper when all this dies down, huh?" Davey said.

"We will, Davey," Wes's father said. "You say hello to Kelly and Renee now."

"Shuh, shuh."

Wes followed his father down the dock to their boat and hopped onto the deck and untied the ropes from the dock cleats. He heard someone step behind him and turned. It was Father Neely in his cassock and alb, the sweat on his forehead gleaming in the dock lights.

"How you, Father," Wes said. He stood and shook the man's hand. Soft and damp. Never a day of boat work in his life.

"Wesley," Father Neely said. "Good to see you, son." He glanced up at the boat, said hello to Wes's father, who was coiling up the mooring rope. He only held up his hand and turned his back. Then he climbed the metal ladder up to the wheelhouse. Through the window Wes saw the spark of his lighter, the guttering flame of the candle nub beside the wheel. Another spark when his father lit a cigarette.

"You guys missed the blessing," Father Neely said, tactful enough to not say *again*.

"Running late tonight," Wes said.

"Shuh, of course," Father Neely said. He glanced up at the wheelhouse and smoothed down his smoke-yellowed mustache with his thumb and forefinger. He looked back at Wes and dug in his robe pocket and fished out a St. Christopher medallion. Wes hesitated. He knew his father wouldn't want it but neither could he exactly turn it down. He took the medallion and pocketed it and thanked Father Neely.

"I'll pray for a prosperous season," Father Neely said.

Wes thanked him again and said that they needed all the praying they could get.

Their boat, the *Bayou Sweetheart,* was a thirty-three-year-old Lafitte skiff, one of the few of its kind in Jeanette that survived the hurricane. Weeks after the storm, when Wes and his father began picking through the ruins, they found the boat miraculously intact, sitting on top of the levee as if placed there by a benevolent giant's hand.

Like many other Baratarians, Wes and his family had chosen to ride the storm out. Or, really, Wes's father had chosen for them. When Wes's family woke on the morning of August 28 and turned on the television, the weatherman on WGNO news out of New Orleans was predicting a Category 5 hurricane. One-hundred-and-fifty-mile-per-hour wind gusts, fifteen-foot storm surges, levee breaks. A monster.

The first winds were just beginning, moaning in the eaves, and outside the sky had already blackened to charcoal, so dark the trees in the yard threw off a strange glow, as if lit from within.

"We should leave," Wes's mother said for the umpteenth time.

They stood before the old Zenith in the den. Still in their bedclothes, faces puffy with sleep.

"You know how many times they've said this and it turned out to be nothing?" Wes's father said. The worry wasn't yet showing in his eyes, but there was an edge in his voice.

Thunder shook the house and rattled the windowpanes. Their black Labrador, Max, scampered to the kitchen and hid under the table, where he watched them timorously, head on forepaws.

"We can stay in Baton Rouge," said Wes's mother. She meant her parents' place.

"Come on, Dad," Wes said, wondering how his father could be so blasé, wanting to take him by the shoulders and shake some sense into him.

But his father was watching the television, rubbing his unshaven chin, hardly listening. "Then you and Wes go ahead and pack. But you better get to it. Now. Before the roads get too choked up."

"You too. You're going."

Wes's father shook his head as if this were out of the question. "I gotta tie down the boat. Help other guys with theirs. I gotta board up these windows. There's a million things."

"Listen to the TV," said Wes's mother.

"They always say this stuff. It's their job."

All morning Wes figured his father would come to his senses and change his mind, but no. And by afternoon, when the first bands of the storm lashed the Barataria, it was already too late to leave. That night the hurricane hammered Jeanette like a djinn. Within hours, houses and mobile homes were smashed apart and swept away like dollhouses. Docks ripped from land and carried down streets turned into raging rivers. Boats snapped away from their moorings and were sucked into riptides.

By the time the storm had run its course, several people in Jeanette drowned in the flood.

Among them Wes's mother.

That was almost exactly five years ago, and the anniversary of his mother's death, August 29, was just half a month away. A day Wes was dreading. Half a decade ago: that meant he'd now lived almost one third of his life without her. He was amazed so much time had passed. Yet the pain was still there, the regrets and resentments between him and his father. There were little things about her he was forgetting, gestures and sayings he struggled to remember. But he recalled her voice distinctly, sometimes even heard it in his dreams. The sweet soothing lilt, a soft halcyon balm on his nerves. *Oh, it'll be fine, Wessy. Oh, Wessy, stop being such a worrywart.*

What a strange pair Wes's mother and father had been, she the quasi-Bohemian peacekeeper in Birkenstocks, he the hotheaded live wire. Wes often wondered whom he took after most. He preferred to think he was more like his mother in certain respects—the most important, like temperament. But he wasn't sure. As time passed he found himself growing angrier, more doubtful and worried, like his father. But his father's stubbornness and resourcefulness, those were good, and Wes felt those beating in his blood.

Sometimes Wes caught his father glancing at him strangely. He supposed it was because he looked a lot like his mother now that he was full grown. He was slightly short and narrow-shouldered, just like his mother, and his skin browned darkly in the sun instead of reddening to brick like his father's. And Wes had his mother's sharp widow's peak. Her wide-set green eyes, teal in the winter and pale mint in the summer, depending on the darkness of his tan, the color of shirt he wore. Girls in his high school were always telling him what pretty eyes he had. Wes's mother used to say he'd never have a problem with the ladies as long as he stayed a gentleman and kept his eyes in his head.

Recently a memory came back to Wes that he'd long forgotten. One of his friends, Tommy Orillon, offered him a stick of gum at a Fourth of July barbeque and Wes took it, not knowing it was blackberry-flavored. As soon as the taste flooded his mouth, Wes remembered the time his mother took him blackberry picking when he was eight or nine.

The day Wes remembered, a sunny Sunday morning in late June, he and his mother held their own tin pails and they were picking among the thorny bushes beside a still-water creek, making a kind of game out of who could gather the most. Wes picked his blackberries so quickly he ended up nicking his hand in dozens of places with the briars. The lashes began to sting only when the game was over, after they returned home. His mother cupped his hands in hers as he sat crying on the fuzzy cover of the bathroom toilet. "Poor Wessy," she said, gently daubing his fingers with a Mercurochrome-soaked cotton ball. "It's okay, it's okay," she said, stroking her fingers through his hair.

* * *

Tonight Wes's father commandeered the wheel while Wes readied the booms. Under the cloud-shawled moon they yawed through the bayou, passing buoys hung with oil company signs.

DANGER, DO NOT ANCHOR. GAS LINE.

PROPERTY OF BP OIL.

CAUTION: PIPELINE.

Wes fiddled with his cell phone, checking Facebook, because soon they'd have no signal.

"Quit fooling with that phone," his father called down from the wheelhouse. "Like a baby on a titty. I swear."

Wes clenched his jaw and pocketed his cell phone. Starboard was a peninsula bowered with dwarf oak and scrub pine. Through the rushes Wes could see a small graveyard, bone-white mausoleums like crooked teeth, a brick fireplace like a basilisk in a clearing. An antebellum mansion belonging to the Robicheaux, a five-generation Creole family, once stood here. They'd evacuated before the storm and when they returned they found everything in ruins and went back to Texas. Last Wes heard, they were running a fried chicken stand in Galveston.

When the *Bayou Sweetheart* reached the pass, the water was scrummed with boats passing back and forth within feet of each other, jockeying for position. A festive glow suffused the water from their red and green running lights. Horns shrilled madly in the night. Men screamed threats and curses from pilothouses and decks.

A tire-bumpered oyster lugger passed their boat. A wizened deckhand, maybe thirty, maybe sixty, impossible to tell, shouted at Wes. “Hey,” he said. “Hey, lookit.”

When Wes turned, the man tossed something from a tin cup. Wes twisted away, but too late. A foul-smelling yolk splattered across his face. Wes wiped with his hand and looked at his fingers. Chum.

The man and his crewmen cackled. Wes gagged against the fishy reek and cleaned his face with the end of his shirt. The man on the oyster lugger shucked down his waders and mooned him. His ass was enormous and inflamed-looking, like an orangutan’s.

Wes’s father slowed the boat to quarter-speed and Wes lowered the booms and dipped the nets into the water. Other boats passed within yards, laboring crewmen hunched in shadowy cameo. Wes moved between starboard and port, checking the booms.

A familiar round-bottomed shrimper, sixty feet long and hung with a Confederate flag, glided alongside them. The captain shouted something from the wheelhouse and Wes looked up. It was Randy Preston, a man who years ago worked on his father’s boat. He grinned down with his too-big dentures and Wes gestured up at his father, who got on his megaphone and leaned out the starboard window. “What you got so far, Randy?”

“Nothing worth a shit.”

“That bad?”

“Wife’s gonna divorce me.”

“Could be a good thing,” said Wes’s father.

“No shit.” His boat was moving out of earshot so Randy had to shout quickly. “Heard on the radio they were catching a lot five miles west. I’m gonna see what’s going on over there. Get out of this mess.”

“Let me know if it’s any good,” Wes’s father said.

“Yeah, yeah,” Randy said. He held his arm out his window and made a jerk-off motion with his hand. “Keep a firm grip on yourself, Wes.”

Wes grinned and shot a bird at Randy. Randy leaned out of his window and shot one back. After a while his boat drifted away and was lost among the rest.

Wes hitched the starboard trawl to the winch. The motor smoked and strained and soon the swollen net emerged from the water like an amniotic sack, inside a squirming mass of fins and pincers and glinting black eyes. Then Wes went port and began winching up the other net.

His father put the boat in neutral and climbed down the wheelhouse ladder. With drip nets they dumped the haul into the sorting box and then they put on gloves and poked through the teeming pile. Hard-shell crabs snapping their pincers like castanets. Catfish and flounders and fingerling baitfish. Soft-shell crabs by the hundreds, so tiny and luminescently pale they looked like ghosts of themselves. A baby stingray whipping its barbed tail, a snapping turtle shooting its head back into its shell.

And then there were pinkie-sized shrimp, their brains and hearts beating like small black seeds beneath their rice paper skin.

"Worst I've ever seen," said Wes's father. His thousand-times-washed chest-stripe polo shirt, the same kind he always wore, was already stuck to his back with sweat.

Wes said nothing. He knew what was coming. His father was pissed and he was going to take it out on him. Wes was screwed if he said anything, screwed if he didn't.

"Gonna be out here for a fuckin' month."

Wes kept quiet, sorting through the fish and crabs and shrimp.

"This is it. This swamp is gonna fuck us. It's gonna fuck us like a thousand-dollar whore."

Wes flipped a baby catfish off the boat.

"Watch that sting-a-ree," his father said.

"I'm watchin' it."

"No you ain't. How many times I gotta tell you about those sting-a-rees? All I need, a trip to the hospital."

Wes lobbed a croaker back into the water.

"Jesus Christ," his father said. "End of the world out here."

It took them several minutes to toss the pile off the boat. Most of the fish and crabs swam back into the bayou's keep, but a few lay stunned on top of the water, finning in dazed circles.

His father climbed back up into the wheelhouse and again Wes lowered the nets. While the *Bayou Sweetheart* moved along the pandemonium of boats, he checked his watch. The hands told him that it was half past two. His eyes felt hot and grainy and he wanted nothing more than to have this whole ordeal behind him. He longed for a shower and the cool clean sheets of his bed. But he knew they'd be out here for several hours more at least. Maybe days.

If he and his father didn't kill one another first.

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When Wes and his father docked at Monsieur Montegut's two days later, it was an orange and foggy dawn. Three young deckhands in creaking rubber waders scrambled aboard the *Bayou Sweetheart* and scooped the shrimp into huge woven baskets. Whenever a shrimp fell onto the deck, seagulls swooped down and lit on the gunwales. One would snatch up the small pink morsel and wing away, a cawing mob chasing after.

The deckhands carried the baskets onto the dock and poured the shrimp into sorting vats. Then the shrimp were separated from the ice and dumped onto a rusty conveyor belt that rattled and groaned into the bargeboard tin-roofed shed, where the shrimp were loaded onto a scale.

The first weigh-ins of May and August were always the tensest, the bellwethers of the spring and fall seasons. Some years the bayou was such a miser that Mother Nature seemed to be telling the trawlers to give up. Other years, few and far between, seemed blessed, the Barataria giving up more shrimp than they dared hope for. Old-timers talked about the fabled hauls of the twenties and thirties, the apocryphal salad days. How the swamp hadn't been the same since the oil companies brought in their diggers and started chewing up the land. Nowadays, trawlers considered themselves lucky if they made enough to pay their bills and feed their families. And if they ended up with a little more on the side to squirrel away—lagniappe—that was nothing short of a miracle.

When the deckhands finished unloading their haul, Wes and his father stepped off the boat and walked down the splintery dock into the open-sided weighing shed. Monsieur Montegut stood rheumy-eyed and haggard behind the scale, a cigarette dangling from the crimp of his mouth. He shook their hands. Told them that if the price of shrimp went down any further he was going to sail out to one of the British Petroleum oil rigs and blow the fucking thing up himself.

"Well, let's see what you have here," Montegut said. "Sure you two got better things to do than socialize with my old ass."

First Monsieur Montegut weighed their total haul. Seven hundred and twenty-six pounds. Not nearly as much as Wes and his father had hoped for.

"These look a whole lot bigger than some I've been seeing," Montegut said. "You shoulda seen the last guy. *Lucky Sevens*? Not a one bigger than my pinkie. And I got the hands of a geisha girl."

Wes's father huffed a polite laugh through his nose.

There was still some hope, Wes knew. The total weight of their haul didn't matter as much as the size of the shrimp, how many it took to make a pound. If it took only thirty or thirty-five shrimp to make a pound, they were in business. If it took sixty or seventy, then the trawling expedition was a bust.

Wes's father lit a cigarette and watched as Montegut took a metal ice scoop and dug into the pile of shrimp. These he dumped on a smaller butcher scale. Montegut added four or five shrimp to the scale until the red needle quivered up to two pounds. Then he transferred the shrimp to a waist-high wooden table and began counting. His puffy lips moved and his stubby fingers flicked as he tallied.

Wes stood quietly beside his father. From the corner of his eye he could see his sagging shoulders, his lined face. Maybe it was his imagination, but his father's age in the last few years seemed to have come suddenly upon him. He climbed down the ladder slower and slower these days. His body was still wiry but the flesh under his arms was loose and flabby in a way that reminded Wes of a chicken's wattle. And he lumbered stiffly around the boat, clutching his coccyx and wincing.

There was a reason why you saw so many billboards for chiropractors and acupuncturists when you drove into the Barataria. Many guys, their backs were shot before they were even thirty. By forty, they were drinking whiskey every night to keep the pain at bay, scoring Oxycontins from their doctors and friends just to make it through another day of trawling. And by fifty, most of them were over the hill and ruined.

Wes's father was forty-eight.

After a few minutes, Montegut had counted out a hundred and five shrimp.

Wes's father flicked his cigarette onto the ground and heeled it out with his boot. "You mind counting again, Willy?"

Patiently, Montegut took another scoop of shrimp. Weighed. Counted. This time the number was one hundred and ten.

"Fuck," said Wes's father, palming the top of his head like he was polishing a bowling ball.

"How bout we stick with the other number?"

"Appreciate it, Willy."

"Hey, shit."

In the tawny morning light they walked out of the weighing shed and headed down a plank-board path toward Montegut's office. Wes's father's eyes were on the ground and his mouth was cinched. Wes knew that numbers were running wildly through his head. How many days were left in the season, how many hours they would have to spend on the boat for the next several weeks, how much a gallon of diesel cost, how many bills needed paying.

He was sure he'd hear plenty about it later.

They passed a ragtag collection of sheds and warehouses rotting from the salt and sun. A shrimp boat named the *Jean Lafitte* was moored in one of the slips. A one-armed man in camouflage cargo pants shouted at Montegut's sons as they unloaded the shrimp from his boat. "Look at that," he was saying. "Spillin' them shrimp all over the place. That's two pounds of shrimp right there."

Once they passed out of earshot, Montegut looked over his shoulder. "Son-bitch gets crazier by the year."

Montegut's office was the size of a storage closet, its metal desk littered with papers. Receipts, invoices, bills, time cards. On the wall hung a smoke-yellowed map of the Barataria waterway system. A tide chart, more recent, was tacked up next to it.

Montegut poured coffee from a pot into a Styrofoam cup and then he reached for the bottle of Jameson sitting on top of the filing cabinet. He poured a dollop of booze into the cup and took a swig. Then he slipped off his necklace and took one of the keys that hung from it and opened his desk drawer. From the drawer he took out a large metal box and opened it with another key. He reached inside and withdrew a thick sheaf of one-hundred-dollar bills and licked the ball of his thumb and counted them out. He handed the money to Wes's father, who looked at the bills woefully.

Montegut sat in his office chair and leaned back and tapped his finger, his wedding band thumping against the blotter. "Ask me, it's more the media's fault than anything," he said. "Acting like it's the end of the world. You know how they like to exaggerate. Wanna draw it out so they have a story to scream about every night."

Wes's father pocketed the bills and thanked Montegut. Back at the harbor, he let loose a stream of curses. Wes let out some of his own as he hosed down the deck. His stomach was sour from eating only protein bars and canned ravioli, his tongue charred from his father's burnt chicory coffee. Aside from thirty-minute catnaps in the cabin, he and his father had kept awake the full forty-eight hours straight. This wasn't unusual, not in the beginning of the shrimping season. You heard about crews staying out there for a week at a time. Some of the Vietnamese trawled for two weeks in a row. The spring after Katrina, Wes and his father had stayed out in the Barataria for four days running. But that was when there were two other men on the crew. When Wes's father was younger, stronger.

At the harbor, Wes's father dug into his pocket and took out some bills. He counted off a few and handed them to Wes. Four twenties. Eighty dollars for more than forty hours' work.

They stood facing one another. His father's eyes were crinkled against the morning sun, the whites webbed with scarlet. "What?" he asked.

"Eighty dollars," Wes said.

"That's right."

"Where's the rest?"

"There ain't no rest."

"Two days for eighty dollars."

"You think I feel good about it?"

"Crazy," Wes said.

"Hey, watch it."

Wes bit his bottom lip, picked at his eyebrow.

"There's a lot of things you're not figuring. The gas."

"Eighty dollars."

"Wes, how am I supposed to give you more when there's no more to give?"

Wes walked away from his father toward his truck.

"Where you going?"

Wes didn't answer.

"Listen," his father called to his back, "I want you back here by nightfall. And don't forget the ice."

Wes kept walking.

"Wes, you hear me? Don't forget the ice."

COSGROVE AND HANSON

A nurse called from a New Orleans hospice and told Cosgrove that his father was dead. Congestive heart failure, a peaceful passing in his sleep. Cosgrove hadn't spoken to the old man in half a decade, was surprised he lasted this long. He'd never taken care of someone's funeral and there was no living family he could call, so he was clueless about what to do next. Too embarrassed to ask the nurse, Cosgrove took the city bus to the public library where he sat at one of the carrels and searched *what to do when someone dies* on the computer.

Next morning Cosgrove set out from Austin to New Orleans in his seventeen-year-old Corolla, a rattletrap jalopy with a cracked windshield and a sugar-ant infestation in the glove compartment. The back bumper was held together with duct tape, and ten miles east of Houston on I-10 Cosgrove heard grinding like rocks in a blender as the car lurched and shimmied. He looked in the rearview mirror and saw the bumper rolling wildly in the road like a suicide by self-defenestration.

He drove on.

The day of his father's burial was gloomy and windswept, scrummed with clouds like an armada of dreadnoughts. Styrofoam cups rollicked over the cemetery lawn, and tattered stick-flags snapped over the veterans' graves. The wind kept blowing the purple drugstore chrysanthemums off the coffin, and Cosgrove gave chase among the mausoleums like a cat after a windup toy. Finally he picked up an egg-sized stone off the ground and weighed the flowers down.

When the minister asked for a eulogy, Cosgrove at first was speechless. During the sermon he'd kept waiting for a stranger to belatedly arrive. A lost cousin or forgotten acquaintance. But the folding chairs around the gravesite stayed empty.

Cosgrove got up from his chair and clenched his lips, looked down at his rented shoes. "He trusted in the Lord and kept his path straight," he said. Something he'd heard a televangelist say the night before on the motel television. As soon as the words left him, he realized how falsely they rang. About his father, about himself. In reality his father's path couldn't have been more crooked, his rambling around the country like one of those wandering dotted lines they showed on movie maps. A paper trail of bad checks and attorney bills and court summonses.

That night Cosgrove walked from his motel to a bar in the French Quarter and matched three Siberian businessmen shot after shot of Basil Hayden's Bourbon Whiskey. The last thing he remembered before his blackout was getting into an argument with one of the men about the World Cup, about which he knew nothing and didn't give a fuck. He had someone in a headlock, and someone else had him in a headlock, and they lurched around the bar like some tangled monstrosity, knocking over tables and chairs.

End of memory.

Next morning Cosgrove woke with a blinding hangover. In a jail cell. Curled fetally on the floor.

Six or seven other miscreants shared the cell, hard-eyed men who looked like they'd been courting trouble since the day they were born. A few paced like caged animals, clutching the bars and howling declarations of innocence. Others sat with their backs against the cinder block wall, eyes shut, heads bowed like penitents.

One bulge-eyed man kept raving about "the famous lawyer Jim Diamond Brousard." "You just call Jim Diamond Brousard," he said. "Tell him that Ricky Hallowell is in trouble."

Another man with a port-wine stain on his cheek had his pants pulled down around his ankles and was shitting without compunction in the corner toilet. He shot Cosgrove a beleaguered look and went about his business.

The police report read like a furloughed sailor's escapades, a story he and his roofing buddies back home would have laughed about. Public intoxication, disorderly conduct, pissing on a jukebox, resisting arrest. He doubted only one part, that he was crying about his father when they shoved him into the back of the police car.

No, that didn't sound like him at all.

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The judge must have hated him on sight because he sentenced Cosgrove to two hundred hours of community service, a punishment insanely disproportionate to the crime. Cosgrove stayed in New Orleans because there wasn't much waiting for him back in Austin save for a crappy roofing job, hell on earth during the summer. Some underwear and socks in an Econo Lodge drawer. His other sole possessions, a cache of childhood mementos and his birth certificate, were still in a safety deposit box in Miami, where he'd left them after a short, ill-fated stint—he'd gotten sun poisoning—as a barback in a South Beach hotel pool-bar.

He feared he was turning into a gypsy, like his father. Maybe in a new place he'd find a career, a woman, a life. He certainly hadn't in Austin.

And his fortieth birthday, four months away in January, loomed before him like a storm front. Maybe the best way to weather the sea change was in New Orleans.

Cosgrove rented one side of a sherbet-colored double shotgun in Mid-City and got a job at a neighborhood sports bar shucking oysters. And three days a week, on Mondays and Wednesdays and Fridays, he showed up at eight in the morning for community service. With a dozen other offenders, deadbeat fathers and druggies and drunks, he waited outside the station in his Day-Glo vest and ragged jeans until a deputy carted them in a windowless white van to their duty for the day. Sometimes they worked in groups of three or four, cleaning graffiti with wire brushes and sandblasters in Jackson Square. Other days they worked en masse, picking up condoms and carnival beads with pointed sticks from the squalid banks of the Mississippi.

A month into his sentence, Cosgrove was dropped off in front of a derelict two-story Victorian with faded purple shutters and lopsided porch columns. It was late August and hot, sparrows keening in the gray-green oaks, bougainvilleas in moribund bloom. A bantam-bodied man with a small pinched face and a black ponytail hanging out the back of his camouflage baseball cap got out of the van with him. They stood on the sidewalk regarding the house.

"Good God Almighty," the ponytailed man said. He had on a TOM PETTY AND THE HEARTBREAKERS T-shirt and frayed denim shorts two or three sizes too large, held up by a canvas belt with a gigantic gold and silver rodeo buckle engraved with the initials JHH.

The deputy, a gourd-shaped Dominican named Lemon, looked at the ponytailed man and then glanced down at his clipboard. "Hanson, is it?" he asked.

"John Henry Hanson," the ponytailed man said. "Yessir." He hung his thumbs from his canvas belt.

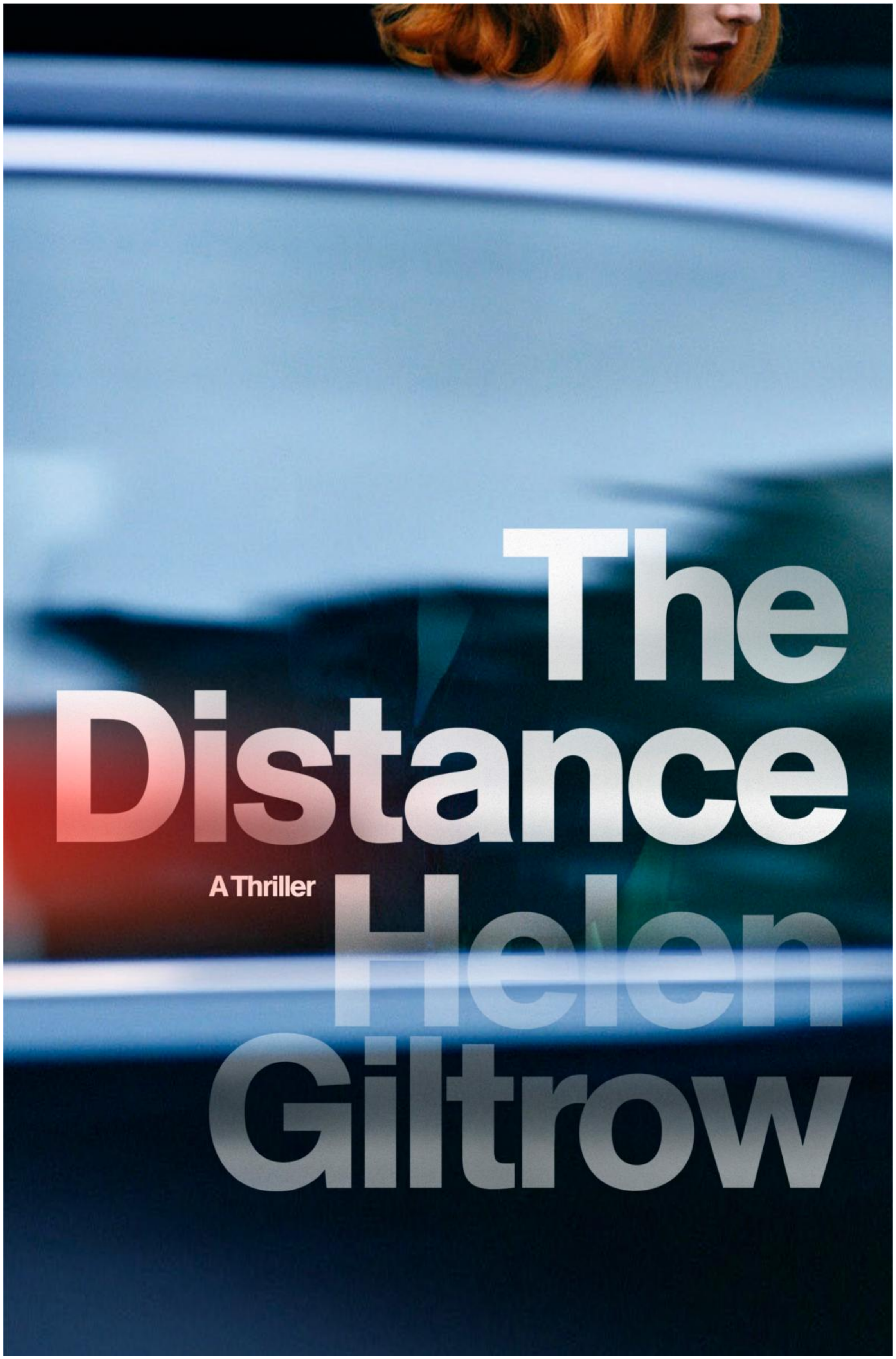
"What does it look like, Hanson?"

Hanson turned again and considered the sagging house. Paint was peeling off the clapboards in great leprous swatches and the front porch steps were spavined and weather-warped. Off to the side was a carport with a corrugated tin roof. No car, only buckets and paint cans and pallets of lumber, shovels and rakes and other gardening tools leaning against the walls.

"I'm no carpenter," Hanson said.

"Man of your mental caliber can manage a little sanding and painting, I'm sure," said Lemon. "You have any trouble with the hammer and nails, ask Cosgrove. He'll tell you which pound which."

Deputy Lemon got into the van and lurched away into the morning traffic. Hanson sidled up next to Cosgrove and watched the van turn


The Distance
A Thriller
Helen Giltrow

PROLOGUE

DAY 25: SATURDAY

KARLA

There's blood in my hair. Twelve hours and I've still got blood in my hair.

"Are you all right?"

The uniformed officer standing guard by the door is staring at my face in the washroom mirror. Breaking rules: she's been ordered not to talk to me. Maybe she thinks I'll faint.

They took my coat away from me last night, at the scene: the blood had soaked through to the lining. There was blood on my face, too, and blood on my hands, working its way into the cracks around my nails—the doctor who examined me cleaned most of it off before declaring me fit to be interviewed. I dealt with the rest as soon as I could, ignoring the pain, scrubbing my skin red-raw to get it out.

Nobody told me about my hair.

I pick at it with my good hand. A brownish clot glues the strands together. I wish I had scissors. I'd cut it out.

Don't think about it. Don't.

It's ten o'clock on Saturday morning. That's what my watch says; without it I couldn't even guess. I last slept, for a few broken hours, on Thursday night. Thursday . . . We had a plan in place then. I'd ceased to kid myself that I had the situation under control, but at least we had a plan. We could see a way through all this.

Now there's just me, in a police station toilet, pulling at my hair, trying to ignore the knot in my chest, holding myself together, sticking to my story. How many times have I rehearsed this situation in my head? But it's nothing like I imagined.

My whole adult life I've devoted to the pursuit of information, the analysis of patterns; to data and cold fact. This is just another fact, isn't it? And that's how I'll get through this, how I'll remain professional, detached—

But it hurts. I never guessed how much it would hurt.

The officer's still watching my reflection.

"I'm fine," I say. "Really. Thank you." I try to smile at her, diagonally, through the mirror, but my face is gaunt and slack.

Her gaze skates away. "We'd better go back," she says.

THE DISTANCE

On the interview room table, the plastic cup of cold coffee by my seat has developed a greenish-white scum. My stomach flips, and I push the cup away. Immediately the officer says, “I could get you another?”

“No—”

Too abrupt: she’s only being kind. Try again. “Thank you, but no.”

She takes the cup and goes out, shutting the door. There are voices in the corridor outside, then silence. I’m alone.

More than anything I want to put my head down on the table and weep.

But any minute they’ll be back, with their questions. *Just one more time, Charlotte, from the beginning.* What did I see? What did I hear? Still they’re checking the details from different angles, listening for a piece that doesn’t fit. Because they have to be absolutely certain how much I know; or how little.

So I’ll start again, from their beginning, the one that makes the story neat and containable, and my part in it entirely innocent. But there are other beginnings.

Eight years ago: a stranger sitting in a warehouse, with a bright light shining into his face; a stranger who should have been afraid, and wasn’t.

Or the eighth of December, just over a year ago: a woman in a dark coat crossing a hallway, her face unreadable.

Or a Wednesday in January, less than four weeks ago, when Simon Johanssen found me, and I learned about the impossible job.

PART I

DAY 1: WEDNESDAY—DAY 2: THURSDAY
KARLA

I've always known the past might hunt me down—despite all my precautions, the false trails and the forged histories and everything else I've done to distance myself from it.

But not like this.

It happens while I'm standing in the interval crush of a Royal Opera House bar, listening politely as a portly banker expounds on the proper staging of *Götterdämmerung*'s final act: I glance up, and in that second my two lives—lives that I have taken so much care to keep apart—grind against each other like tectonic plates and set the room rocking.

He's loitering at the edge of a nearby group but angled fractionally away from them: he isn't with them, though you might be forgiven for thinking that he is. The beautiful suit, the tie, the glass of champagne held loosely in the fingers of his right hand, even his haircut and his stance, mark him as someone who belongs here. Only I know that he doesn't.

Two years. Two years, and only one reason he'd be here. He's come for me.

A beat—I swallow my shock—then I turn back to my companion and smile and provide the right response. But my peripheral vision strains for a fix on him: I need to watch him, as if he's some unpredictable animal, potentially dangerous. I want to turn and stare. But right here, right now, I'm Charlotte Alton—polite, wealthy, idle Charlotte Alton—and she emphatically doesn't know the man I've just seen. Instead I must maneuver myself so I can survey the crowd over the banker's shoulder. By the time I've done so, he's vanished.

Carefully, discreetly, I sweep the room.

It's a sold-out performance, and the bar—the biggest in the opera house, like a giant Victorian glasshouse under a high curved roof—is packed, the north and south balcony tables full, people crowding around the circular copper counter of the central servery. Too many men in dark suits who could be him but aren't. A wall of rippling mirrors doubles the size of the place, reflecting the elaborate ironwork of the huge arched window and turning the crowd into a throng. He and his reflection have melted into it. At the top of the mirrored wall, the glass oblong of the upper bar's balcony seems to float suspended above us: the people lounging against its rail look like boxed exhibits. I glance up there, too. He isn't among them.

But he's here, somewhere, and he's found me. Of course he has. *And whose fault is that?*

The five-minute bell goes. Around me, glasses are drained. "Here, let me"—the banker takes mine, but as he turns away another of our party, a senior City lawyer, lays a hand on my arm—"Charlotte, I was hoping for a word—shall we?" So I fall into step beside him as we join the patient shuffle toward the auditorium, and I smile, and focus, while the blood beats harder behind my eyes.

Even though I'm searching for him, I don't see him until he's right beside me. He doesn't look at me, but his hand finds mine. Then he's gone, blending into the crush around me.

The lawyer and I move along the corridor toward the grand tier: the lawyer is on the board of a charity, there's an auction coming up, might I possibly . . . ? The object nestles in my closed hand. It's sticky and warm with perspiration when, bending to take my seat, I slip it into my clutch bag.

It is a tiny Christmas-tree decoration, a little red-and-purple bauble that has embedded glitter into the skin of my palm.

The lights dim. The final act begins. Wagner's tale of assumed identities, broken promises, betrayal, and murder storms toward its end. I barely register it.

The bauble is a message, a prearranged signal in a code devised on the fly years ago. Simon Johanssen wants a meeting. But not with discreet, well-bred Charlotte Alton. Johanssen wants a meeting with Karla.

The easy excuses come unbidden. *You haven't been near a client in months. You're out of the game. Send Craigie. He'll deal with it. It's what you pay him for.*

It's a pointless debate. I'm going anyway.

The early hours of the next morning. The cold is like grit, stinging the eyes.

Up on the main road in this part of East London there are glass-fronted office blocks and smart, new light-industrial units, and in the distance the towers of Docklands—my apartment building among them—glitter like something out of a fairy tale, but from down here they're invisible and a world away: a burned-out van slumps on its axles beside the approach road, and the gutters are choked with rubbish.

An amusements company uses the site for storage: decrepit fairground rides, tatty street decorations. Broken machinery litters the yard like the fossilized remains of prehistoric beasts: a giant petrified octopus with its tentacles drawn up around it, a stretch of track like the curved spine of a tyrannosaur. Inside the warehouse, underpowered fluorescent tubes send a grimy wash of light across the aisles, illuminating a sheared-off dodgem car still with its pole, a painted board with the words THE ULTIMATE THRILL.

It's January, I've been here for twenty minutes, and I'm cold. Perhaps that's why I miss it.

Not movement. I would have spotted movement. He is simply there, in the gloom, watching me.

"I'm sorry," he says, but still I find myself sucking in air.

It's as if he's been here all along, among the grinning plastic Santas, the concertinaed Chinese New Year dragons, and only a change of focus has brought him into view. Or as if he's developed fractionally, like the grass growing or the accumulation of dust: the shadows thickening into human form.

He's thirty-eight years old. Six feet tall and spare, with the lean muscle mass of a distance athlete. The beautiful suit's gone; now his clothes are understated, anonymous, his wristwatch mass produced. The bones of his knuckles are prominent, and scarred.

As always I'm struck by his stillness.

"I wanted to be sure we were alone," he says. His voice is quiet, polite. The flat northern vowels betray his roots; nothing else does.

Two years since we last met. Fielding couldn't tell me where he'd gone. The trail he left petered out in Amsterdam. A scatter of rumors after that came to nothing. I'd almost come to believe that he was dead. But here he is.

So why now, after all this time? Why come to find me now?

Instead I ask, "You didn't try the number?" and I sound calm.

He says, "I didn't know the man who answered."

"He works for me. He's safe."

He nods, but his gaze goes sideways, away from me.

"Two years," I say. "I thought we'd lost you."

"I was keeping my head down."

"Any particular reason?"

He just shrugs.

What does he want? Up until two years ago a meeting like this meant he simply needed an ID, or information for a job. That's what people came to Karla for: the unauthorized obtaining of data, whether by bribery or blackmail or hacking or straightforward physical theft; the deliberate destruction of other data that would, if left intact, be of benefit to law enforcement agencies; the forging of identities or their deletion.

It can't simply be that; not after two years of silence. But perhaps he's out of the game, too, perhaps he's ceased to be the man who—

"Tell me about the Program," he says.

One extra second of silence, that's all. But I've schooled myself too long and too hard, and nothing else shows.

You could call it a prison, but it's like no other prison standing, apart from the wall and the wire.

When Johanssen left two years ago it didn't exist. It came only after the prison riots. Which came after the recession and the crime wave and the prison overcrowding and the budget cuts . . . Five thousand inmates dumped out of overflowing jails and into the care of a private security firm, to be housed—temporarily—in a collection of rundown suburban streets that had been emptied for redevelopment just as the economy crashed. A stopgap, certainly—but a stopgap that might run for years, so they pasted on a snappy Americanized name and set up a website extolling the theory behind the move.

And they came up with the experiment.

"And this experiment?" Johanssen asks, though he must know the answer already. It's on the Internet, after all.

"Teaching criminals to function within a self-regulating society."

"A self-regulating society made up of other criminals."

"That's right."

"And in return for taking part they get—?"

" 'Enhanced individual liberty and responsibility within a secure environment.' "

Keys to their accommodation. Access to TV and newspapers. The opportunity to sit on self-governing councils, make rules. Educational support, vocational training, small-business initiatives. Health care, sports facilities, even a restaurant. According to the website.

"Sounds too good to be true," he says.

“Then it probably is.”

“Is it safe?”

“‘Regular patrols by armed officers ensure the safety and well-being of all residents.’” Then, “Charlie Ross went in there when it opened. One of the first batch. He was dead in three months. Came out in bits.”

He doesn’t blink. Of course: he knew that, too.

“So who’s in there?”

“Mainly career criminals. Thieves, racketeers, pimps, dealers, human traffickers, murderers . . . but no pedophiles or terrorists.”

“Psychopaths?”

“Officially, no: can’t be trusted to take their medicine. Unofficially? Dozens at least, maybe hundreds. All learning to be good citizens.”

“You know people in there?”

“Knew.” I smile. It feels glacial. “We’re no longer in touch.”

“Internal surveillance?” he asks.

“Cameras.”

“Communications?”

“A landline system for inmates, all calls recorded. No mobiles.”

“Security?”

I’ve been asked that question so many times that I can reel it off in the blink of an eye; in a heartbeat.

“Double perimeter wall: forty feet high above the surface, thirty feet below. Electric fence, razor wire, heat and motion sensors. Twenty-four-hour guard on the walls. Air exclusion zone above. All underground connections are sealed apart from the main sewer; the contents of that are—*processed*—as they pass under the perimeter. A rat couldn’t get out.”

“What about in?”

“No one wants to get in.”

“What if I did? Could you get me in?”

I say, “There’s limited visitor access—”

“More than that.”

More than that? “A staff ID? Something that will get you in as a guard—”

“More than that,” he says, and he looks at me . . .

“As an inmate?”

And then away again.

So it’s a job. An anticlimax with a whiplash sting of irony: a job, it’s just a job, for which he needs an ID. Guards work in teams, to strict rotas; civilian staff are heavily protected. Only inmates can move freely in that place. He has to pass for an inmate, for what he's planning to do—

A sudden sense of dread.

"It can't be done," I say.

He glances at me. "You sure?"

End this now, just end it. "We don't have an in with the operating company, and we can't hack prison system records. Too well defended. Believe me, it's been tried."

He says, "By people who wanted to get out. Not in."

I just shake my head.

A silence between us, as if there's something else to say. At last I break it. "Is that everything?" A fractional nod. "Well, then: if you need me again, use this."

I hand him a card with no name, just a phone number. He reads it once, twice, and passes it back. We're done. Two years, and this is all we have to say to each other.

I push the card back into my coat pocket. "I'd better be going."

He doesn't say good-bye.

The car—not the Merc Charlotte Alton's used for the last year but a Ford with shell-company plates—is parked a street away. Robbie's on watch beside it, arms folded across his barrel chest, breath smoking in the cold air, heavy grizzled head cocked, alert to every sound.

A year since I last called him, since I last asked him to do anything like this, but he's worked for the network right from the beginning, and he knows the rules: he opens the door for me without a word or a look.

I slide into the passenger seat, and there it is, that brief smothered pang, *You should have stayed, you should have said something, you should have asked . . .*

I close it down. Close down, too, the image of Johanssen standing there in the shadows, listening as the car pulls away. For all I know, he's gone already.

We take the usual precautions. It's gone 4:00 a.m. when I get back to Docklands.

The building I live in overlooks an arm of the West India Dock, on the north side of Canary Wharf. Once they unloaded cargoes of sugar here, but all that's left of the industrial past is a pair of monumental cranes on the wharf, the dock itself—a shivering oblong of water that has to be skimmed periodically for cigarette butts and takeaway paper cups—and a run of low brick warehouses converted into bars for the tourists and the office workers. Everything else is new, and my building is among the newest. It caters to the nervous rich: overscaled rooms, heavy on security, cross-webbed with CCTV. It's possible to hermetically seal the place from the outside world; I don't get surprise visitors. Even at this hour there's a uniformed guard on patrol out front and, inside, a night porter on duty behind a bank of switches and monitors. We nod to each other as I cross the lobby to the lift.

From the forty-first floor the views are glittering—the offices of Docklands, the riverside warehouse conversions of Limehouse Reach, the curve of the Thames and the skyline of the City of London—but tonight when I look out, I barely notice them.

Did Fielding track him down in some obscure corner of the world? *Something's turned up, son. Right up your street.* Or did he just decide to come back and discovered this waiting for him? A job inside a prison. Looks impossible.

That sense of dread again: of course he'll try to do it.

I walk into the small room I use as an office. Switch on the computer, plug in a hard drive. Enter passwords, run decryption, and open a file I haven't touched in a year.

The first click brings up a set of five colored rings, one inside the other—outer security, inner security, the first wall, a narrow no-man's-land, and then the second wall—all formed around a dark, blank heart. I click on the central blank, and a numbered grid appears. Place a cursor on one of the squares and click again, and that square expands to fill the screen with detail: roads and buildings, a canteen, a vocational training block, a football pitch. Click again, and a delicate tracery of sewage pipes and electricity cables runs beneath the streets like veins under skin. Again, and icons scatter themselves across the plan: a random punctuation of little blue diamonds, green dots, yellow squares. Some are command centers or observation posts; some represent cameras and listening devices. Others we simply can't decipher.

We started gathering data on the Program, assembling this map, when the place was still in the planning stage. And ever since it opened its gates, people have come for the map. Except they don't come to me anymore, they come to Craigie; and it's not really the map they want, it's an answer to the question, *Is there a way out of there?*

The answer, as it has been since the Program opened, is no.

But that's not what Simon Johanssen is asking for. He wants something else.

And still I don't phone Craigie, although I know I should. I phone Fielding.

I phone using a line that no one will be able to trace. The person who picks up the phone just grunts, but it's him.

"Hello, Fielding."

A pause that stretches out to ten long seconds. Then—

"*Karla.*" One word, but Tony Fielding manages to load it with a heavy freight of superiority and contempt. He's never liked me—he prefers his women younger, and grateful. I'm a cold bitch, aren't I? In a way that's liberating.

Fielding says, "Well, here we are again," and his voice is like rust. Still smoking, then. "I take it you had a visit," and he sounds smug.

"Why are you letting him do this?"

He snorts. "Why not? You worried he's out of practice? I think he'll pick it up again soon enough—"

"A job in the Program."

Fielding says, "Look, he wants to work. I've already told him it's impossible. But that's what he does, isn't it? The fucking impossible. Put money on it, Karla, he's going to do it. Question is, are you?"

End this. End it now. The same argument trotted out again, deadpan. "You know the system in there. We can't hack it."

"Sure about that, Karla? Well, your choice. There's other people who can set this up. They'll get him in there. 'Course, they're not as *careful* as you, but beggars can't be choosers."

The words are out before I've time to think. "You can't put him in there—"

"Watch me."

"John Quillan runs the Program."

But Fielding says, "Does he, Karla? Good old John Quillan. I'll make sure Johanssen knows."

When he's gone, I walk back into the main room of my apartment, go to the window, and look down: the black water of the dock ripples back at me.

Walk away. Just walk away. You don't live the old life now. You're not Karla anymore, and you owe Simon Johanssen nothing . . .

But I can't walk away.

You like to think you make your own decisions. You like to think that it's all conscious, planned. But sometimes the decisions are made for you, and you only find out when it's much too late. Sometimes the borders are invisible; you cross them in the dark.

Before Johanssen told me about the job. Before I even walked into that warehouse—

That moment in the opera house, when I looked up and saw him: the future was set then.

Somewhere in the Program's security there is a loophole, and I will find it and use it to put him in there. Because if I don't, someone else will, and they won't watch his back.

John Quillan—professional criminal, gangster, murderer—runs the Program.

John Quillan wants him dead.

DAY 2: THURSDAY

JOHANSSEN

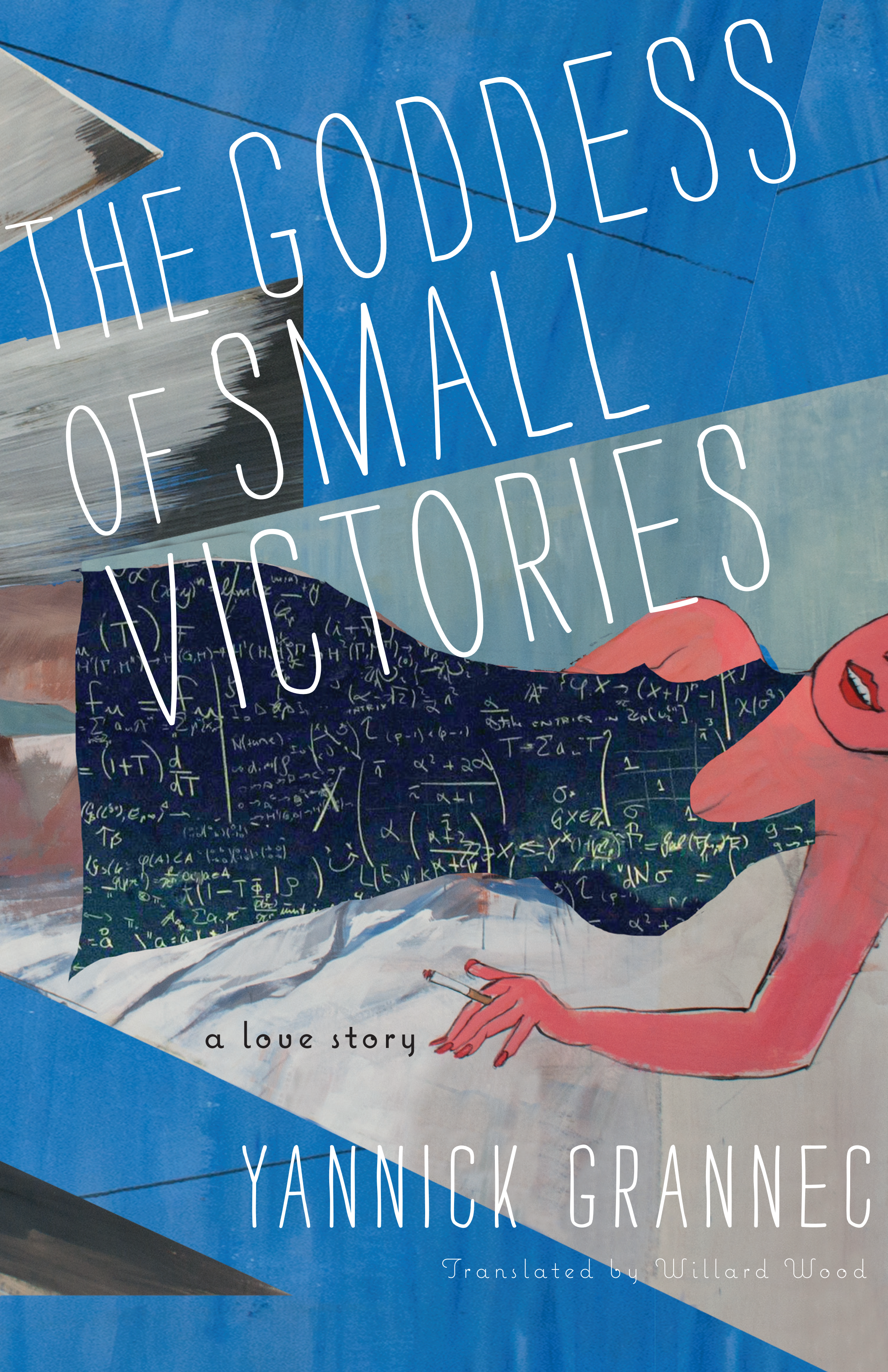
Three thirteen a.m., Thursday. A North London street in what they call an up-and-coming area, bars and estate agents slowly replacing the old pound shops and cheap clothing stores. A taxi took him part of the way here, and a night bus, but now he's on foot: the usual drills.

A sniper's habit reduces the world to distances.

Three meters to his left: a teenage couple huddles at a bus stop, their breath clouding the air around them. Eight meters right, a drunk zigzags down the opposite pavement, immune to the cold, then pauses with one hand against a wall and doubles. Johanssen keeps moving. Six paces take the man out of his field of vision. There's the sound of vomiting, and above his head a CCTV camera swivels impassively to catch the action.

No one is watching him.

He's seen her again. He's spoken to her. Now he's carrying that memory through the yellowish dark almost as if it's an object in his hands, with weight and shape. Sometimes it's fragile, precious—the light in her



THE GODDESS OF SMALL VICTORIES

a love story

YANNICK GRANNEC

Translated by Willard Wood

The Goddess *of* Small Victories

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TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH
BY WILLARD WOOD

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

There are two ways of spreading light:
to be the candle or the mirror that reflects it.

—Edith Wharton

1

OCTOBER 1980
PINE RUN RETIREMENT HOME
DOYLESTOWN, PENNSYLVANIA

Anna waited at the exact boundary between the hallway and the bedroom while the nurse pleaded her case. The young woman concentrated on every sound, trying to contain her anxiety: wisps of conversation, raised voices, televisions droning, the swish of doors being opened, the clatter of metal carts.

Her back ached but still she kept her bag shouldered. She moved a step forward to be in the center of the linoleum square marking the room's threshold. She fingered the index card in her pocket to give herself courage. Her well-reasoned argument was written out in block capitals.

The nurse patted the old woman's age-speckled hand, straightened her cap, and adjusted her pillows.

"Now Mrs. Gödel, you don't have so many visitors that you can go turning people away. Let her in. Have a little sport with her. It will give you some exercise!"

On her way out, the nurse gave Anna a small smile of commiseration. *You have to know how to handle her. Good luck, sweetheart.* That was all the help she could give. The young woman hesitated. Not that she hadn't prepared for this interview: she would lay out the salient points of her case, articulating each word carefully and with enthusiasm. But under the steady, unwelcoming gaze of the room's bedridden occupant, she changed her mind. Better to be neutral, to disappear behind the unobtrusive outfit she had selected that morning, a beige plaid skirt and matching twinset. She was certain that Mrs. Gödel was not one of those old ladies you call by their first names because they're going to die soon. Anna's index card would stay in her pocket.

"I'm honored to meet you, Mrs. Gödel. My name is Anna Roth."

"Roth? Are you Jewish?"

Anna smiled at the thick Viennese accent, refusing to be intimidated.

"Is that important to you?"

"Not in the slightest. I like to know where people come from. I travel vicariously, now that…"

She tried to straighten up in bed and a painful grimace crossed her face. Impulsively, Anna reached out to help. An icy glare from Mrs. Gödel stopped her.

"So, you work for the Institute for Advanced Study? You're terribly young to be moldering away in that retirement home for scientists. But enough. We both know what brings you here."

"We're in a position to make you an offer."

"What total imbeciles! Money is not the issue!"

Anna felt a wave of panic. *Whatever you do, don't respond*. She hardly dared draw breath, despite her mounting nausea from the smell of disinfectant and bad coffee. She had never liked old people and hospitals. The old lady poked under her cap and twirled a lock of hair but didn't meet her eyes. "Go away, young lady. You don't belong here."

Back in the lobby, Anna collapsed onto a brown leatherette chair. She reached for the box of liqueur-filled chocolates on the nearby side table. She had left it there when she arrived, suddenly realizing that sweets might be a bad idea if Mrs. Gödel could no longer eat them. But now the box was empty. Anna bit down instead on her thumbnail. She had tried and failed. The Institute would have to wait until Gödel's widow died and just pray to all the Rhine gods that she not destroy anything precious in the meantime. The young woman would so have liked to be the first to inventory Kurt Gödel's papers, his *Nachlass*. She looked back with mortification at her feeble preparations. In the end, she'd been cast aside with a flick of the hand.

She carefully tore up her index card and distributed the pieces in the compartments of the chocolate box. She'd been warned about the Gödel widow's stubborn vulgarity. No one had ever managed to reason with her, neither her friends nor even the director of the Institute. How could this madwoman cling as she did to this trove of cultural patrimony, which belonged, by right, to all mankind? Who did she think she was? Anna stood up. *I couldn't screw this up more if I tried, I'm going back.*

She gave a perfunctory knock and went in. Mrs. Gödel seemed unsurprised at the intrusion.

"You're not mercenary, and you're not crazy," said Anna. "All you really want is to provoke them! The power to hinder is all you have left."

"And what about them? What are they cooking up this time? Throwing some kind of secretary at me? A nice girl but not too pretty so that my old lady's sensibilities won't be ruffled?"

"You realize perfectly the value of these archives to posterity."

"Do you know? Posterity can go straight to hell! And those archives of yours, I just might burn them. I particularly want to use some of the letters from my mother-in-law for toilet paper."

“You don’t have the right to destroy those documents!”

“And what do they think at the Institute? That the fat Austrian lady is unable to judge the importance of those papers? I lived with the man for more than fifty years. I know goddamn well how great a man he is! I carried his train and polished his crown all my life! You are just another of the prim, tight-sphinctered Princeton types wondering why a genius would marry a cow like me. Ask posterity for an answer! No one has ever wondered what *I* might have seen in *him*!”

“You’re angry, but your anger is not really directed at the Institute.”

The widow Gödel looked at Anna, her faded blue pupils and bloodshot eyes matching the pattern of her flowered nightgown.

“He’s dead, Mrs. Gödel. No one can help that.”

The old woman twisted her wedding band around her yellowed finger.

“Out of what drawer of doctoral candidates did they pluck you?”

“I have no particular degree in science. I’m an archivist at the IAS.”

“Kurt took all his notes in Gabelsberger, a shorthand used in Germany but now forgotten. If I gave you his papers, you wouldn’t know what to do with them!”

“I know Gabelsberger.”

The old woman’s hands stopped playing with her ring and gripped the collar of her bathrobe.

“How is that possible? There are maybe three people in the world…”

“*Meine Grossmutter war Deutsche. Sie hat mir die Schrift beigebracht*.” My grandmother was German. She taught me how to write it.

"They always think they are so clever! I am going to trust you because you can spout a few words in German? For your information, Miss Librarian, I am Viennese, not German. And the three people who can read Gabelsberger don't intersect with the ten people who can understand Kurt Gödel. Which neither you nor I are capable of doing."

"I don't claim to understand him. I'd like to make myself useful by inventorying the contents of the *Nachlass* so that others, who truly are qualified, can study it. This is not some airy fantasy, and it's not a heist. It's a mark of respect, Madam."

"Why are you all hunched over? It makes you look old. Sit up straight!"

The young woman corrected her posture. All her life she had been hearing, "Anna, don't slouch!"

"Those chocolates, where did they come from?"

"Oh, how did you guess?"

"A question of logic. Number one, you are a sensible girl, well brought up, you wouldn't arrive here empty-handed. Number two…"

She gestured toward the door with her chin. Anna turned and saw a tiny wrinkled creature standing quietly in the doorway. Her pink, spangled angora sweater was smeared with chocolate.

"It's teatime, Adele."

"I'm coming, Gladys. Since you want to be useful, young lady, start by helping me out of this chromed coffin."

Anna brought the wheelchair next to the bed, lowered the metal rails, and drew back the sheets. She hesitated to touch the old lady. Pivoting her body, Gödel's widow set her trembling feet on the floor, then with a smile invited the young woman to help her up. Anna grabbed her under the arms. Once she was seated in the wheelchair, Adele gave a sigh of comfort, and Anna a sigh of relief, surprised at having so easily rediscovered movements she had thought erased from her memory. Her grandmother Josepha trailed the same scent of lavender in her wake. Anna shook off her nostalgia. A lump in her throat was a small price to pay for such a promising first contact.

"Would you really like to give me pleasure, Miss Roth? Then next time bring a bottle of bourbon with you. The only thing we manage to smuggle into this place is sherry. I despise sherry. Besides, I've always hated the British."

"Then I can come back?"

"*Mag sein*…" Maybe so.

2

1928

Back When I Was Beautiful

> To fall in love is to create a religion that has a fallible god.
>
> —Jorge Luis Borges, *Other Inquisitions*

I noticed him long before he ever looked at me. We lived on the same street in Vienna, in the Josefstadt district next to the university—he with his brother, Rudolf, and I with my parents. It was in the early hours of the morning, I was walking back to my house—alone as usual—from the Nachtfalter, "the Moth," the cabaret where I worked. I'd never been so naïve as to believe in the disinterest of customers who offered to accompany me home after my shift. My legs knew the route by heart, but I couldn't afford to lower my guard. The city was murky. Horrible rumors circulated about gangs that snatched young women off the street and sold them to the brothels of Berlin-Babylon. So here I was, Adele Porkert, no longer a girl exactly but looking about twenty, slinking along the walls and starting at shadows. "Porkert," I told myself, "you'll be out of these damn shoes within five minutes and tucked up in bed within ten." When I'd almost reached my door, I noticed a figure on the opposite sidewalk, a smallish man wrapped in a heavy coat, wearing a dark fedora and a scarf across his face. His hands were clasped behind his back and he walked slowly, as though taking an after-dinner stroll. I picked up my pace. My stomach knotted into a ball. My gut rarely misled me. No one goes for a walk at five o'clock in the morning. If you're out at dawn and you're on the right side of the human comedy, then you're returning home from a nightclub or you're on your way to work. Besides, no one would have bundled up like that on such a mild night. I tightened my buttocks and ran the last few yards, gauging my chances of rousing the neighbors by screaming. I had my keys in one hand and a little bag of ground pepper in the other. My friend Lieesa had showed me how I could use these to blind an attacker and lacerate his face. No sooner did I reach my building than I darted inside and slammed the thin wooden door shut behind me. What a scare he'd given me! I watched him from behind the curtain of my bedroom window: he continued to stroll. When I encountered my ghost the next day at the same time, I didn't hasten my pace. For two weeks I ran into him every morning. Not once did he seem aware of my presence. Apparently he didn't see anything. I began walking on his side of the street and took care to brush against him when passing. He never even raised his head. The girls at the club had a good laugh at my story of almost using the pepper. Then one day he wasn't there. I left work a little earlier, a little later, just in case. But he had vanished.

Until one night in the cloakroom at the Nachtfalter when he handed me his heavy coat, a coat much too warm for that time of year. Its owner was a handsome dark-haired man in his early twenties with blue eyes blurred behind the severe black circles of his glasses. I couldn't help taunting him.

"Good evening, Herr Ghost from the Lange Gasse."

He looked at me as though I were the Commendatore himself, then turned to the two friends who accompanied him. One of them I recognized as Marcel Natkin, a regular at my father's store. They sniggered as young men do when they are a little embarrassed, even the best educated. He wasn't the type to go putting the make on hatcheck girls.

As he didn't answer and I was busy with a sudden flood of customers, I decided not to press the point. I took the young men's overcoats and ducked between the coat hangers.

Toward one o'clock, I put on my stage costume, a modest enough affair given how much some girls exposed of themselves at the fashionable clubs. It was a saucy sailor's outfit: a short-sleeved shirt, white satin shorts, and a flowing navy-blue necktie. And I was of course fully made up. Amazing how much paint I wore in those days! I did my number with the other girls—Lieesa flubbed her dance routine again—then we turned the stage over to the comic singer. I saw the three young men sitting near the stage, all of them getting an eyeful of our exposed legs, my ghost not least among them. I resumed my station at the hatcheck stand. The Nachtfalter was a small club. We all had to do a little of everything—dancing and selling cigarettes between appearances onstage.

When the young man joined me a short while later, it was my friends' turn to snigger.

"Excuse me, Fräulein, do we know each other?"

"I often pass you on the Lange Gasse."

I hunted around under the counter to give myself something to do. He waited impassively.

"I live at number 65," I said, "and you at number 72. But during the day I dress differently."

I felt an urge to tease him. His muteness was endearing. He seemed harmless.

"What are you doing every night outdoors, other than watching your shoes move?"

"I like to think as I walk, that is…I think better when I'm walking."

"And what is so terribly fascinating to think about?"

"I'm not entirely convinced…"

"That I'd understand? Dancers have heads too, you know!"

"Truth and undecidability."

"Let me guess, you're one of those philosophy students. You're frittering away your father's money on studies that will lead to nothing—except someday taking over the family's hat-making business."

"You're almost right, philosophy does interest me. But I'm a student in mathematics. And, in point of fact, my father runs a garment factory."

He seemed astonished to have spoken so many words. He bent his upper body forward at the waist in a parody of a military bow.

"My name is Kurt Gödel. And you are Fräulein Adele. Am I right?"

"Almost right, but then you can't know everything!"

"That remains to be seen."

He fled, walking backward, jostled by an influx of clients.

I saw him again, as I'd hoped, at closing time. His drinking pals must have stirred his blood during the evening.

"May I walk you home?"

"I would keep you from thinking. I'm very talkative!"

"It's not a problem. I won't listen to you."

We left together on foot and climbed toward the university. We chatted, or rather, I asked him questions. We talked about

Lindbergh's flight; about jazz, which he disliked; and about his mother, whom he seemed to truly love. We avoided discussing the violent political demonstrations of the past year.

I don't know what color my hair was at the time. I've changed it so often in my life. I was probably blond, something on the order of Jean Harlow but less vulgar. Finer boned. In profile, I looked like Betty Bronson. Does anyone still remember her? I loved actors. I would pore over every issue of the weekly movie magazines. Well-bred Viennese society, of which Kurt was a part, looked down on the movies. They babbled endlessly about art, literature, and especially music. That was my first abdication, going to the movies without him. To my great relief, Kurt preferred comic opera to opera proper.

I had already put a cross on many of my youthful dreams. I was twenty-seven and divorced. When I was too young, I'd gone and married an unreliable man to escape my family. We were just emerging from those years of runaway inflation, of turnips and potatoes, of scrounging on the black market. We would soon plunge back into them. I was starving, eager to party, and I chose the first man to come along, a smooth talker. Kurt, on the other hand, never made a promise he couldn't keep. He was sickeningly scrupulous. My girlhood dreams had gone by the board. I would have liked to be in the movies, along with every other girl at the time. I was a little wild, and I was pretty enough, my right profile, anyway. The tyranny of the permanent had just replaced the tyranny of long hair. I had bright eyes, a mouth always drawn in red, lovely teeth, and small hands. And lots of powder over the port-wine stain that disfigured my left cheek. Actually, this damned birthmark has served me well. I've blamed it for all my lost illusions.

Kurt and I had nothing in common, or very little. I was seven years older than he and had never been to university, while he was preparing his doctorate. My father was a neighborhood photographer, his a prosperous manufacturer. He was a Lutheran, I a Catholic—though not a very devout Catholic at the time. For me, religion was a family relic that collected dust on the mantelpiece. The most you'd hear from the chorus girls in their dressing room was the prayer: "Blessed Mary, who became the mother of a child without doing it, please let me do it without becoming a mother!" We were all afraid of getting stuck with a little lodger, and I was no exception. Many of us wound up in the back rooms of Mother Dora's place, where she kept her knitting needles. At the age of twenty, I accepted the luck of the draw as it came. Good card, bad card, I was still going to play. I didn't think I had to store up any happiness or lightheartedness for later. I needed to burn everything, pillage everything. I'd always have time for another hand. I'd particularly have time for regret.

The walk ended as it had started, with both of us hiding our thoughts behind an uncomfortable silence. Even though I've never had any talent for mathematics, I know this basic premise: a tiny deviation in the angle at the start can mean an enormous difference at the end. In what dimension, in what version of our romance, did he not accompany me home that night?

3

"What does she mean, '*Mag sein*'? Is she going to turn over the papers or not? What is she angling for here?"

"Time, I suppose. And a listening ear."

"Take all the time you want, but make sure the *Nachlass* is in a safe place. And don't go making her mad! The old bat could dump the whole pile in the trash."

"I don't think so. She seems perfectly lucid. On this subject, anyway."

"It's so stupid. She can't even make sense of it."

"They lived together for fifty years. He may have explained some aspects of his work to her."

"We're not talking about the recollections of a sales rep, for Pete's sake! This is a field that most people can't begin to understand even in its simplest form."

Anna drew back. She hated having her personal space invaded. Calvin Adams had the habit of showering his interlocutor with spittle whenever the tension mounted.

As soon as she'd returned to the Institute, the young woman had given the director a summary of her conversation with Gödel's widow. She made sure not to underplay the old lady's aggression. Anna wanted her own skill to be recognized, and she had managed to pry the door open where her predecessor, a pedigreed specialist, had gotten it slammed in his face. But her boss was too annoyed at the ongoing standoff to pick up the nuance.

"What if Gödel himself destroyed the archive in a fit of paranoia?" asked Anna.

"Not likely."

"The family hasn't made any claims?"

"Gödel has no heirs except for his brother, Rudolf, who lives in Europe. He left everything to his wife."

"Then he thought his wife fit to look after his moral rights."

"Those papers belong in the Institute for their historical interest—whether they are his notebooks, his bills, or his medical prescriptions!"

"Or an unpublished manuscript, who knows?"

"We're unlikely to come across anything fundamental. He lost his bearings somewhat in his last years."

"The gropings of a genius still bear a trace of genius."

"My dear Anna, in your line of work, romanticism is a mark of amateurishness."

His contempt-laced tone of familiarity revolted her. Anna had known Calvin Adams since childhood, but she would never have the right to call him by his first name. Certainly not within the precincts of the Institute. Next he would be patting her on the thigh. And the mention of Gödel's genius hadn't been naïve, her fascination with him was genuine. In fifty years the mythical recluse had published little, yet by all accounts he had never stopped working. Why was it unreasonable to expect more from these documents than a daily reckoning? Anna was determined not to be just a go-between. She would get the *Nachlass* and make Calvin Adams choke on his condescension. "Would you happen to know anything about bourbon, sir?" A superfluous question for anyone who came in contact with his breath in the morning.

Early that afternoon, Anna headed back to the retirement home, ready to renew her attack. The duty nurse stopped her short. Mrs. Gödel was undergoing treatment and Anna would have to wait. The young woman made her way to the waiting area and chose a seat where she could see Adele's door. A woman well over a hundred years old called to her from the end of the hallway. "Did you bring any chocolates?" When Anna said nothing, she vanished.

Unwilling to become engrossed in her novel lest she miss Adele's return, Anna found her impatience mounting. When she saw the housekeeper enter the room and leave the door open. Anna seized her chance.

Acting as though she belonged there, she dropped her coat and purse on a chair and washed her hands at the sink before quietly taking stock of the space. On her first visit, she had been too anxious to notice any details. The walls, painted a bold turquoise, managed to reconcile the dark-oak Formica of the bed and the dirty beige of the roller table. A brand-new armchair, also blue, stood ready to receive visitors, one at a time. She was shocked to find that the only reading material was a worn Bible and a few trivial magazines. She also noticed a few more personal objects: a crocheted bedspread, a pillow slip with a floral motif, and a bedside lamp with glass beads. Through the venetian blinds came a golden light. Everything was neatly in its place. Other than the intrusive presence of medical equipment and the television mounted high on a wall bracket, the room was cozy. Anna would have gladly sipped a cup of hot tea by the window.

A white plastic radio alarm clock reminded her that the day was shot. The cleaning lady wiped the floor with a damp cloth, then set off to do other chores. On the nightstand were some fusty knickknacks, nothing of any value. Inside a tin whose faded colors announced violet candies from the Café Demel, *Produziert in Österreich*, nothing was left but a few withered, shapeless lumps. Anna set it down in disgust. She lingered over some photographs in tawdry frames. The profile of a very young Adele, her marcelled hair cut short, had a softness that no longer survived. She was pretty, despite the vapid expression that seems to have been required in old studio portraits. She must have been a chestnut blond, but the black-and-white photo resisted too precise a reading. Her eyebrows were darker and drawn with a pencil in the fashion of the times. In a wedding photo, no longer quite so attractive and once more in profile, she had become a platinum blonde. By her side, Mr. Gödel eyed the lens skeptically. A group shot with the Mediterranean in the background showed her, large and ebullient, without her husband.

"You're taking an inventory before the auction?"

Anna cast about for an excuse. She was doing her work, after all. It was her job to distinguish between personal mementos and cultural heritage.

The nurse's aide helped Adele into bed.

"There, Mrs. Gödel. You get some rest now."

Anna got the message: Don't rile her up, she has a weak heart.

"Do you imagine that I keep Kurt Gödel's *Nachlass* in my nightstand, young lady?"

"Your room seems like a very pleasant one to live in."

"It is a place to die, not to live."

Anna felt a growing urge to have a good cup of tea.

"I'm willing to talk to you, but spare me your young woman's pity! *Verstanden?*" Do you understand?

"I gave in to curiosity. I was looking at your photos. Nothing terribly bad."

She walked toward the portrait of Adele as a young woman. "You were beautiful."

"And I'm not now?"

"I'll spare you my young woman's pity."

"Touché. I was twenty when my father took that photograph. He was a professional photographer. My parents had a shop in Vienna, across from where my future husband lived."

She took back the frame from Anna. "I have no memory of ever having been that person."

"I often feel the same thing."

"It must be the hairstyle. Fashions change so quickly."

"Sometimes people in old photographs seem to belong to a different species."

"I live surrounded by a different species. That's what it's like to enter what is delicately called 'old age.'"

Anna gave a show of savoring this aphorism while her mind searched for ways to approach the reason for her visit.

"I'm pontificating, aren't I? The old are fond of doing that. The less we are sure about things, the more we blather on about them! It distracts us from our panic."

"We pontificate at all ages, and we're always an old person to someone."

When Adele smiled, Anna glimpsed the luminous young lady hidden in the stout, acerbic old woman.

"With time, your chin starts to get closer to your nose. Age makes you look more doubtful."

Anna brought her hand to her face instinctively.

"You're still too young to see this happen. How old are you, Miss Roth?"

"Please call me Anna. I'm twenty-eight."

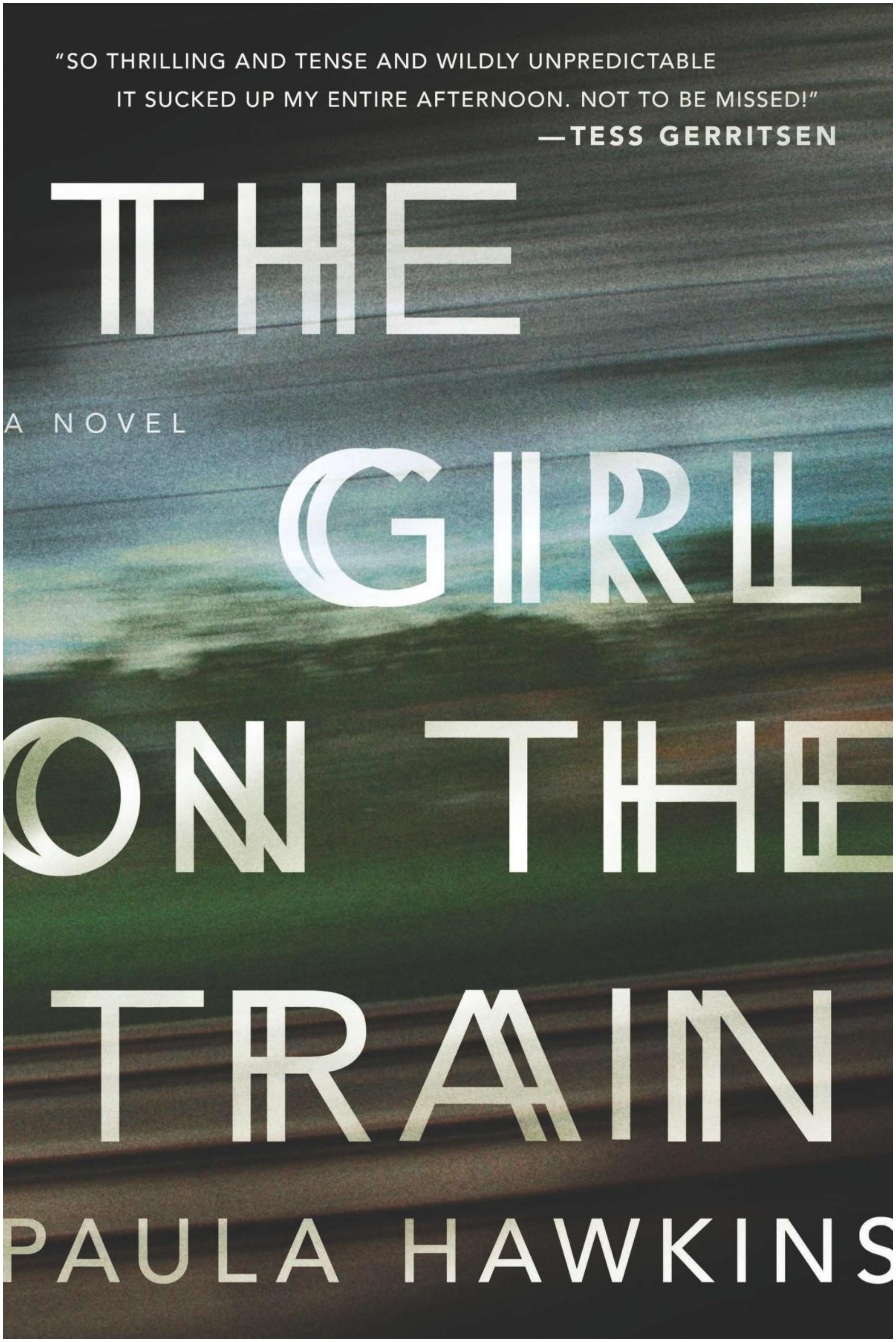
"At your age, I was so much in love. Are you?"

The young woman didn't answer. Adele looked at her with new tenderness.

"Would you like a cup of tea, Anna? They are serving it in the conservatory half an hour from now. You won't mind a few more old biddies, will you? 'Conservatory' is the name they give that horrid indoor porch with all the plastic flowers. As if none of us knows how to tend a plant! But where are you from? You avoided my question the last time. Do you travel to Europe often? Have you been to Vienna? You must take that sweater off. Is beige in fashion now? It doesn't suit you. Where do you live? Our house was in the north part of Princeton, near Grover Park."

Anna removed her cardigan. It was very hot in purgatory. If she had to make a deal, the old lady's life against her own, she was in for a very long haul.

Adele was disappointed to learn that her visitor had never been to Vienna, but she was gratified by the present Anna had brought, a bottle of her favorite bourbon.



"SO THRILLING AND TENSE AND WILDLY UNPREDICTABLE IT SUCKED UP MY ENTIRE AFTERNOON. NOT TO BE MISSED!"
—TESS GERRITSEN

THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN

A NOVEL

PAULA HAWKINS

RACHEL

. . .

FRIDAY, 5 JULY 2013

MORNING

There is a pile of clothing on the side of the train tracks. Light-blue cloth—a shirt, perhaps—jumbled up with something dirty white. It's probably rubbish, part of a load dumped illegally into the scrubby little wood up the bank. It could have been left behind by the engineers who work this part of the track, they're here often enough. Or it could be something else. My mother used to tell me that I had an overactive imagination; Tom said that, too. I can't help it, I catch sight of these discarded scraps, a dirty T-shirt or a lonesome shoe, and all I can think of is the other shoe and the feet that fitted into them.

The train jolts and scrapes and screeches back into motion, the little pile of clothes disappears from view and we trundle on towards London, moving at a brisk jogger's pace. Someone in the seat behind me gives a sigh of helpless irritation; the 8.04 slow train from Ashbury to Euston can test the patience of the most seasoned commuter. The journey is supposed to take fifty-four minutes, but it rarely does: this section of the track is ancient, decrepit, beset with signalling problems and never-ending engineering works.

The train crawls along; it judders past warehouses and water towers, bridges and sheds, past modest Victorian houses, their backs turned squarely to the track.

My head leaning against the carriage window, I watch these houses roll past me like a tracking shot in a film. I see them as others do not; even their owners probably don't see them from this perspective. Twice a day, I am offered a view into other lives, just for a moment. There's something comforting about the sight of strangers safe at home.

Someone's phone is ringing, an incongruously joyful and upbeat song. They're slow to answer, it jingles on and on around me. I can feel my fellow commuters shift in their seats, rustle their newspapers, tap at their computers. The train lurches and sways around the bend, slowing as it approaches a red signal. I try not to look up, I try to read the free newspaper I was handed on my way into the station, but the words blur in front of my eyes, nothing holds my interest. In my head I can still see that little pile of clothes lying at the edge of the track, abandoned.

EVENING

The premixed gin and tonic fizzes up over the lip of the can as I bring it to my mouth and sip. Tangy and cold, the taste of my first ever holiday with Tom, a fishing village on the Basque coast in 2005. In the mornings we'd swim the half mile to the little island in the bay, make love on secret hidden beaches; in the afternoons we'd sit at a bar drinking strong, bitter gin and tonics, watching swarms of beach footballers playing chaotic twenty-five-a-side games on the low-tide sands.

I take another sip, and another; the can's already half empty, but it's OK, I have three more in the plastic bag at my feet. It's Friday, so

I don't have to feel guilty about drinking on the train. TGIF. The fun starts here.

It's going to be a lovely weekend, that's what they're telling us. Beautiful sunshine, cloudless skies. In the old days we might have driven to Corly Wood with a picnic and the papers, spent all afternoon lying on a blanket in dappled sunlight, drinking wine. We might have barbecued out back with friends, or gone to The Rose and sat in the beer garden, faces flushing with sun and alcohol as the afternoon went on, weaving home, arm in arm, falling asleep on the sofa.

Beautiful sunshine, cloudless skies, no one to play with, nothing to do. Living like this, the way I'm living at the moment, is harder in the summer when there is so much daylight, so little cover of darkness, when everyone is out and about, being flagrantly, aggressively happy. It's exhausting, and it makes you feel bad if you're not joining in.

The weekend stretches out ahead of me, forty-eight empty hours to fill. I lift the can to my mouth again, but there's not a drop left.

MONDAY, 8 JULY 2013

MORNING

It's a relief to be back on the 8.04. It's not that I can't wait to get into London to start my week—I don't particularly want to be in London at all. I just want to lean back in the soft, sagging velour seat, feel the warmth of the sunshine streaming through the window, feel the carriage rock back and forth and back and forth, the comforting rhythm of wheels on tracks. I'd rather be here, looking out at the houses beside the track, than almost anywhere else.

There's a faulty signal on this line, about halfway through my journey. I assume it must be faulty, in any case, because it's almost always red; we stop there most days, sometimes just for a few seconds, sometimes for minutes on end. If I sit in carriage D, which I usually do, and the train stops at this signal, which it almost always does, I have a perfect view into my favourite trackside house: number fifteen.

Number fifteen is much like the other houses along this stretch of track: a Victorian semi, two storeys high, overlooking a narrow, well-tended garden that runs around twenty feet down towards some fencing, beyond which lie a few metres of no-man's-land before you get to the railway track. I know this house by heart. I know every brick, I know the colour of the curtains in the upstairs bedroom (beige, with a dark-blue print), I know that the paint is peeling off the bathroom window frame and that there are four tiles missing from a section of the roof over on the right-hand side.

I know that on warm summer evenings, the occupants of this house, Jason and Jess, sometimes climb out of the large sash window to sit on the makeshift terrace on top of the kitchen-extension roof. They are a perfect, golden couple. He is dark-haired and well built, strong, protective, kind. He has a great laugh. She is one of those tiny bird-women, a beauty, pale-skinned with blond hair cropped short. She has the bone structure to carry that kind of thing off, sharp cheekbones dappled with a sprinkling of freckles, a fine jaw.

While we're stuck at the red signal, I look for them. Jess is often out there in the mornings, especially in the summer, drinking her coffee. Sometimes, when I see her there, I feel as though she sees me, too, I feel as though she looks right back at me, and I want to wave. I'm too self-conscious. I don't see Jason quite so much, he's away a lot with work. But even if they're not there, I think about what they might be up to. Maybe this morning they've both got the day off and she's lying in bed while he makes breakfast, or maybe they've gone for a run together, because that's the sort of thing they do. (Tom and I used to run together on Sundays, me going at slightly above my normal pace, him at about half his, just so we could run side by side.) Maybe Jess is upstairs in the spare room, painting, or maybe they're in the shower together, her hands pressed against the tiles, his hands on her hips.

EVENING

Turning slightly towards the window, my back to the rest of the carriage, I open one of the little bottles of Chenin Blanc I purchased from the Whistlestop at Euston. It's not cold, but it'll do. I pour some into a plastic cup, screw the top back on and slip the bottle into my handbag. It's less acceptable to drink on the train on a Monday, unless you're drinking with company, which I am not.

There are familiar faces on these trains, people I see every week, going to and fro. I recognize them and they probably recognize me. I don't know whether they see me, though, for what I really am.

It's a glorious evening, warm but not too close, the sun starting its lazy descent, shadows lengthening and the light just beginning to burnish the trees with gold. The train is rattling along, we whip past Jason and Jess's place, they pass in a blur of evening sunshine. Sometimes, not often, I can see them from this side of the track. If there's no train going in the opposite direction, and if we're travelling slowly enough, I can sometimes catch a glimpse of them out on their terrace. If not—like today—I can imagine them. Jess will be sitting with her feet up on the table out on the terrace, a glass of wine in her hand, Jason standing behind her, his hands on her shoulders. I can imagine the feel of his hands, the weight of them, reassuring and protective. Sometimes I catch myself trying to remember the last time I had meaningful physical contact with another person, just a hug or a heartfelt squeeze of my hand, and my heart twitches.

TUESDAY, 9 JULY 2013

MORNING

The pile of clothes from last week is still there, and it looks dustier and more forlorn than it did a few days ago. I read somewhere that a train can rip the clothes right off you when it hits. It's not that unusual, death by train. Two to three hundred a year, they say, so at least one every couple of days. I'm not sure how many of those are accidental. I look carefully, as the train rolls slowly past, for blood on the clothes, but I can't see any.

The train stops at the signal as usual. I can see Jess standing on the patio in front of the French doors. She's wearing a bright print dress, her feet are bare. She's looking over her shoulder, back into the house; she's probably talking to Jason, who'll be making breakfast. I keep my eyes fixed on Jess, on her home, as the train starts to inch forward. I don't want to see the other houses; I particularly don't want to see the one four doors down, the one that used to be mine.

I lived at number twenty-three Blenheim Road for five years, blissfully happy and utterly wretched. I can't look at it now. That was my first home. Not my parents' place, not a flatshare with other students, *my* first home. I can't bear to look at it. Well, I can, I do, I want to, I don't want to, I try not to. Every day I tell myself not to look, and every day I look. I can't help myself, even though there is nothing I want to see there, even though anything I do see will hurt me. Even though I remember so clearly how it felt that time I looked up and noticed that the cream linen blind in the upstairs bedroom was gone, replaced by something in soft baby pink; even though I still remember the pain I felt when I saw Anna watering the rosebushes near the fence, her T-shirt stretched tight over her bulging belly, and I bit my lip so hard, it bled.

I close my eyes tightly and count to ten, fifteen, twenty. There, it's gone now, nothing to see. We roll into Witney station and out again, the train starting to pick up pace as suburbia melts into grimy North London, terraced houses replaced by tagged bridges and empty buildings with broken windows. The closer we get to Euston, the more anxious I feel; pressure builds; how will today be? There's a filthy, low-slung concrete building on the right-hand side of the track about five hundred metres before we get into Euston. On its side, someone has painted: *LIFE IS NOT A PARAGRAPH*. I think about the bundle of clothes on the side of the track and I feel as though my throat is closing up. Life is not a paragraph, and death is no parenthesis.

EVENING

The train I take in the evening, the 17.56, is slightly slower than the morning one—it takes one hour and one minute, a full seven minutes longer than the morning train despite not stopping at any extra stations. I don't mind, because just as I'm in no great hurry to get into London in the morning, I'm in no hurry to get back to Ashbury in the evening, either. Not just because it's Ashbury, although the place itself is bad enough, a 1960s new town, spreading like a tumour over the heart of Buckinghamshire. No better or worse than a dozen other towns like it, a centre filled with cafés and mobile-phone shops and branches of JD Sports, surrounded by a band of suburbia and beyond that the realm of the multiplex cinema and out-of-town Tesco. I live in a smart(ish), new(ish) block situated at the point where the commercial heart of the place starts to bleed into the residential outskirts, but it is not my home. My home is the Victorian semi on the tracks, the one I part-owned. In Ashbury I am not a homeowner, not even a tenant—I'm a lodger, occupant of the small second bedroom in Cathy's bland and inoffensive duplex, subject to her grace and favour.

Cathy and I were friends at university. Half friends, really, we were never that close. She lived across the hall from me in my first year, and we were both doing the same course, so we were natural allies in those first few daunting weeks, before we met people with whom we had more in common. We didn't see much of each other after the first year and barely at all after college, except for the occasional wedding. But in my hour of need she happened to have a spare room going and it made sense. I was so sure that it would only be for a couple of months, six at the most, and I didn't know what else to do. I'd never lived by myself, I'd gone from parents to flatmates to Tom, I found the idea overwhelming, so I said yes. And that was nearly two years ago.

It's not *awful*. Cathy's a nice person, in a forceful sort of way. She makes you notice her niceness. Her niceness is writ large, it is her defining quality and she needs it acknowledged, often, daily almost, which can be tiring. But it's not so bad, I can think of worse traits in a flatmate. No, it's not Cathy, it's not even Ashbury that bothers me most about my new situation (I still think of it as new, although it's been two years). It's the loss of control. In Cathy's flat I always feel like a guest at the very outer limit of her welcome. I feel it in the kitchen, where we jostle for space when cooking our evening meals. I feel it when I sit beside her on the sofa, the remote control firmly within her grasp. The only space that feels like mine is my tiny bedroom, into which a double bed and a desk have been crammed, with barely enough space to walk between them. It's comfortable enough, but it isn't a place you want to *be*, so instead I linger in the living room or at the kitchen table, ill at ease and powerless. I have lost control over everything, even the places in my head.

WEDNESDAY, 10 JULY 2013

MORNING

The heat is building. It's barely half past eight and already the day is close, the air heavy with moisture. I could wish for a storm, but the sky is an insolent blank, pale, watery blue. I wipe away the sweat on my top lip. I wish I'd remembered to buy a bottle of water.

I can't see Jason and Jess this morning, and my sense of disappointment is acute. Silly, I know. I scrutinize the house, but there's nothing to see. The curtains are open downstairs but the French doors are closed, sunlight reflecting off the glass. The sash window upstairs is closed, too. Jason may be away working. He's a doctor, I think, probably for one of those overseas organizations. He's constantly on call, a bag packed on top of the wardrobe; there's an earthquake in Iran or a tsunami in Asia and he drops everything, he grabs his bag and he's at Heathrow within a matter of hours, ready to fly out and save lives.

Jess, with her bold prints and her Converse trainers and her beauty, her attitude, works in the fashion industry. Or perhaps in the music business, or in advertising—she might be a stylist or a photographer. She's a good painter, too, plenty of artistic flair. I can see her now, in the spare room upstairs, music blaring, window open, a brush in her hand, an enormous canvas leaning against the wall. She'll be there until midnight; Jason knows not to bother her when she's working.

I can't really see her, of course. I don't know if she paints, or whether Jason has a great laugh, or whether Jess has beautiful cheekbones. I can't see her bone structure from here and I've never heard Jason's voice. I've never seen them up close, they didn't live at that house when I lived down the road. They moved in after I left two years ago, I don't know when exactly. I suppose I started noticing them about a year ago, and gradually, as the months went past, they became important to me.

I don't know their names, either, so I had to name them myself. Jason, because he's handsome in a British film star kind of way, not a Depp or a Pitt, but a Firth, or a Jason Isaacs. And Jess just goes with Jason, and it goes with her. It fits her, pretty and carefree as she is. They're a match, they're a set. They're happy, I can tell. They're what I used to be, they're Tom and me five years ago. They're what I lost, they're everything I want to be.

EVENING

My shirt, uncomfortably tight, buttons straining across my chest, is pit-stained, damp patches clammy beneath my arms. My eyes and throat itch. This evening I don't want the journey to stretch out; I long to get home, to undress and get into the shower, to be where no one can look at me.

I look at the man in the seat opposite mine. He is about my age, early to midthirties, with dark hair, greying at the temples. Sallow skin. He's wearing a suit, but he's taken the jacket off and slung it on the seat next to him. He has a MacBook, paper-thin, open in front of him. He's a slow typist. He's wearing a silver watch with a large face on his right wrist—it looks expensive, a Breitling maybe. He's chewing the inside of his cheek. Perhaps he's nervous. Or just thinking deeply. Writing an important email to a colleague at the office in New York, or a carefully worded break-up message to his girlfriend. He looks up suddenly and meets my eye; his glance travels over me, over the little bottle of wine on the table in front of me. He looks away. There's something about the set of his mouth that suggests distaste. He finds me distasteful.

I am not the girl I used to be. I am no longer desirable, I'm off-putting in some way. It's not just that I've put on weight, or that my face is puffy from the drinking and the lack of sleep; it's as if people can see the damage written all over me, can see it in my face, the way I hold myself, the way I move.

One night last week, when I left my room to get myself a glass of water, I overheard Cathy talking to Damien, her boyfriend, in the living room. I stood in the hallway and listened. "She's lonely," Cathy was saying. "I really worry about her. It doesn't help, her being alone all the time." Then she said, "Isn't there someone from work, maybe, or the rugby club?" and Damien said, "For Rachel? Not being funny, Cath, but I'm not sure I know anyone that desperate."

THURSDAY, 11 JULY 2013

MORNING

I'm picking at the plaster on my forefinger. It's damp, it got wet when I was washing out my coffee mug this morning; it feels clammy, dirty, though it was clean on this morning. I don't want to take it off because the cut is deep. Cathy was out when I got home, so I went to the off-licence and bought two bottles of wine. I drank the first one and then I thought I'd take advantage of the fact that she was out and cook myself a steak, make a red-onion relish, have it with a green salad. A good, healthy meal. I sliced through the top of my finger while chopping the onions. I must have gone to the bathroom to clean it up and gone to lie down for a while and just forgotten all about it, because I woke up around ten and I could hear Cathy and Damien talking and he was saying how disgusting it was that I would leave the kitchen like that. Cathy came upstairs to see me, she knocked softly on my door and opened it a fraction. She cocked her head to one side and asked if I was OK. I apologized without being sure what I was apologizing for. She said it was all right, but would I mind cleaning up a bit? There was blood on the chopping board, the room smelled of raw meat, the steak was still sitting out on the countertop, turning grey. Damien didn't even say hello, he just shook his head when he saw me and went upstairs to Cathy's bedroom.

After they'd both gone to bed I remembered that I hadn't drunk the second bottle, so I opened that. I sat on the sofa and watched television with the sound turned down really low so they wouldn't hear it. I can't remember what I was watching, but at some point I must have felt lonely, or happy, or something, because I wanted to talk to someone. The need for contact must have been overwhelming, and there was no one I could call except for Tom.

There's no one I want to talk to except for Tom. The call log on my phone says I rang four times: at 11.02, 11.12, 11.54, 12.09. Judging from the length of the calls, I left two messages. He may even have picked up, but I don't remember talking to him. I remember leaving the first message; I think I just asked him to call me. That may be what I said in both of them, which isn't too bad.

The train shudders to a standstill at the red signal and I look up. Jess is sitting on her patio, drinking a cup of coffee. She has her feet up against the table and her head back, sunning herself. Behind her, I think I can see a shadow, someone moving: Jason. I long to see him, to catch a glimpse of his handsome face. I want him to come outside, to stand behind her the way he does, to kiss the top of her head.

He doesn't come out, and her head falls forward. There is something about the way she is moving today that seems different; she is heavier, weighed down. I will him to come out to her, but the train jolts and slogs forward and still there is no sign of him; she's alone. And now, without thinking, I find myself looking directly into my house, and I can't look away. The French doors are flung open, light streaming into the kitchen. I can't tell, I really can't, whether I'm seeing this or imagining it—is she there, at the sink, washing up? Is there a little girl sitting in one of those bouncy baby chairs up there on the kitchen table?

I close my eyes and let the darkness grow and spread until it morphs from a feeling of sadness into something worse: a memory, a flashback. I didn't just ask him to call me back. I remember now, I was crying. I told him that I still loved him, that I always would. *Please, Tom, please, I need to talk to you. I miss you.* No no no no no no no.

I have to accept it, there's no point trying to push it away. I'm going to feel terrible all day, it's going to come in waves—stronger then weaker then stronger again—that twist in the pit of my stomach, the anguish of shame, the heat coming to my face, my eyes squeezed tight as though I could make it all disappear. And I'll be telling myself all day, it's not the worst thing, is it? It's not the worst thing I've ever done, it's not as if I fell over in public, or yelled at a stranger in the street. It's not as if I humiliated my husband at a summer barbecue by shouting abuse at the wife of one of his friends. It's not as if we got into a fight one night at home and I went for him with a golf club, taking a chunk out of the plaster in the hallway outside the bedroom. It's not like going back to work after a three-hour lunch and staggering through the office, everyone looking, Martin Miles taking me to one side, *I think you should probably go home, Rachel.* I once read a book by a former alcoholic where she described giving oral sex to two different men, men she'd just met in a restaurant on a busy London high street. I read it and I thought, I'm not *that* bad. This is where the bar is set.

EVENING

I have been thinking about Jess all day, unable to focus on anything but what I saw this morning. What was it that made me think that something was wrong? I couldn't possibly see her expression at that distance, but I felt when I was looking at her that she was alone. More than alone—lonely. Perhaps she was—perhaps he's away, gone to one of those hot countries he jets off to to save lives. And she misses him, and she worries, although she knows he has to go.

Of course she misses him, just as I do. He is kind and strong, everything a husband should be. And they are a partnership. I can see it, I know how they are. His strength, that protectiveness he radiates, it doesn't mean she's weak. She's strong in other ways; she makes intellectual leaps that leave him openmouthed in admiration. She can cut to the nub of a problem, dissect and analyse it in the time it takes other people to say good morning. At parties, he often holds her hand, even though they've been together years. They respect each other, they don't put each other down.

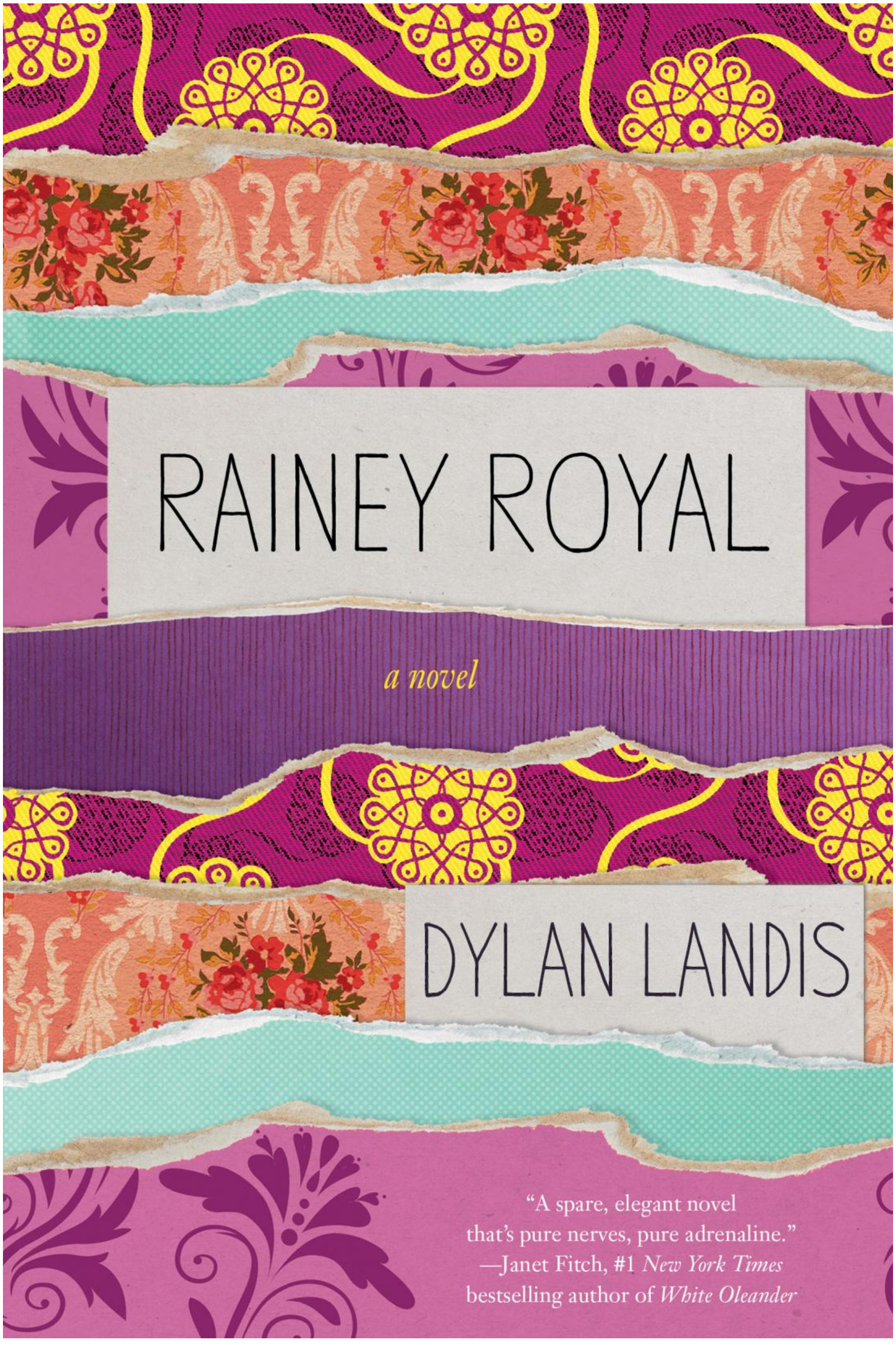
I feel exhausted this evening. I am sober, stone-cold. Some days I feel so bad that I have to drink; some days I feel so bad that I can't. Today, the thought of alcohol turns my stomach. But sobriety on the evening train is a challenge, particularly now, in this heat. A film of sweat covers every inch of my skin, the inside of my mouth prickles, my eyes itch, mascara rubbed into their corners.

My phone buzzes in my handbag, making me jump. Two girls sitting across the carriage look at me and then at each other, with a sly exchange of smiles. I don't know what they think of me, but I know it isn't good. My heart is pounding in my chest as I reach for the phone. I know this will be nothing good, either: it will be Cathy, perhaps, asking me ever so nicely to maybe give the booze a rest this evening? Or my mother, telling me that she'll be in London next week, she'll drop by the office, we can go for lunch. I look at the screen. It's Tom. I hesitate for just a second and then I answer it.

"Rachel?"

For the first five years I knew him, I was never Rachel, always Rach. Sometimes Shelley, because he knew I hated it and it made him laugh to watch me twitch with irritation and then giggle because I couldn't help but join in when he was laughing. "Rachel, it's me." His voice is leaden, he sounds worn out. "Listen, you have to stop this, OK?" I don't say anything. The train is slowing, and we are almost opposite the house, my old house. I want to say to him, *Come outside, go and stand on the lawn. Let me see you.* "Please, Rachel, you can't call me like this all the time. You've got to sort yourself out." There is a lump in my throat as hard as a pebble, smooth and obstinate. I cannot swallow. I cannot speak. "Rachel? Are you there? I know things aren't good with you, and I'm sorry for you, I really am, but . . . I can't help you, and these constant calls are really upsetting Anna. OK? I can't help you any more. Go to AA or something. Please, Rachel. Go to an AA meeting after work today."

I pull the filthy plaster off the end of my finger and look at the pale, wrinkled flesh beneath, dried blood caked at the edge of my fingernail. I press the thumbnail of my right hand into the centre of the cut and feel it open up, the pain sharp and hot. I catch my breath. Blood starts to ooze from the wound. The girls on the other side of the carriage are watching me, their faces blank.



RAINEY ROYAL

a novel

DYLAN LANDIS

"A spare, elegant novel
that's pure nerves, pure adrenaline."
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bestselling author of *White Oleander*

LET HER COME DANCING ALL AFIRE

The patron saint against temptation sits straight-backed in an Italian convent as if mortised into her chair, and she is dead, dead, dead. Her name is Saint Catherine of Bologna, and nuns have been lighting candles at her feet since Columbus asked Isabella for those ships.

Rainey Royal, in the reading room of the New York Public Library, peers at the photo in the book so closely she can smell the paper. Her shiny hair spills over the page. Saint Catherine is not just about temptation: she's the patroness of artists, for Chrissake—just what Rainey needs. She thinks they could be sisters, five hundred years apart. Rainey is an artist, and she *embodies* temptation.

Wisps of smoke from centuries of candles, she reads, have stained Saint Catherine's hands and face mahogany. In the photo, the saint wears a gargantuan habit, her nut-colored fingers laced in her lap. Rainey wears a halter top and holds a dry clay egg in one hand and a silver teaspoon in the other.

While she reads, she burnishes the egg with the back of the spoon on her lap.

In her mind, Rainey lifts the musty black fabric. She looks up Saint Catherine's legs. She sees this: not an old lady's crinkles but the lucent flesh of a fourteen-year-old virgin. One morning, Cath walked out on her rich foster family, with its tutors and grooms, and offered herself to the nuns.

In the cloister, Cath will never listen at night for the marquis padding toward her through chilled marble halls.

Why Cath endured that setup at all is because her own father sent her there, to serve the marquis's daughter. There's always a man, right? So there's always a problem in the house.

It is October 1972, and the problem in Rainey's house is Gordy, who tucks her in. Gordy is the best friend of her father, Howard. She remembers this: hugging her knees on the stairs one night, listening to the grown-ups in the Greenwich Village townhouse where she was born and where Gordy has lived forever. Her mother, Linda, came and went from both bedrooms without embarrassment, so Rainey grew up thinking all married ladies had sleepovers. Downstairs that evening her father said, "Gordy and I share everything." Then a pause, and Howard's voice again, lower, a tone she understood even before kindergarten: "Except for the Steinway, my friend, everything," and then rising laughter.

No one wrote anything about Cath's mother in the book.

No one talks about Linda Royal either, even when Rainey asks.

In the library, she reads how Cath and the marquis's daughter grew up studying at the same table. When Cath walked behind her mistress in the gardens, their silk gowns swished like running water. That's because Cath was given the daughter's lavish hand-me-downs with barely yellowed armpits. Rainey can see it.

Plus Cath got unlimited paper and inks, being good at painting animals and the faces of saints.

"I found her," said Rainey, causing all the library people at the long table to look up. With precise little bursts, she rips out the page on Saint Cath. The woman across from her, tracing a map onto onionskin, yelps.

"Oh, relax," says Rainey. She packs up her egg and her spoon and the folded page and strides down the staircase and out into an autumn rain.

RAINEY IS FOURTEEN, JUST a girl trying to get from the entry hall of the townhouse to her pink room on the third floor when her father, Howard, thumps the sofa in that *sit down, baby* way.

She stops, rain-soaked, in the foyer. The place is too quiet. Not an acolyte in sight. Did he send them upstairs to their own rooms or out for pizza? Usually the first floor is packed with young musicians. Some are students, some strays, but Howard Royal only brings home the best. Three days ago he found two brilliant cellist chicks—*found*, thinks Rainey, like shining orphans. The girls have been ensconced in his bedroom. Like he's really going to jam with cellos. Half the acolytes are guys, who supply part-time money and part-time girlfriends and revere Howard in an appropriately oblique manner. When someone new shows up, they say things like, "What's your ax, baby?" But half are girls who play celestial music and give celestial blowjobs and can't believe they get to jam and party and live in the extra bedrooms of, oh my God, *Howard Royal*.

Rainey hasn't heard the place this silent in centuries.

Howard's at one end of the parlor sofa, clamping a beer between socked feet and a clarinet between his knees. He's adjusting the reed. "C'mere, baby," he says. "Isn't it amazing? We're alone."

On West Tenth Street, *alone* means three people: Rainey, her father, and Gordy, who lounges on the far sofa arm refractive as a patch of snow, from his long, milk-colored hair to his alabaster hands. His jeans are white, too, and he parks a damp white Ked on the upholstery. Gordy Vine is not and never has been an acolyte. He is a horn player and the best musical technician in the house—even Howard says it. But Howard has the charisma. Gordy claims to be albino, but his eyes are green. He pretends to be unaware of Rainey by keeping his head down. He pretends he is not getting sidewalk crud on the brocade. He pretends to edit penciled notes in a spiral-bound score.

He turned thirty-nine last month.

Rainey shifts in the foyer. "What?"

She has a stolen saint in her backpack. Her egg is stolen, too; it is supposed to live on the Studio Art windowsill at school. She holds out her arms to show the damage she will do the upholstery. "I'm soaking wet."

She regrets this instantly. Gordy's attention, like a draft from a threshold, wafts toward her. He doesn't even have to raise his head. Howard blows on the clarinet's mouthpiece, looks puzzled, and says, "Sounds like fish frying." Not much about her father's jazz makes sense to Rainey.

"Get your shoe off Lala's sofa," she says. Lala is Howard's mother. She owns the house, but she lives in an old folks' home uptown. Some days Rainey can talk to Gordy any way she wants.

Gordy smiles. The Ked remains. "Rainey," he says softly. Even his voice sounds albino. Rainey thinks of white plaster walls, licked by the painter's brush.

"I sent the acolytes out to collect sounds," says Howard, as if sounds were lost quarters that winked from gutters. "Sit, Daughter."

She drops her pack, collaborates noisily with a folding chair in the parlor, and sits on it backward while Howard watches with pleased amusement. She smells his body oil: sandalwood.

"That school psychologist called again today," he says, "but I think she's on the wrong track. What do you think?"

Rainey flinches and looks to the ceiling cherubs for strength. The ceiling cherubs are three plaster angels who cavort around a trio of bare bulbs. Their ax used to be the chandelier, but last month Sotheby's Parke-Bernet took it away. The house is shedding its sweetest parts like lost earrings; in return, electricity keeps humming, pizzas keep arriving, and Rainey keeps going to Urban Day.

"Are we getting a new chandelier?"

"Do you know *why* the school psychologist called again?"

"No." Rainey stares off into the kitchen, willing the refrigerator to disgorge a glass of milk.

"I think you do."

"She's full of shit. Can I go now?"

"Look at me, Daughter." He smiles as if indulging her. "It's important to be candid about these things."

Gordy's not-looking at her is now so intense he might as well shine flashlights in her eyes.

Howard, and the smile, persist. "So tell us why the school psychologist is talking about you *engaging* with the male teachers."

The school psychologist always peels and eats an orange while she and Rainey talk. The scent comes back to Rainey in a rush. It is the scent of denial, the innocence that slides over her when Florence, the psychologist, asks how she feels about her mother, her father, the torments she dreams up for that Levinson girl.

Extricating herself gracefully from a straddled folding chair could be problematic.

"Screw you." She knocks over the metal chair as she stands and elbows one of the new cellos, so she barely has to hear her father say under the clatter, *Oh, you can do better than your old dad.*

Sometimes Rainey has to share her room—a ginger operation, a kind of Howard trick.

It is one year after the onset of the blue and white pills. They are prescription, but Howard Royal gets them from a doctor friend and dispenses them daily from packs of twenty-eight. Rainey doesn't need them, but he doesn't believe her. Three weeks white, one week blue—he gives her one every morning with a glass of milk and waits until she swallows. He says things like "That's my girl" and "Because, sweetheart, with maturity comes responsibility."

And it is a year after the summer of Jean-Luc Ponty, when her father had Gordy take her one night to hear Ponty play in Central Park, and Gordy steered her under some trees. She was still thirteen. "You radiate power and light," Gordy told her on the grass. But he is always saying shit like that. It was the only time he lost control, and they still didn't go all the way.

It is 4:00 p.m. on a Friday, and Rainey takes a savage bite of Gordy's grilled cheese. He has been making grilled cheese the way she likes it—and rice pudding and chocolate egg creams—for as long as she remembers.

Howard smiles her up and down. "Sweetheart, your room—"

"Tina is sleeping over Friday and Saturday in *my room*."

Tina is Rainey's best friend. They smoke pot on the roof and take turns reading Howard's pornography aloud to each other. Rainey is positive her mother, whose cool elegance she remembers as seeming somehow beyond sex, never read these books.

"Then Sunday," says Howard. "My brilliant young cellists are in need of your floor. Just for a few days. Open your heart."

She has seen the new cellists, always together—giggling on the stairs or leaving Howard's room. They could be sisters, their faces like two porcelain cups, but one girl is shaped like a cello and one more like a bow.

"My heart?" says Rainey. "My heart is a cell in which candles burn at the feet of Saint Catherine of Bologna." Language is the only turf on which she can stand with her father and joust. Occasionally it works.

"Well, then I pity you," says Howard.

"When the fuck do I get my privacy back?" says Rainey. "Where am I supposed to do my homework?"

What she really wants to know is, where is the place beneath a girl's armpit that the back ends and the *side* begins? She can share her pink room with strangers, but tell her this: Is there a region between back and breast that can, in a proper back rub, be considered neutral?

"Be creative," says Howard.

What if it doesn't *feel* neutral?

"Be creative and be adaptable."

Gordy says nothing. His language with Rainey is often nonverbal. For example, the way he has been tucking her in the past couple of years: sitting on the edge of her bed without moving and sometimes stroking her long hair, as if he were the father and she were the little girl. The hair stroking makes her feel so porous and ashamed that she pretends to be asleep. She has no idea if Howard knows; he sleeps on the second floor, and Gordy and Rainey share the third. What would Howard even say? *He strokes your hair—and?* She wonders if Linda knew before she left last year. Gordy never says it is a secret, yet she senses that her silence is required. She has not told anyone but Tina. Often she wishes she had not.

Rainey would like to ask Tina a few things when she comes over, though she won't. For example: Do Tina's body parts meet clearly at dotted lines, like pink and green states on a gas-station map? Where does she get her God-given ability to not give a fuck?

AND WHAT CAN RAINEY draw from Cath's first miracle, performed after death and underground? The nun's corpse exuded a scent so sweet and strong it rose through the soil and drew all of Bologna to her grave. Rainey can see it: every morning, men and women gather at the mound of earth, inhale deeply, and drop to their knees. All day the perfume clings to them. The grave smells like tea-rose oil!

No, the priest says, what you smell is Easter lily, the flower of Christ—but he is wrong. It's tea rose, the scent of power and coiled-up sex, an oily perfume in a little brown bottle. It's the perfume mothers leave behind when they split, that daughters rub between their toes to someday drive men wild. And after eighteen days, according to the book, the mourners get kind of manic. They love and desire their dead, sweet-smelling virgins even more than they hate and desire whores. They have to *see.* So they dig her up. The women and girls dig very carefully, scraping with silver spoons.

LATE OCTOBER SUNLIGHT SLANTS through shuddering leaves, angling low into the windows. Rainey does her homework sprawled on her pink carpet—when she does it. More often she goes to the museum after school, pulling out a sketchpad, dropping her army pack with its straps and buckles noisily on the floor.

People look up. People always look up. She radiates power and light.

"Have you seen her notebooks?" Howard demands when he is summoned to the school. Rainey looks at him gratefully. They sit across a conference table from two teachers and the principal. It's a cool school. Everyone wears jeans except the janitor. Even the principal wears jeans. Howard calls him Dave. When he calls the science teacher Honor he gives her a long, private smile, as if a waiter were even now carrying in a silver tray set for two. "Her real notebooks, Dave, the ones she draws in. Do you people not know an artist when you see one?"

He pulls a pack of Kools from his shirt pocket, flashing a large watch that Rainey loves, smacks the pack on his hand, and flicks a cigarette toward her. Shocked, obedient, she pulls it out. Next to the cigarette, tucked farther down in the pack, she sees a joint.

"For one thing," says Honor Brennan, and looks sharply at Rainey's unlit cigarette. There seem to be so many things, Rainey thinks.

Rainey does not smoke menthol, and students can't smoke inside the school, and she knows Howard knows this. He lights his own cigarette. She waves the lighter away.

"Come on," says Howard, holding the flame. "Don't be afraid. Regulations are just words on paper." Dave looks at the smoke and coughs. He is wearing a tie-dye T-shirt. It is not impressing anyone, thinks Rainey.

She glances at her teachers, hesitates. "My thumb is burning," says Howard. She can hear what he doesn't say, too. *Fuck 'em if they can't take a joke.* She leans into the lighter and inhales.

"This is highly unorthodox," says Dave.

"Even artists go to college," says the English teacher, Zach Moreno, softly.

"By definition, the artist lives *outside of society*," says Howard, "and mirrors it to itself, whether he goes to college or not. I'm an adjunct, personally, and this is what I teach. Are you noticing any lack of intelligence in my daughter? You're not? Then—ladies, gentlemen—are we really here to discuss a few missed pages of homework for a girl who spends every afternoon in a museum?"

"She could go to art school," says Dave. "There's RISD. There's Cooper Union if she can get in. But she needs the grades."

"What are you grading?" Howard blows a stream of smoke past Dave's head. "I think you should ask yourselves this," he says. "Why does your art teacher ask a girl who can't stay out of the Met to rub an egg with a spoon?"

FRIDAY NIGHT RAINEY AND Tina decide to get high. No occasion—just that Howard and Gordy are playing the Vanguard, with most of the acolytes in tow; just that two months into school Rainey is bored sick. The government is based on a tripartite system, and she's supposed to care about this why, exactly? She's in love with Studio Art; it's got Rapidograph pens, and Rainey can draw anything—Ophelia drowning, Icarus falling, Janis Joplin lusciously dead from smack, with that fabulous throat—but Mr. Knecht assigned some weird shit. They had to form eggs out of raw clay, let them dry for two weeks, and then polish them in an endless, circular motion with the backs of teaspoons.

School did not provide the teaspoons. Rainey took one of Lala's spoons, an English antique sterling spoon that shows a leaping hart. She knows the difference between a leaping hart, which she draws surrounded by William Morris–like leaves, and a leaping heart, which she draws interpretively. Sometimes she draws it so interpretively she has to tear the picture out of her notebook and rip it into little strips and throw them out in different trash cans on her way to school.

The egg polishing goes on for two more weeks, consuming entire art periods. Rainey steals her egg from the windowsill and burnishes during French, world religions, and math.

“What’s the fucking point?” says Tina. They are baking their dinner: zucchini muffins. They can’t decide if it’s better to distribute the whole nickel bag through the batter or roll a couple of joints first.

“My egg is perfect,” says Rainey. “It looks like pewter.”

Aqua threads trail from Lala’s ancient copy of *The Joy of Cooking* as if it has a secret underwater life. Rainey checks the recipe, then pours a dollop of vanilla into the bowl without measuring.

“Now, see, if he told me to rub an egg on a spoon,” says Tina, in that husky voice Rainey never tires of, “I’d stick the spoon down his throat.”

Rainey readies herself. She always has to mention the one thing that hurts; it’s like nudging a loose tooth. “Your grandmother said you could sleep here both nights, right?”

Tina winces. It’s a faint movement around the eyes. “Probably.” The grandmother is a sensitive subject. Tina turns her back and reaches for a bag of sugar. Her top rides up, revealing an indented waist that Rainey appreciates because it is necessary that they both be sexy, but revealing, also, a little sash of fat, which Rainey relishes because it is necessary that only one of them have a flawless body.

It is after the time Howard said to her, “Next to Tina, you’re a centerfold—is that why you hang out with her?” and Rainey, thrilled and mortified, choked out that Tina was her *best friend*, and Howard looked past her at silent Gordy and said, “‘The lady doth protest too much, methinks.’”

Tina licks a finger and dips it in the bag of sugar. “You think Gordy might come in our room?”

Rainey brains an egg on the edge of the bowl. She thinks about a redheaded oboist she likes to look at across the parlor till he blushes. She demanded his name once, and he stammered it: Flynn. Howard likes to say he has the only jazz oboist in New York. Rainey is not allowed to bother the acolytes, but she can stare.

Gordy has never come in on sleepovers before—she assumes because she stays up and talks.

“He just checks on me,” she says in a low voice. “He never *does* anything.”

When Tina laughs it sounds like *huh*. Rainey suddenly feels grateful to have confessed the hair stroking, grateful that Tina doesn’t judge. Maybe Tina intuits the back rubs, which only just started. Tina, caught beneath an overhead light that brings out the cinnamon in her hair, has her moments of beauty and perfect understanding.

“If he comes in,” says Tina, “can we be mean to him?”

“He lives here,” says Rainey, who only knows certain ways of being mean to Gordy.

“You know the kind of mean I mean.” Tina orbits her upper teeth with her tongue as if checking the jewels on a bracelet. They have both perfected the Pearl Drops move.

The words *drawing off* come faintly to mind—a lightning rod drawing off the fatal bolt; a sister drawing off a bully. A saint, intervening. Is it cool if the person *drawing off* does not know what she is getting into?

“Stick a knife in his heart for all I care.”

“Whoa,” says Tina. “Fond of the motherfucker, are we?”

THE FIRST TIME TINA came over, they sat on the carpet of Rainey’s pink room, which Rainey thinks of as girlfriend pink, a pink chosen by one of Howard’s ex-lovers to coax Rainey out of a black phase. Kids and acolytes are forever telling Rainey what this pink is like: it is Barbie, it is Pepto-Bismol, it is Bazooka bubble gum. But the first time Tina saw it she said, *Oh my God you live in a vagina*, and Rainey said, *Fuck you, Tina*, and the wary warmth of equals was sealed between them.

It is 4:30 in the morning, half an hour after the Vanguard padlocks up. The door to the townhouse opens; Rainey hears young musicians laughing and stairs beginning to creak. She and Tina fake sleep. They have eaten three zucchini muffins each. *Come to the dance singing of* *love*—Rainey has memorized the entire verse, but she is sure Saint Cath wrote it with a special, spiritual dance in mind, not the kind where you go under the bleachers with a boy. She breathes as slowly as her lungs will let her. She attempts to seal her skin, starting at the toes and working up. Her flannel nightie is as modest as Cath's habit. After several minutes she sees, through her eyelashes, a doorway of light slice across Tina's sleeping bag. She watches Gordy step with agility and night vision into the room and around the bag. He moves the edge of Rainey's quilt, which she sewed herself, and sits, and his weight causes Rainey to tip toward him so their hips touch.

He strokes her hair.

I'm moldering, she thinks. I'm not actually *doing* anything and I'm moldering. But between her toes she smells of tea-rose oil, and she knows she is responsible for sending scent molecules swimming through some primal part of his brain.

"Eew," says Tina. "What are you doing?"

"Checking on Rainey," says Gordy. He rises, though. "Doesn't someone check on you?" No, thinks Rainey, can't you tell? No one ever checks on Tina. Somebody feeds her and keeps her clothed, but she is an untended soul. Gordy stands so close she can smell club smoke on his jeans; she can smell jazz. "What are *you* doing?" says Gordy. He sounds genuinely interested.

"Watching you," says Tina.

Gordy doesn't speak. Rainey doesn't move. She wonders if Tina is *drawing off* now. It feels dangerous. You better stop, she wants to say, but she is faking sleep.

RAINEY LOVES HOW SHE and Tina can sit in certain ways and force certain male teachers to look at them. Sometimes the teachers stammer. Sometimes the armpits of their shirts get dark.

She and Tina have a code for it. They call it The Private Game.

TINA SAYS: "WHAT DO you like, Gordy?"

"I am an honorable man," says Gordy. But he does not leave.

Rainey imagines herself fragmenting into the Gustav Klimt lady, the one made of glinting squares of color and gold.

"You like giving back massages?" Tina says.

Rainey is sure she never said a word about Gordy touching her back. He doesn't do it every time.

It is five hundred years after Cath wrote her poem: *Come to the dance singing of love, let her come dancing all afire. Desiring only him who created her and separated her from the dangerous worldly state.*

As Rainey imagines it, Cath knew all about dangerous worldly states.

"I never go where I'm not invited," says Gordy.

Under the heat of her quilt and the domed, dark canopy, Rainey conjures Cath at midnight in the marquis's house, faking sleep, waiting for her door to swing slowly open.

"I like back massages." Tina's voice is a cat weaving around an ankle. *You know the kind of mean I mean*. They have never pushed The Private Game this far. Rainey hears the longest unzipping sound in the universe, a sleeping bag, followed by the feathery sound of a T-shirt being pulled up. She opens one eye and sees what Gordy must see: the lunar arc of breast as Tina flips onto her stomach. Not drawing *off*, thinks Rainey. *Drawing in.*

"But if you make one move off my back," says Tina, "it's over."

This is followed by the shifting of Gordy's shape, then silence, rustling. Then silence. Rainey palms the hard, shiny egg under her pillow. She fakes sleep as hard as she can.

Here is Cath's second miracle performed after death: though buried unpreserved, her body never molders. Despite eighteen days in the soil it emerges with the flesh resilient and still scented with tea rose.

Undefiled by men, undefiled by death.

"Excuse me." Tina's voice is a doorbell chime. "That is *not my back*."

Gordy rocks back on his heels. His voice is calm. "What did I do, Miss T? This is a back rub worthy of a saint."

THEY HAVE CLOCKED MANY hours with Florence, the Urban Day psychologist, lying in their sweetest voices. Tina tells Florence what she tells Rainey and the rest of zip code 10011 and Planet Earth: that her parents pay her to live with her grandmother because her grandmother has immaculate degeneration and is going blind. Rainey tells Florence that she plays jazz flute. She says her mother calls from the ashram twice a week and that her father helps with math and cooks bodacious dinners.

They were sent to Florence for staring inappropriately at the male teachers and doing the Pearl Drops thing. “I don’t understand,” Rainey said sweetly. “I’m in trouble for paying attention? And I shouldn’t cross my legs? That’s it?”

“That,” says Tina, “that right there, that’s what I’m talking about. Quit it.”

The quilt on her bed was Rainey’s first. She made it by stitching scraps of Linda’s forsaken Jefferson Airplane T-shirt and Indian-print skirts and lacy nighties to a blanket with white satin binding. She cut up wrap dresses Linda wore to her job. No one said she could have the clothes; she took them from the closet. She doesn’t use blankets anymore; she’s gone to the library. She knows about batting.

Where the quilted bits of Linda intersect, Rainey stitched down left-behind earrings, buttons, torn and lacquered pieces of Kodak photos stolen from Howard’s albums. She spent months on her Tailor of Gloucester sewing.

Through her eyelashes she sees Tina burrow into her sleeping bag. “I don’t want a back rub anymore,” Tina says, and Rainey, in the womb of the quilt, marvels at the expansion of her own night-vocabulary. Quit it. Don't want. Anymore.

"You can stop right now," Tina says, and Rainey repeats to herself, *You can stop.*

"Yes, my lady." Gordy stands, his hair phosphorescent in the hallway light. His hands are still and pale at his sides, like gloves. Rainey wonders what shade of blue his balls are under his jeans and decides on cornflower. Blue balls are the point of the entire exercise, the heart of the Pearl Drops thing, the source of all their power.

"Does it hurt yet?" Tina says.

SUNDAY, WHEN RAINEY COMES home from the museum, Howard summons her to the Steinway with a wave. No one puts anything on Howard's piano: no ashtrays, no sheet music, no beer bottles, no rosin, no Harmon or wolf or Buzz-Wow mutes, no toilet-paper hash pipes, no framed family photos because it's never been that kind of house. Fantastic sound is thumping through the parlor, with a heavy backbeat that Rainey likes. She stares down Flynn, who flushes and studies his fingering. He spends a lot of time waiting his turn. He reminds her of one of those long-legged birds that take delicate steps with backward-hinged knees. When Howard finally stops playing, Gordy lowers his horn, the snare stops clicking, and finally the winter draperies, which have stood through two summers in mournful dark red columns since

Lala's departure, suck up the last of the sound. The room is half empty, not everyone plays every time, and Rainey has no idea if there's a schedule. Far beneath the jazz she hears the rattling of the air conditioner, which Howard hates, but he has to keep the windows closed for the neighbors and stop by nine at night.

Some of the acolytes stare at her with fascinated and hungry eyes, for she has constant access to Howard Royal, and she is as untouchable to them as a veiled novice.

Rainey opens her arms and rotates slowly. "'Come to the dance singing of love,'" she says, and feels her powers grow. "'Let her come dancing all afire.'" It was in the book, and now it is in the folds of her burning brain. She does not know what she is trying to provoke. She wants to prove she is protected.

Gordy laughs aloud. The laugh says, *You are beautiful when you are nuts.* Her father says, warningly, "Rainey." She turns on him a gaze like a shield. Who knew she had a shield in her head and a saint in her pack?

"I hope you cleared your perpetually messy floor. I promised the cellists you'd share. A few days, Daughter." The electric violinist, Gemma, shivers visibly as if the room has chilled. Everyone knows the cellists could double up with other acolytes. "Be generous," says Howard softly. He would resemble Christ, Rainey thinks, if his beard did not receive the trimmer and the comb—a weekly father-daughter ritual he taught her young and that she could live without.

"So," she says tightly, "I'll just go up and move my shit."

Rainey turns away as the flautist, Radmila, plays a patter of high notes. It's water, dropping leaf to leaf through the rainforest canopy: Rainey can see it. *Don't try to understand jazz*, Gordy said once: *You are jazz.* A few times he has whispered, *You're awake*, *aren't you?* She keeps faking sleep, as if she has left West Tenth and gone far away. Is she saving herself or is she moldering?

Howard's musicians start touching their instruments again. Rainey, stranded, takes the stairs alone to her pink shell of a room.

It's too late.

The cello-shaped chick and her friend, kneeling at the bureau, are dropping her clothes piece by piece into two piles on the rug. Keepers, she realizes, and rejects. "The fuck you are," says Rainey, and slams her fist into the open door.

They raise their porcelain faces. "We're just borrowing." The friend holds up a T-shirt that Rainey doctored with grommets and lace inserts. "This is gorgeous. He said we could share the room, so we figured . . ." Behind her, two cellos bask on the bed.

Rainey stalks in and grabs a cello by the throat. "You want to put that shit back?"

When she and Tina talk like this in the girls' room at school they can make anyone do anything. But these girls are older. They gaze at her, waiting to see what she has in mind for the hostage cello. Rainey jerks it hard. The instruments knock together and hum, and the girls clamber to their feet.

"Clothes and whatever else you stole," says Rainey. "Are those my earrings?"

Miss Cello works at her earlobes. "Please, may I have my cello?"

"Oh, are we at *please* now?" says Rainey, buoyed. "If I let it go, will you leave the house?"

Miss Cello tugs a key from her pocket and turns it triumphantly in the air. "Howard Royal gave me this."

"Cello," Rainey reminds her.

Miss Cello only pretends to know joy on this earth: Rainey can feel it. Miss Cello keeps her gaze on the ground, on filthy stars of chewing-gum foil and bottle-cap planets. Whereas Cath, dead and in the soil for eighteen days, looked at the earth particles all around her and was awed by every turning molecule.

Rainey drags the cello off the Linda-quilt. It makes a scratching sound across the buttons and thumps to the rug. The first girl lunges for it, and Rainey draws back her foot and says, "I'll kick it. I really don't care." She's only wearing Converse, but the girls freeze in the frosted cupcake that is Rainey's room. "You can have it in the morning," she says, "if you don't steal anything else." Of course, they have already stolen everything.

She drags her prize into Gordy's room, pulls it inside, closes the door, and considers. Then she looks back out in the hall. Miss Cello is darting down the stairs, and her friend leans out from the doorway of the pink room.

"You should know that Howard does not give a fuck," says Rainey.

"Seems like Howard doesn't give a fuck about his daughter, either," says the friend.

Rainey picks up a yellow ceramic ashtray from Gordy's bureau and hurls it. The girl ducks and laughs. The ashtray hits the doorframe and falls without breaking. Miss Cello bolts back upstairs. "That bitch," she says, and spots Rainey. Her eyes fill.

"I can't go to school without my cello," she says. "Why are you doing this?" If she got centered in that body of hers, she could be a totally different chick. Move like *this*, Rainey wants to tell her, and you could have men aching to draw a bow across your hips. But Miss Cello doesn't want power. She wants to feel safe. Rainey sees through the eyes of Cath that she will never be an artist.

"Howard says give it back or get out." The girl rubs her hands together frantically.

Rainey gazes at her till Miss Cello's face contorts through several changes of expression. Give it back, or get out—this has to be a lie; Howard has no time for the settling of squabbles. Her mother got out; she sloughed off West Tenth Street to find God on the ashram in Boulder, Colorado. Lala descended the stairs weeping, in the arms of two ambulance men. But Rainey will hold fast to her pink room the way Boston ivy grips the sills outside the garden windows.

Heavy footsteps begin an ascent. Gordy's white-blond head bobs into view. “Raineleh,” says Gordy. He picks up his ashtray, sits on the top step, and stares at her through the spindles, ignoring the cellists. “Are you being a little troublemaker?”

“No.” Rainey wheels around and locks herself in Gordy’s bedroom with the cello. “I’m fucking things up majorly,” she yells through the door.

Sometimes she comes to the dance singing of love, and sometimes she is deep in the dangerous worldly state. She is not sure which would be accurate now. When Tina asked Gordy, *What do you like?* it seemed like a good question. Rainey likes rubbing silver against clay until clay turns to pewter: alchemy.

Gordy’s room smells like socks. Outside his windows, a tree flips its leaves to their metallic backs. On the floor, the cello lies naked and bright.

Rainey drags it onto the unmade bed. She takes off the diamond ring her mother gave her, the one that belonged to Linda’s mother. She settles herself and with the diamond begins scratching an image into the instrument’s back. In the hall, people knock and test the doorknob. Safe in the room, Rainey is making art. Through the windows, the sky bruises. Around her, honey-colored dust sifts onto the unwashed sheets.

Five minutes pass, an hour, she has no idea. Voices rise, and she ignores them.

When the door flies open, it slams the corner of Gordy’s bureau so that everything on top jitters. Howard, large in the doorway, does not look so Christ-like now. “If you don’t release that goddamn cello, Daughter,” he says, “you can get thee to a nunnery for all I care.”

Rainey slips her ring back on, grabs Gordy’s penknife off his night table, and stands on the bed. The cello stands with her. It is her spruce-and-maple mother. It is her saint against temptation, though she can’t resist testing her hold on the pink room.

Watching Howard, she opens the penknife, slides it against the fingerboard, and slits the thickest string. It snaps with a wiry groan. What was the other thing Tina asked that night? Her father crosses the threshold with an angry stride. She is scared, but his anger feels better than when he smiles her up and down. She steps behind the cello but looks him in the eye.

“Does it hurt yet?” she says.

RAPTURE AND THE FIERCEST LOVE

On Monday Rainey witnesses the sorrow of Miss Honor Brennan, who wears a crucifix tucked under her clothes. Miss Brennan suggests they eat lunch together after class, at her desk. Revoltingly intimate, to see a teacher's lunch, its homemade sandwich and nicked pear.

"I didn't bring lunch." Rainey holds her pack to her chest and backs away.

Miss Brennan dangles a rumpled brown bag and says, "I'll share." She has a widow's peak that sculpts her glowing, blue-eyed face into a heart. "I think you could use a chat."

"I'm fine." Rainey's hand is on the doorknob. The only thing keeping her in the science lab is curiosity.

"Yes, I agree you're doing a tremendous job of holding it together," says Miss Brennan. "But people are saying things." She touches her crucifix through the starched fabric of her blouse. Sometimes it works loose. Rainey has seen it. "I can't believe they're all true, but I'm asking you to stay and talk." She is the prettiest teacher at school; she has to be dating one of the male teachers, right?

"Oh, for Chrissake," says Rainey, but she doesn't exactly fling herself out; she wants to hear what people are saying.

"Please," says Miss Brennan, "sit, and tell me about your mother, Rainey. I understand she left."

Rainey slowly closes the door. "She didn't *leave*. My mother took a year to study Ashtanga Vinyasa yoga at an ashram in Boulder, Colorado." She went to the library for this one. She goes to the library for everything. Miss Brennan looks at her steadily. "When she comes back she'll be certified to teach it," says Rainey. "We talk twice a week."

Miss Brennan sucks in her lower lip and nods. "Sit down, Rainey."

Rainey stays at the door.

"Your father says she never calls. He didn't make a secret of it at our parent-teacher conference. Please. Sit."

"She calls when he's not home." Rainey scuffs over to a chair and drops her pack on it. "*Ob*viously. He doesn't know we talk. We talk about art. She's my *mother*."

Miss Brennan gestures firmly at the chair. "You can always leave," she says. "Have a pear."

Rainey sits tangentially. First she dislodges her pack. Then she shoves another chair out of the way. She does not have a pear.

"The teachers who care about you are wondering," says Miss Brennan in the same soft voice, as if she were slowly wrapping Rainey in cashmere, "if you need help with your home situation. I don't mean to pry, but"—she takes a delicate bite of her sandwich, which has a petticoat of lettuce around the edges—"some teachers have heard it's like a commune. The word *cult* came up. Is it true, Rainey, that your father has a lot of young people living there?"

Rainey looks at her, amazed. Do people think her mother abandoned her to some cult?

"It's none of your business," she says.

"I'm making it my business." Miss Brennan bites deep into her sandwich, and Rainey senses that she cannot, in fact, always leave.

"My father," she says, "runs—it's like a boarding school for brilliant jazz students. I live in a house full of music." She chooses her words carefully. "It's very creative," she says. "My home is a very nurturing place."

Miss Brennan pushes the pear closer to the edge of her desk. "Eat," she says. "Where do these brilliant jazz students sleep?"

With Howard, thinks Rainey. "It's a five-story townhouse," she says. "We have like a zillion bedrooms."

"Is that enough?" says Miss Brennan. "Your father is very . . . charismatic. I've met him. Is there any . . . adult activity going on that might make you uncomfortable? Do you feel safe in that house, Rainey?"

"It's *my house*. I feel two hundred percent safe." Rainey stands, pushing the chair away. It screeches.

"People are concerned for you, Rainey. No one is gossiping. Don't be angry." Miss Brennan stands, too. "One more question. Please. Is it true there's a man living there who isn't related to you?"

Rainey possesses an expression of baffled innocence, and she puts it on now. "Gordy? My cousin?" She waits for doubt to register on Miss Brennan's face. "He's lived there since I was two."

Miss Brennan says, "Your cousin."

"He's a genius on horn," says Rainey. "He and my dad play in the best clubs."

Miss Brennan nods. "Rainey," she says, "if you ever need to chat, I'm here. It can be hard without a mom. I think things are tougher than you let on."

The English teacher, Zach Moreno, always sits with Miss Brennan at lunch. And he is gorgeous, too. Mr. Piriello is fat, and Mr. Noble is craggy in a romantic way, but he is old. So, Mr. Moreno. It is like matching up Barbie and Ken, Rainey thinks. Maybe there is something she can do with that. Maybe she could flirt with Mr. Moreno more. In her mind, she picks up her chair and smashes Miss Brennan's head. Only when she can see the blood does she shoulder her pack and say in her sweetest voice, "May I go now?"

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The pietà by Jacques Bellange is the most delicious in the show at the Met, and Rainey is riveted. In the picture, Mary tips her head back and dips her fingertips into the tiny bowl between her collarbones as if holy water might have collected there. Her face is radiant with pain.

It's Monday afternoon, the afternoon of the humiliation. Rainey lets her pack thud on the museum floor and pulls out her sketchbook.

A tour group sifts around the corner. Rainey feels it rather than sees it swelling behind her. "Ah, we love our art students." The guide has a faint Germanic accent. "But this is the one you should be copying, Miss. It's filled with contradiction. Come join us."

Drop dead, thinks Rainey.

After a moment, he goes on in his tour-guide voice. "Let us explore the tension in this engraving by Claude Mellan."

Rainey balances her sketchbook on one arm. The Mary in the pietà is a real woman, not like those stiff ones from the 1400s. She doesn't try to copy the pietà precisely, with its fine hatch marks. Rather she wants to capture the curve of Mary's neck, the folds in her garment, the muscles in the thigh of the Christ.

Never has she seen such muscles in the thigh of a Christ.

"We see Mary Magdalene with two symbols of the religious contemplative," says the guide, and from his accent Rainey imagines him with skis and Alps. "The cross and the skull," says the guide. "We don't know why Mellan omitted the third symbol, the book. And yet, and yet. Look at her, this reformed prostitute. Her robes have slipped. Her hair is undone. She's a lush young woman, our Magdalene. This is a typical pose for her, during her desert days."

Rainey totally sees it. Spiritual, pretty, a little loose, deep into her thoughts, not a big reader. Hair to her waist.

She refuses to look.

In the Bellange pietà, the Mother Mary sits with her legs apart and the body of Jesus on his knees between them, facing the viewer. This Mary is not embarrassed about any damn thing. She may be pure, but she is still a sensual, fleshy woman, caught up in grief.

The thing Rainey doesn't get, as she sketches, is how the Christ stays upright, kneeling, if he's dead. Every muscle is delineated. His nipples are erect. A fold of Mary's hem flutters up strategically across his hip.

"So I wonder," says the guide, as if musing to himself, "does she know? Is Mary Magdalene so transported by religious fervor she does not realize her bosom is bared? Or are the artists telling us, once a whore, always a whore?"

Rainey hears tittering and turns, furious. The engraving is small, but she can tell right away that the Magdalene, a big-boned, dark-haired sexy chick, is dreaming away. She could almost be Mary's daughter. "Can't you fucking *tell*?" says Rainey loudly, causing a guard to take several decisive steps toward her. "She's like totally transported. Jesus Christ."

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TUESDAY, FROM THE FIFTH row, Rainey stares at Miss Brennan as if tenth-grade chemistry might save her life. Her gaze savors the heart-shaped face and locks onto the electric-blue irises. Obviously she's listening, right?

Meanwhile, she inches her arm over to the wall where the Erlenmeyer flasks are lined up. Then she closes her hand around one.

She feels Tina encouraging her, without eye contact, from the front of the room. Miss Brennan separates them. A bunch of teachers separate them, especially in gym. They don't know it strengthens Rainey to feed on Tina's energy from a distance, to know what Tina is thinking without meeting her eyes. Like right now, Tina is thinking, *I dare you to eat the egg afterward. Real slow.*

Rainey pretends she doesn't even know what her hand is doing with the flask because she is so riveted by Miss Brennan's every word. Miss Brennan is gorgeous, even if she is like thirty. She looks like Wonder Woman. So here is what Rainey and Tina want to know: If a woman becomes a chemistry teacher *by choice*, does that mean she is a lesbo or hates sex? And are those two things the same?

Rainey has some unanswered questions in this department, but one thing she knows for sure is how to coax the fat glimmering hard-boiled egg in her lunch bag down the skinny neck of the Erlenmeyer flask.

When she has slid the flask right in front of her, she dips her hand into her pack, finds her lunch, and slips the peeled hard-boiled egg out of its Baggie, never taking her gaze off Honor Brennan.

She balances the egg on the lip of the flask, where it nests, ovoid and shiny, stuck on the neck of the bottle like a fat stopper.

Miss Brennan radars onto her. “Absolutely not,” she says. “What lab are *you* doing?” In that moment—Rainey can feel it—Miss Brennan loses Andy Sakellarios, who looks at the egg and laughs hoarsely. She loses Tina, separated by four lab tables but communicating mischief telepathically. She loses Mary Gage, who peers over the collar of her rabbit-fur jacket with wide eyes.

“Egg,” says Miss Brennan, pointing at it. “Trash,” pointing near her desk. “Immediately.” She loses Leah Levinson, who glances only at the base of the flask, and Rainey knows why: she’s afraid to look Rainey in the eye.

Hard to handle, Rainey thinks. That’s what they say when they talk about me.

She flips her hair over her shoulder, a long, sensuous gesture involving a dramatic arm flourish, because her hair comes down past her waist.

“Miss Brennan?” she says sweetly. “I really, really want to make this egg go down this hole. It’ll just take a minute. Please? It’s science.”

Rainey keeps her voice low and says *hole* as if she were blowing a smoke ring, or a kiss, which makes the boys grin.

“It’s third-grade science,” says Miss Brennan, “and there is no food in my class. Throw it out, now, Rainey, I'm not kidding."

Rainey is busy. It's this thing she does with her hair, combing it with her fingers, looking around, catching her friends' eyes and laughing—she has it down. "But I *like* third-grade science," she says in a little-girl voice. She thrusts her shoulders back. If Miss Brennan is having sex with a male teacher, she wants her to think about that teacher trying not to look at Rainey's bust in class. Miss B doesn't have that kind of bust, the kind her own father has special words for. "I have a lighter," Rainey entreats—her way of announcing that she smokes, in case there is still someone who doesn't know—and she tears a thin strip of paper out of her notebook. "Please? Can I? It'll take ten seconds."

She flicks the lighter and waits. The flame wavers near her thumb. The class is mesmerized.

"You are this close to detention. But ten seconds, yes," says Miss Brennan, and Rainey knows she is thinking: *Abandoned girl, confused girl, give her a little rope.*

Rainey is running the class now. "Oooh," she says, "thank you," and squirms on her stool. She takes the egg off the neck of the Erlenmeyer flask. She lights the strip of paper on fire, drops it into the flask, and sets the egg on top again.

It takes only a moment for the air pressure inside to decrease and for the flask to suck in the egg—for the egg to stretch and narrow itself into the neck of the flask. The egg plops down inside with a tiny bounce, lands on the charred paper, and puts out the flame.

"Oh, my God, I love that," cries Rainey. "Thank you, Miss Brennan."

Miss Brennan thrusts her hand out and says, "Flask, Rainey. That happened because the air pressure inside did what? Andy?"

But Andy Sak has his back to her and is looking directly at Rainey. When it's clear he won't turn away, Rainey lifts the flask, joggles it till the egg is in position, and blows into the opening.

Not one eye is on Miss Brennan.

"Rainey, get up here. Bring the flask." Miss Brennan slaps the edge of the desk. "At the board, Rainey, now. I want the formula for pressure versus temperature if a gas is at constant volume. Now."

"I have to get it out," says Rainey helplessly, and holds the flask upended over her palm. The egg narrows again, slithers into the neck of the flask, and drops neatly, warmly, wetly, into her hand.

"Lunch," she sings.

"Five points off your grade," says Miss Brennan. "Throw out the egg out and write the formula."

"It's got *p*'s and *t*'s," says Rainey. "But I forget it exactly. I'm sorry." She looks contrite. Then she takes a slow bite out of the egg. *This is for you, Tina.*

"Ten points off. Throw out the egg," says Miss Brennan.

"I know why you are doing this, Rainey. But just because you have trouble at home doesn't mean you get to inflict it on us."

The silence in the room creaks and shifts. Someone coughs. Rainey stares into the eyes of Miss Brennan as if to drill a hole in her skull.

"It's. My. Lunch," she says softly. She extends the tip of her tongue, which she knows is pretty because she has studied it in the mirror, and licks a bit of ash off the egg. The heads of boys lock almost audibly into position.

Miss Brennan picks up her wastebasket, walks over to Rainey, and slams it on the floor. "Drop it," she says through her teeth.

"I'm hungry." Rainey knows she is going too far, but Miss Brennan went farther, and besides, she no longer knows how to throw out the egg.

Across the aisle Angeline Yost whispers, "Fight, fight." Leah laughs, but when Rainey angles her a look she goes to work on a fingernail with her teeth. Miss Brennan's eyes are bright as glass. "In addition to the ten points," Miss Brennan says, "you have detention."

Rainey mouths a word that is silent but unmistakable and takes another bite of the egg. Leah emits a tiny gasp.

"Detention's Mr. Moreno today, isn't it, Miss Brennan?" says Rainey. "You know his schedule, right?"

She holds the half-eaten egg high above the trash can and waits, watching Miss Brennan's face until color flows into it.

"Thought so," she says. She drops the egg into the trash. It thumps.

Earlier that semester Rainey went to the library, her second-favorite place, and looked up the name. She held the word close till she needed it.

"*Brennan*," she says musically, deciding that today, even as she loses, she wins. "That means 'sorrow' in Irish, right?"

MR. MORENO'S CLASSROOM HAS pictures of the authors around the room. George Eliot, who was a woman. Fitzgerald, whose wife was crazy. There is no keeping up with English lit; you could read and read and never get through it, whereas one day she will have seen every painting in every museum in New York City.

"Can I sketch?" says Rainey from the doorway.

"You can do homework, in silence, Rainey."

She bites her lower lip as if a camera were trained on her, but Mr. Moreno just sits at his desk reading student essays. He has his aviator glasses on, and his hair is as dark and lush as Miss Brennan's. Sometimes they share a Thermos—they *have* to be having sex, Rainey thinks. Their *hair* has to be having sex.

She takes a seat in the front row where she will be maximally distracting and watches his pupils dart back and forth, tracking the handwriting. *Her* handwriting. He makes notes with a red Bic pen.

"Mr. Moreno," she says softly. "I have a problem."

"You do," he says, without looking up. "You're talking."

“That’s not it,” she whispers. She has no idea what she is going to say next. She is all out of hard-boiled eggs.

“You have a problem with this essay,” he says. He looks up and seems to realize, suddenly, that he has a chance to connect with her. “This could be a good time to work on it, actually. You don’t fully support your thesis. Here, where you talk about the relationship between wealth and honor—”

Honor Brennan. Dishonor Brennan.

“I don’t remember what I wrote,” says Rainey, and rises from her chair. “I have to see.”

“Stay right there,” says Mr. Moreno. His voice is a closed door.

“I just need to see,” she says in her little-girl voice. She plants her palms on the front of his desk and leans forward. And then Mr. Moreno says something that doesn’t make sense.

“I’m bulletproof, Rainey.” He looks directly into her eyes. “Are you?”

At that moment Honor Brennan knocks and steps into the classroom with textbooks in her arms. She looks from Zach Moreno to Rainey’s chest and says drily, “Am I interrupting?”

Rainey scuffs back to her seat but turns it sideways. She opens her knees wide, like Mr. Bellange’s Mary, and sprawls.

“I thought I’d take over, Zack,” Miss Brennan says. “Rainey and I have a few things to iron out.”

“Oh, Jesus,” says Rainey.

“I’ll meet you in the lounge,” Mr. Moreno tells Miss Brennan. To Rainey he gives a small, courteous nod.

"Leave me a ciggie, Zach," says Rainey, but he doesn't even smile. When the door closes, Miss Brennan perches on the edge of the desk. Rainey bobs out of the chair and starts pacing. "I need a smoke," she says.

Miss Brennan keeps the textbooks on her lap. *Shield*, thinks Rainey. "Once again I find myself asking you to sit," says Miss Brennan.

"I'm done sitting. I'm done *talking*." At the back of the classroom, Rainey looks out the window over East Eighty-Seventh Street, where kids leave school and stream down the block as if they had all the time in the world. "I need a cigarette," she says.

When she turns and sees Miss Brennan, though, she realizes she is wrong. The cigarette is nothing. Miss Brennan, gazing at her and fingering her hidden crucifix, is the one with the need. She needs to fix Rainey Royal.

Rainey stares at the dagger's point of hair on her teacher's forehead, opens and closes her mouth a few times, and says, "Miss Brennan." Then she falters.

She is *so good*.

"Yes, Rainey?"

"I want—" She looks at the floor.

"What is it, Rainey? What's troubling you?"

She hesitates. "It's embarrassing."

Miss Brennan leans forward. "You can tell me anything, Rainey."

In a voice not much above a whisper, Rainey says to the floor, "I just need to be held."

"You—oh, I knew there was something under all that behavior."

Rainey holds her ground and waits.

Miss Brennan puts her books on the desk. She walks all the way down the aisle. She wears black trousers with low heels and a white cotton blouse buttoned to her neck and a gold cross where Rainey can't see it. She clasps Rainey's upper arms, looks at her searchingly for a moment, and then enfolds her.

She smells of perfume, deodorant soap, and a tiny bit of sweat. Rainey likes it. It is the smell of Wonder Woman. Miss Brennan hugs her the way women hug, shoulders touching but with a natural distance between the chests. Rainey counts to five, then slowly begins to melt into the shape of that distance. When she inhales, her breasts press into Miss Brennan's breasts. When she exhales, her breath washes over Miss Brennan's neck and disturbs her thick, dark hair.

Miss Brennan seems to have stopped breathing.

"Oh, my God," says Rainey, her arms around Miss Brennan's waist. She is alive, she is incredibly alive, she is running the class. "Miss Brennan," she whispers, "will you do something for me?"

Miss Brennan begins to disengage from the hug like a cat that has been held too long. "What is it, Rainey," she says.

"Will you kiss me?"

Miss Brennan steps abruptly back, though they are still, in some way, interlocked. Rainey feels herself scrutinized. She turns her face away and bites the side of her thumbnail.

She gives Miss Brennan time to recollect how an abandoned girl would be—troubled, shy, desperate for affection.

Miss Brennan hesitates, then swiftly leans in and kisses Rainey on the cheek.

Rainey touches her fingertips to the side of Miss Brennan's face.

Then she touches her lips to Miss Brennan's mouth.

For one second, two seconds, there is only shock.

Then Rainey could swear Miss Brennan moves her mouth, or perhaps it is just her head, ever so slightly.

And for a second or two after that it's as if their hair is kissing. But already Rainey's brain is working on another problem. She tips her head back, exposing the tiny bowl between her collarbones. She ignores the little cry of disgust, or is it despair, from Miss Brennan, and the firm shove, and she thinks about what is wrong with Jacques Bellange's pietà—what's wrong, in fact, with every pietà in the Met, right?

"I gotta go," she says, and she stalks to the front of the room to grab her pack. She barely notices Miss Brennan wiping her mouth on her sleeve, barely hears her calling, "Rainey. Don't you dare walk out on this." Studio Art II has oil pastel crayons; maybe the door isn't locked. In *her* pietà, the person draped between the Virgin's knees will be Mary Magdalene, very much alive, a loose, dreamy chick who doesn't like to read; and the Virgin Mother's face will be lit not by sorrow but by rapture and the fiercest love.

TRUST

"We're just practicing," says Tina.

"We're just playing," says Rainey.

"We're just taking a walk."

"Yeah, but we're walking behind *them*," says Rainey. She and Tina have turned right about twenty feet behind a couple who lean into each other, slowly strolling, and here is something Rainey has noticed: couples don't attend to their surroundings the way solo walkers do. She wonders if the gun in her purse has a magnetic pull, if it wants to be near people.

"We're losing them," says Tina.

They're playing robber girls. Before they took the gun out for a walk, Rainey and Tina were up in Rainey's room wrapping tie-dye scarves around their heads to disguise their hair. They put on cheap lime-green earrings from Fourteenth

Street to take attention off their features and T-shirts from Gordy's room, across the hall, to hide their own tops.

The earrings and T-shirts will go in the trash right afterward, that's the idea.

Would go. They're just playing.

The man and the woman amble on through the purpling evening, past the trees that encroach on the sidewalk.

"Gordy didn't mind you going through his stuff, huh?" Tina's T-shirt says LARRY CORYELL on the front and THE ELEVENTH HOUSE on the back. Rainey's says CHICK COREA. Hers is signed.

Rainey regards Tina as they walk. She wonders if the question is loaded. Tina is the only person on earth who knows about Gordy's night visits. But they are best friends. Plus Rainey doesn't want to be one of what her father calls *those eggshell people*.

She says, guardedly, "If he figures it out, he'll be pissed. But he won't. I'm never in his room."

Ahead of them, the couple slows to look up at the window of a townhouse, and Rainey stalls by bending over to retie her sneaker lace.

Tina makes a little smirk sound in her nose. "Yeah, why would you be," she says. "He's in *your* room every night." Her hand fastens to her mouth. "Oh, no," she says through her fingers. "It just came out. I'm sorry, Rain."

Inside Rainey's purse, the gun beats like a heart. Its workings are a mystery. She and Tina were afraid to check if it had bullets because of the little lever that looks like another trigger. Rainey thinks the round part might be called a *chamber*, which sounds romantic.

"It's okay," says Rainey. What else is it her father says? *Fuck 'em if they can't take a joke.*

Through the darkness that drapes them all, she studies the woman who walks ahead of them. She's tucked her sleek hair into her collar, implying some magnificent length—*like mine*, thinks Rainey—and she wears Frye boots, which make a lovely, horsey click on the sidewalk. It's not enough for this chick to hold the man's hand; she has to nestle both of their hands into the pocket of his leather jacket, a gesture that irritates Rainey and makes her think, bizarrely, of the airlessness of that pocket, of lying under her quilt at night, waiting to see if her door will open and faking sleep.

How do you say no to an innocent back rub? She had finally asked Tina that.

"It's not okay," says Tina. "I can read you. It was a shitty joke, Rain. It just came out. I don't know why."

As they walk on, Rainey can see what the man and woman stopped to admire: a red room hung floor to ceiling with paintings. "Really," she says. "It's okay." She smiles sweetly at Tina. It isn't clear who's being punished by the sweetness.

What kills her is the woman's cape. It flaps serenely behind her calves like a manta ray. Sometimes when Rainey meets her aunt Laurette for lunch, Laurette wears a cape, which connects it somehow with her mother.

"Swear it's okay," says Tina.

"I swear." She is still smiling, and it is like smiling at Tina from across a long bridge. Rainey ought to get over it—seriously, fuck her if she can't take a joke.

Tina exhales. "Okay." They both watch the couple for a moment. Then Tina says, "It's not like I need the money."

Rainey opens her mouth and closes it. She's tempted to make a crack, but she holds it in. Tina's been going on about her grandmother a lot—how she gets paid twenty dollars a week to live with her. How the grandmother is blind. Best friends for five years, and Tina has never invited Rainey home, so Rainey's not buying. She's never probed, though. Tina might detonate, or cry.

They've sped up, and now Rainey slows, partly so their footsteps won't be heard, but partly because she is pissed off and wants to consider the ramifications—that she *is* one of those eggshell people and fuck her because she cannot take this particular joke, and she suddenly has had it with the grandmother story, because Tina has never had a twenty in her pocket once. A perverse urge to find the fuse in Tina rises up in her. And it would be so easy. Tina is like one of those sea corals they saw in a bio-class movie that plant themselves any damn where they please but close up tight as a fist when brushed by something they mistrust. In fact the only thing they do trust is this one fish called a clown fish. Rainey isn't anyone's goddamn clown fish.

She says, "I know, Tina. You get twenty dollars a week to live with your grandmother."

Tina looks at her slantwise and reaches deep into the bag on Rainey's shoulder—*for the gun*, Rainey thinks crazily, but it is only for the pack of Marlboros.

"Check out that cape," says Rainey. "That's mine." By now it feels like the cape might have belonged to her mother once, and she is simply reclaiming it.

"What's that supposed to mean, about my grandmother?" Tina lights a cigarette and drops the pack back in the bag.

Rainey wonders if she should be reeling Tina in right now, since they are playing robber girls. Besides, the grandmother is sacred territory. Rainey knows that without being told. Tina is tougher than Rainey, but she is also easier to hurt. Rainey knows *that* without being told. She listens to the slow, steady hoofbeat of the Frye boots, satisfying as a pulse. Can you rob someone of her boots and cape? It's okay to think these things, because they are just playing. They will veer off any minute. The woman looks back, appraises them with a glance, and dismisses them.

"I asked you what it means about my grandmother," says Tina.

"It means your cup runneth over." Rainey uses her musical voice. "If you're getting twenty dollars a week."

"I don't have a cup." Tina's voice is low. "I have a savings account. I'm not supposed to touch it."

"You must be rolling." Now Rainey, too, reaches for the cigarettes, which they jointly own, and lets her knuckles bump the gun. "What bank?" She's ultracasual. The gun is cold and could shoot off her foot, but the weight of it feels good. Already she knows she will stash it at the bottom of her school backpack, with her picture of Saint Cath.

"What *bank*? What is this, a fucking quiz? You don't believe me." Reflexively Tina passes over her cigarette so Rainey can light hers.

"I want that cape, Teen."

The couple turns left on Greenwich, walks a block, and crosses Barrow. Then they turn right on Morton. Rainey and Tina pick up their pace and fall back again, spooling out distance like kite string. It's perfect; they're all headed closer to the Hudson, where only true Villagers live and tourists rarely stray. Even from a half block back, Rainey knows the man is handsome, his hair dark and thick, the shape of his head suggesting broad cheekbones that ride high. Rainey wants this man to desire her even as he looks at the gun and fears her. If she can make him desire her, she'll erase the feeling of Gordy's fingers where they don't belong. Right now the feeling is a dent at the far edge of her left breast. It's a pressure along her neck where he starts stroking her long hair. She wants the cape, and she wants some other things that the man and the woman have. The money doesn't interest her.

"I have over a thousand dollars in Marine Midland Bank," says Tina.

"I'm going to take her cape. You can have all their bread."

"If you don't believe me," says Tina, "I'm not taking another step."

"Oh?" says Rainey in the dangerously charming voice she saves for the final minutes with a victim in the girls' room. "Do you really live with your grandmother? Or do you just not want me to meet your family?"

Tina stops. Let her, thinks Rainey, she won't stop long. She keeps walking. By the time she makes half of Morton Street by herself, she is trying not to trudge; she is missing Tina acutely, missing the way she bumps into Rainey sometimes, the slight brushing of her jacket sleeve. Tina doesn't go in for hugging, but she finds other ways to make contact, the affectionate shove, the French braiding of each other's hair, touching the hand that holds the match—anything that can't be called lezzie, which suits Rainey fine. When she finally hears Tina approaching at a scuffing trot, she stops and waits, happy and faintly ashamed.

Tina says, "Gimme the goddamn bag, Rain."

Rainey passes it over. She waits to see if Tina is going to detonate and what that will look like. She waits to see if Tina can take a joke.

"I'm sorry, Teen."

Tina looks into the bag as she cradles it in front of her, and Rainey knows she is looking at the darkly radiant gun, a gun Rainey stole from her father's filing cabinet days earlier after one of his obnoxious sex talks. She's spent a lot of secret time in her father's room. She's excavated the postcards her mother sends from the ashram. She's stolen family photos from Howard's albums, one at a time. She's found boxes of Ramses and a pair of leopard-print underwear for men and the dispensers of birth-control pills from which Howard administers one pill to her every morning. *I know what girls your age are doing.* The talks have escalated, and she hates them, Howard loosely strung across a brocade parlor chair while she's curled into her carapace to hide her breasts.

"I believe you," says Rainey. "I do."

In addition to the gun, Rainey stole her birth certificate from a file marked "Legal." *Rainey Ann Royal.* Who the fuck picked Ann, anyway? A girl named Ann would dance badly and her hip-huggers wouldn't hug. If anyone kissed her, she'd wonder where the noses go. In dodgeball, if you were feeling mean, Ann would be the girl whose anxious face you'd aim for.

Maybe Ann is the reason her mother left.

No one knows Rainey's middle name, not even Tina, and she knows every single other thing about Rainey. Tina knows it is a lie when Rainey says she plays jazz flute. She knows it is true that Rainey technically may almost have lost it to her father's best friend. She knows it is a lie that Rainey will move to the ashram to be with her mother when she is sixteen. She knows all this, and she says nothing.

Ahead, near the corner of Washington, the couple sits on a townhouse stoop. They kiss and lean into each other.

"She's blind," says Tina. It takes Rainey a second to realize they are still talking about the grandmother. "I *told* you." They are standing less than half a block from the couple, watching obliquely. The man lights two cigarettes and passes one to the woman. Maybe they are just playing, too, playing at being robbed. The man glances up the sidewalk and watches Rainey and Tina, still in conference.

"I get it," says Rainey. "I believe you. I get it, Teen."

They resume a slow walk toward the townhouse stoop. Rainey could swear she hears Tina thinking hard in her direction. She could swear she hears something like, *I'm lying, she's not blind. The twenty dollars, that's bullshit, too*, and Rainey thinks back, *It's okay, Teen, I love you anyway, and we're going to just walk by these people, right?* and she hears Tina think, *Of course we are, we're just playing*, when Tina drops her hand into the bag and says, "You don't get anything."

They are about a quarter block away. Less.

Alarmed, Rainey looks straight at the beautiful leonine man. "Don't do it," she says in a low voice. And then, because she knows it is too late, because it is not in her control, and because she wants to do it, too, she says quietly, "Don't hurt anyone."

Now the woman looks up. In about fifteen steps, if they keep walking, Rainey and Tina will reach the man and the woman on the stoop.

They keep walking, slowly.

Tina says, "There's a safety, right? That's what it's for, right?" Her elbow is cocked; it's obvious she's about to draw something out of the bag, and now they are right there, steps from the man and the woman sitting and smoking on the stoop, and Rainey has no idea if there's a safety or what a gun was doing in Howard's filing cabinet. She wants the man to look at her and lose all awareness of everything that is not

Rainey, and he is, now, looking at her, but with the wrong expression. Quizzical. He looks quizzical, and the woman is checking his face to see what's changed. Tina stops. Rainey stops behind her. She imagines Tina stepping closer to the stoop and the man twisting her wrist so that the gun falls to the sidewalk and explodes, shooting someone in the ankle. But she wants that softly gliding cape, which she will wear to school, inciting fabulous waves of jealousy.

She could go somewhere around the treetops and look down from there. It's a gift she has, one she likes to think her mother left her. The moment hurtles toward them. She has to decide fast. Tina faces the woman as if she were going to ask her directions. Her two hands shake around the gun, which is abruptly half out of the bag.

"This is a stickup," she says, trembling, her voice hoarse, and Rainey is far from the treetops, she is right there, feeling the concrete through her shoes.

The woman claps a hand over her mouth, stopping a laugh. "Central casting," she whispers from under her hand.

"The gun's real," says the man. "Shut up, Estelle." Rainey has no idea what *wuthering* means, but she thinks he must have that kind of face: brooding and gorgeous, from some dreamy old novel.

"Yeah, shut up, Estelle." Tina sounds like she does in the girls' room but with an undertow of fear. She says, "You guys live here or what?" Rainey feels the approaching moment thundering right up to her. She feels like someone who can take any kind of joke, now. She can't wait to find out what her job will be.

The man and the woman say no and yes at the exact same moment. "Take our wallets," says the man. "You don't have to hurt anyone."

"Be nice," says Tina. "Invite us up."

"If you're going to do anything, do it here," says the man. Estelle's hand remains plastered to her mouth.

Rainey feels ravenous for what is about to happen. The sidewalk is pushing through her shoes now. "I'm feeling kind of antsy down here," she says in a voice that sounds like smoke and jazz. She has it down. "Take us upstairs, baby," she tells the man.

Tina walks up to the stoop and jabs the gun against Estelle's knee. Saint Tina of the Girls' Room—are they really in the same place, doing the same thing? Is it possible that Tina feels purification as she does this bad act? Rainey's father's words unspool from her body as if she is expelling a magician's silk scarf: *They talk about this at school, don't they? How girls your age are growing into their sexual powers?* She feels the nape of her neck sealing itself against Gordy's hand, and she looks at Estelle's neck with rising irritation.

"Okay okay okay okay okay," says Estelle, and gets up fast from the stoop.

"Hey, listen," says Rainey, batting Tina on the arm. She almost says her name but catches herself. "I totally believe you. I do. I had one crazy moment of doubt, but it's over. I'm sorry." She waits while Tina closely scans her face as if she's not sure she's seen it before.

"You still think I'm bullshitting," says Tina, locking her gaze back onto the boyfriend and Estelle. "And you're still mad from what I said about Gordy."

Rainey is not afraid of Tina. She might be afraid of hurting Tina, though.

"I believe you to death," says Rainey. "And it's okay about Gordy. Come on. I'll prove it. Let's do something crazy."

"Oh my God," says Estelle. "Oh God oh God oh God."

THE BRICK BUILDING'S ENTRY hall is lit with bare bulbs, and its stairs are thickly carpeted. Glossy black doors, greenish walls—Rainey feels like she is at the bottom of a fish tank. "Go," says Tina harshly, and the man looks at her jamming her purse, with the gun half in it, into Estelle's back. "Don't touch her," he says, and immediately starts up the stairs. Rainey listens for sounds from other tenants and hears none. "I'm aiming right at Estelle's spine," says Tina, and while it seems to Rainey that the man could lunge back down the stairs at them, it also seems that the word *spine* sounds menacingly like bone porcelain, and she is not afraid.

They climb, first him, then Estelle and Tina in a kind of lockstep, then Rainey, the shag carpeting hushing their progress, till the man stops at a door on the third floor and Estelle sags against it. She says, "You don't have to come in. You could turn around. We'll give you everything."

Tina holds the gun close to her own side, aimed at Estelle. “Oh, we can’t wait to see your apartment,” she says in a pretend-guest voice.

Rainey holds her hand out for both sets of keys; she senses Estelle and the boyfriend trying not to touch her palm. It makes her powers grow, holding their keys and key chains: such intimate objects. She opens the shiny black door, feels for a switch, and turns on the light.

“You’re not *kidding* we want to see it,” she says.

The apartment, a large studio with two tall windows, is painted a deep violet, as if an intense twilight has settled. In contrast, the trim and furnishings—a bureau, a table with chairs, and a curvaceous bed frame—are painted bridal white. Rainey can’t believe it. She walks down a violet hall into which a Pullman kitchen is notched, flicking on lights as she goes. At the end, she opens the door to a violet bath. She wants to steal all the walls.

Behind her, she hears Tina telling the boyfriend and Estelle to sit on the bed, and how far apart.

“What color is this?” she calls from the bathroom, where the white shower curtain manages to look like a wedding gown against the violet walls.

“I mixed it.” Estelle is hyperventilating; she can hear it. “I’m a set designer.”

Rainey walks back down the hall and props herself against a white dining chair. Tina moves cautiously around the room, always watching Estelle and the boyfriend, lifting small objects off the bureau and nightstands and amassing a little pile of goods on the hearth. Rolls of coins. Bracelets. The gun never wavers. Rainey asks Estelle, “Yeah, but what do you *call* it, this color?”

“Amethyst,” says Estelle. “It’s a glaze.”

“It’s incredible,” says Rainey. “It’s the most beautiful color I’ve ever seen.”

Estelle hugs herself and shivers. “Please point that somewhere else,” she asks Tina. “I swear I won’t do anything.”

“God, I love this place,” says Rainey. “Would you light me a cigarette? And may I have your cape, please?”

RAINEY WATCHES TINA COLLECT sixty-three dollars from the two wallets tossed on the table and a fistful of silver earrings from a bureau drawer. It takes only a minute. Tina never stops watching Estelle and the boyfriend. She jams her prizes into the pocket of the boyfriend’s leather jacket, which she is now wearing. Then she positions herself by the white marble hearth. Estelle and the boyfriend are not playing at being robbed. They sit on the edge of the bed about as far apart as they can while still holding hands—the holding hands was Tina’s concession.

Glancing at Tina, Rainey catches sight of herself in the mirror over the hearth, luxuriant hair spilling out the back of the tie-dye scarf. “Look at us.” She gives Tina a light nudge. “Even with all this shit on, we’re still cute. We should take a Polaroid. You got a Polaroid, Estelle?”

Tina keeps the gun aimed straight at Estelle as she turns quickly to look at herself in the mirror, then at Rainey. Her shoulders slump a little. She looks back at Estelle but says, “How can you tell it’s still us?”

Rainey laughs. “You’re tripping, right?” Tina shrugs. They both know she hasn’t tried acid yet. “’Cause it looks like us,” says Rainey. “Right?”

“I’m not sure,” says Tina.

“You’re on blotter,” says Rainey, and waits for her to stop being spooky. Rainey once licked blotter off Gordy’s palm and spent hours watching the walls quilt themselves exquisitely, kaleidoscopically. “Who else would you think I am.” says Rainey. “Jimi Hendrix?”

“I know what Jimi Hendrix looks like. Don’t move,” Tina snaps at the boyfriend, who is edging closer to Estelle. “I *am* tripping,” she says. “I don’t recognize myself.”

Rainey isn’t sure she recognizes this Tina either, the one who sees a stranger in her own face. “Ever?”

“That would be retarded. I mean, with the scarf on.”

It’s Rainey’s turn to *nosy around*, as her father would say. She takes her time. Tina’s weirding her out. The nightstand clock says they’ve been there four minutes. Surely they can stay another four. In the silence she can hear the clock whir. The cape hangs heavy from her shoulders; it is too hot for the apartment, but the weight feels terrific.

On a closet shelf she finds a stack of typed and handwritten letters rubber-banded in red. She takes it down and sets it aside on the bureau. “You don’t want that,” says Estelle, half rising. “It’s old, it’s junk—”

"I don't always recognize people on TV, either," says Tina. "Or at school. You think there's something wrong with me?"

"Yes." Rainey goes back to the hallway Pullman kitchen for a pair of shears.

"Well, then fuck you," calls Tina.

"But there's plenty of shit wrong with me, too," says Rainey, walking back in with the scissors.

She snips buttons from Estelle's blouses, lace and beadwork from a vintage sweater, ribbons from a nightgown. She puts these on the bureau with the letters. "In winter?" says Tina. "When you put a hat on? I'm not a hundred percent sure it's you till you say something." She takes a deep breath and locks it up somewhere for a while. "At least I always know my grandmother." She smiles; it's a private, knowing smile. Rainey could almost swear there's pride in it.

She bites her lip. She prowls the room more aggressively. She finds two photo albums at the foot of the hearth and begins robbing them of photographs. "Not my father," says Estelle, and starts to cry. "Not my grandmother."

"Who is this?" Rainey holds up a square color photo of a woman pretending to vamp in a one-piece bathing suit. The woman's smile is playful, as if she is somebody's mother who would never really, actually vamp. Mothers interest Rainey: their presence, their absence, the way they react to the heat waves her body gives off near their husbands and sons.

"No one," says Estelle.

Rainey adds it to the stack. Estelle makes a keening sound in her throat. Rainey, moving on, seizes two black journals from a nightstand drawer.

"Oh my God, no," says Estelle, but then she looks at Tina and the gun and closes her eyes.

Rainey turns abruptly to face Tina. "Look," she says, "if you ever don't know who someone is, just ask me, okay?"

"Do you think I'm crazy?"

"Just ask me."

"Are we okay?"

Rainey sighs like of course they're okay, but she still hears it. *He gets into your room every night.*

"Do you think I have schizophrenia?"

"Just *ask* me," Rainey says.

She goes down the hall again, cape flapping behind her; she salvages a grocery bag from under the sink, unclips the receiver from the hallway wall phone, and drops that in first. Then she drops in the letters, the cuttings, the photos, and the journals that she has piled on the bureau. The door lock, miraculously, requires a key on each side. She and Tina can actually lock these people in.

"Who's the woman in the photo?" demands Rainey.

Estelle, crying, shakes her head.

"Take my watch," the boyfriend tells Tina. "Leave her papers and take my watch. You'll get fifty dollars for it, I swear."

"Thanks," says Tina, as if startled by his generosity. She makes him give it to Estelle, who holds it out, shrinking from the gun.

"The papers?" he says. Rainey sees Tina admiring the watch, and she slips into a vision. She sees a tapestry made from scraps of handwriting and snippets of photos, tiny telegrams from the heart: patches of letters, strips of confessions, grainy faces of people who have, in one way or another, perhaps like her mother, split. She'll sew buttons at the intersections, layer in some lace. In Rainey's hands, such things will reassemble themselves into patterns as complex as snowflakes. She will start the tapestry tonight, in her pink room. What would Estelle do with this ephemera anyway, besides keep it closeted away?

"You have Paul's watch," whispers Estelle. "Can I have my papers?"

"Oh, it's Paul?" Rainey looks at the boyfriend. "I don't have Paul's watch." She doesn't, in fact, have a watch at all; she is waiting for her father to give up his. She swirls the cape and turns theatrically to Tina, who appears delicate in the leather jacket. "You have the watch, right?" Rainey sighs dramatically and runs her hands over the cape down the curves of her body, staring at Paul, who looks back at her with the directness of someone who respects the gun too much to move but is not exactly afraid. This intrigues Rainey tremendously.

"I thought Paul would like me better, but *she* got the watch, so apparently not." She's just playing, but it seems to her that Tina looks at her sharply. "Listen," she says to Tina, "let's go. I'm great. I have every single thing I need."

She is surprised to see hurt flash across Tina's eyes.

"You're great?" says Tina. "Why are you great? What've you got that you need?"

Paul sits forward.

“Shut up,” says Tina, though he hasn’t said anything.

“Don’t,” says Rainey. She is holding her grocery bag with one arm and has a hand on the doorknob. “I said I believe you. Let’s go.” But Tina remains plastered to the hearth.

“What’ve you got that you need?” says Tina. When Rainey doesn’t answer, she says, “What? You’ve got an albino freak who—” She stops, possibly because Rainey is staring her down, possibly out of restraint.

“An albino freak who *what*?” mutters Paul.

Rainey looks at Tina, flaming against the amethyst walls, radiant in her distress. She feels the gaze of Paul upon her. “I have everything I need *from this apartment*,” she says, as if talking to someone from a distant land.

“Oh.” Tina visibly relaxes, as if warm water were being poured through her. “I don’t.” She turns a slow, thoughtful quarter circle, looking around the room.

“Oh no,” says Estelle. “Please go. Please please please go.”

“Get those scissors, would you?” says Tina, taking a step toward Estelle.

Rainey picks them up off the nightstand, where she’d set them down after taking souvenir snippets from Estelle’s clothes, and swings them from one finger. “What are you going to do, cut her hair?”

Tina smiles. “No, you are.”

“Really? Seriously”—again she almost says Tina’s name—“what are you planning to do with her *hair*?”

"Same thing I was going to do without it," says Tina.

Estelle lets go of Paul's hand and clamps both her hands around her hair. "For Christ's sake," says Paul.

Rainey wonders if the gun belongs to Tina now. Estelle's hair belongs to Estelle; that much is true. "No," she says. "This is between me and you."

"You said everything was okay," Tina says. "You said you believed me. You said, 'I'll prove it.'"

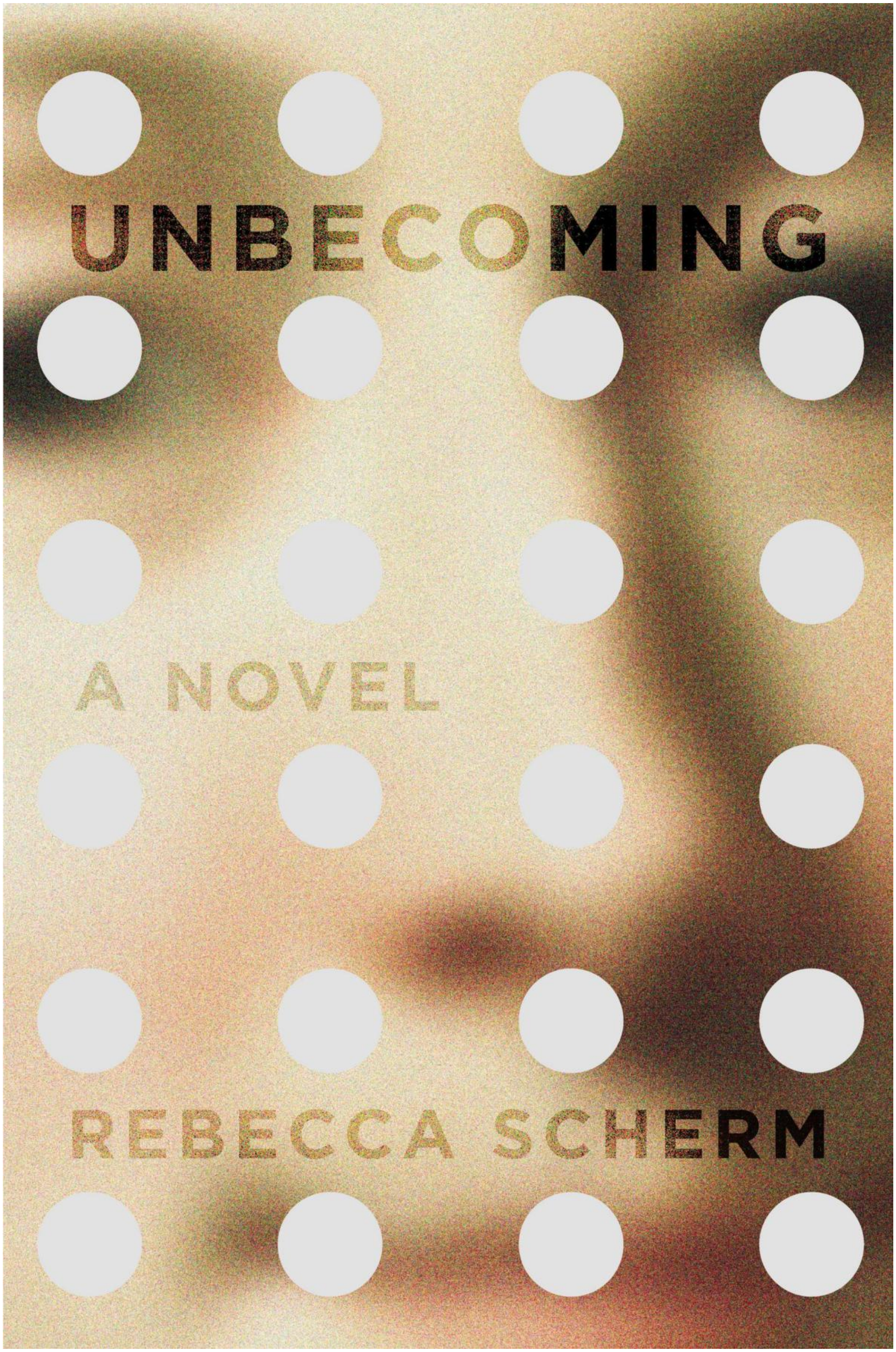
"I think she's proven quite a bit," says Paul.

"Whose boyfriend *are* you? Be quiet," says Tina, still pointing the gun at Estelle.

Rainey sets the grocery bag on the floor and puts her face in the bowl of her hands, scissors still dangling, so she can think. Tina is telling the truth now. It's Rainey who's lying: she does not believe a word about the grandmother, and things are not okay. She looks through her fingers from Estelle, who has wrapped her long hair protectively around her fist, to Tina, who waits to see if trust can be restored.

She almost asks again about the woman in the picture. It's the right moment: she holds the scissors, and Tina holds the gun. Instead she takes a deep breath of amethyst air. "Forgive me," she says, and for a moment, while neither Tina nor Estelle knows whose forgiveness she requires, she feels nearly free.

"Here," says Rainey. She bends over quickly, so the tie-dye scarf falls forward and the violet room swings back, grabs a thick sheaf of her own long, dark hair, and cuts.



UNBECOMING

A NOVEL

REBECCA SCHERM

The first lie Grace had told Hanna was her name. “Bonjour, je m’appelle Julie,” Grace had said. She’d been in Paris for only a month, and her French was still new and stiff. She’d chosen the name Julie because it was sweet and easy on the French tongue—much more so than Grace was. The best lies were the simplest and made the most sense, in the mind and in the mouth. These lies were the easiest to swallow.

Jacqueline, the boss, had shown Grace to her worktable, abutting Hanna’s, and where to store her tools in the jars along the center crack, what she could borrow and what she would need to procure herself. Hanna had reached out to cover a jar of picks and pliers. “I don’t share these,” she’d said with a taut smile, like someone forced to apologize.

When Grace sat down on her spinning stool a few minutes later, Hanna asked where she was from. Grace was so obviously American.

“California,” Grace said, because most people already had ideas about California. They didn’t ask you to explain it to them. Grace hated lying, got no joy from it, and this was how she knew she wasn’t pathological. But California satisfied people so easily, even in Paris. Garland, Tennessee, where Grace was really from, was a confusing answer that only led to more questions. “Tennessee?” Hanna might have started. “Elvis? *Péquenauds*?” Hillbillies? When Grace had lived in New York, everyone who asked her where she was from followed her answer with the same question: “What’s *that* like?”

As if her journey from somewhere as tiny and undistinguished as Garland had required a laborious transformation. As if getting from Garland to New York City had been some kind of pilgrimage to the first world.

Grace had been in Paris for two years now, and she had been Julie from California since her arrival. Her life was conducted entirely in French, another kind of disguise. She and Hanna seldom discussed anything deep in the past, and when the conversation took an unwelcome turn, they quickly righted themselves. Facing each other across their tables, they hunched over their antiques and talked of busted hinges and gouged veneer, not sorrow or worry, not home.

The boys would be paroled tomorrow, released from LaCombe and sent home to Garland with their families. It was three o’clock in Paris now, morning in Tennessee. Riley and Alls would be eating their last breakfast of powdered eggs and sausage patties, doughy-faced guards planted behind them. Grace had always imagined them together, but she’d begun to imagine their lives without her so long ago that she often forgot how little she really knew. She didn’t know a thing about their lives anymore. She hadn’t spoken to them in more than three years, since before they were arrested for robbing the Wynne House: three years of imagined sausage breakfasts.

He wouldn’t come for her, she told herself. It had been too long.

Grace had often felt like two people, always at odds, but when the boys had gone to prison, one Grace had stopped her life’s clock. Now it had begun to tick again. She had no control of Riley now, what he would do and where he would go, and these unknowns bred in her a private, shapeless dread. She’d left lies unleashed in Garland and now she couldn’t mind them.

Riley and Alls were twenty years old when they were sentenced to eight years each in LaCombe. This was the minimum: it was their first offense, they were unarmed, and, more important to Judge Meyer, they were “not your typical criminals,” and Riley’s family was a *nice* family. The Grahams had lived in Garland for seven generations, and Alls benefitted from the association—as had Grace, when she’d been associated. Grace often thought that if Alls alone had been charged with the crime, he would not have gotten off as easy, and that if only Riley had been charged, he probably would have gotten off altogether. Greg had pled guilty too, but his parents had won him a plea bargain for turning in his friends. He was released in a year.

Grace had robbed the Wynne House too, and she could not go home again.

She remembered the moment—maybe it had lasted minutes or maybe days; she didn’t remember—after the judge had handed down the eight-year sentence, but before she’d learned that they could be paroled in only three. Eight years had seemed an incredible length of time. Eight years was longer than she had known Riley. Eight years seemed long enough for everyone to forget.

She gave the birdcage's latch a final swipe with the chamois and called for Jacqueline. The filigree onion dome alone had taken her nine days to clean. The wire metalwork was so fine that from a distance, it might have been human hair. On the first day, she'd held the vacuum hose in her left hand and the hair dryer in her right, blowing off dust and sucking it up before it could land again. Then she'd spent more than a week swabbing the curlicues with dental tools wrapped in cotton and paintbrushes dipped in mineral spirits. This morning she'd finished scraping off centuries of songbird guano from the cage's floor. It wasn't a birdcage anymore, but a gilded aviary, *orientaliste*, late nineteenth century, nearly as tall as Grace was. Jacqueline would return it to the dealer who had purchased it from the flea market, and he would sell it for at least five thousand, maybe much more. Perhaps it would be wired for electricity and made into a chandelier. Maybe an orchid collector would use it to shield his best specimens from human hovering.

When Jacqueline emerged from her skinny office beneath the stairs, Grace stood apart from her work. She waited as her boss pulled a pair of white cotton gloves from the bin next to the tables. Jacqueline ran her gloved index finger lightly along the wires. She gently turned the latch on the door and bent close to listen to its movement. She craned to see the underside of the onion dome.

"Ça suffit," she said.

That was as approving as Jacqueline got. She did little restoration herself, only the most basic things—regluing a horn handle to a letter opener, or cleaning larger metalwork—and only what she could do while on the phone. Now she clacked over to Amaury's dark alcove, where he was slumped over an open watch. After decades in exactly that position, his shoulders had slid into his belly. Jacqueline reached for the watch, but Amaury grunted and swatted her hand away. He'd been at Zanuso et Filles the longest. He'd even worked for the original Zanuso, back when Jacqueline and her sister were the *filles*. Jacqueline had neither the head nor the hands for antiques restoration, but she was the senior Zanuso now. Grace supposed that made her and Hanna the *filles*.

Hanna cleared her throat, eager for their boss's attention. Last week she'd begun a new project, and now she wanted to show off her progress.

“C’est parti,” Jacqueline said, squeezing the bridge of her nose. “Yes, Hanna?”

“My beaded centerpiece is Czech, 1750 to 1770,” Hanna said, though they all knew by now. “I will have it to the decade by the end of the week.”

Hanna was sitting in front of the shared computer, clicking through the hundreds of photographs she’d taken of her project. The centerpiece was the size of a card table and divided into four quadrants, each containing beaded miniatures of flora and fauna: spring blossoms, a summer peach orchard, an autumn crop harvest, and a snowy thicket with white wool sheep and shepherdesses. The centerpiece had clearly once been exquisite, if silly. Grace imagined it as a diorama that some young countess had hired palace artists to build for her. The trees, their leaves made of cut silk, were as detailed as real bonsai.

“The materials,” Hanna continued, “are linen and pinewood, glass, mica, copper, brass, steel, lead, tin, aluminum, beeswax, shellac, white lead, paper, and plaster of Paris. I have disassembled and numbered it into 832 parts, each corresponding to this diagram. You will see how the glass beads have been discolored by oil, no doubt applied by someone with limited knowledge of the period.”

Jacqueline rolled her eyes. “Julie will help you with this one. It’s a very big job.”

“I don’t want any help.”

Jacqueline put her finger to her lips. “Until something else comes in for her to do, she will assist you.”

“You’ll have to measure all the old wires,” Hanna said to Grace. “The new ones will be steel, which won’t be historically correct, of course, but my primary objective is to preserve the integrity of the object’s intention.”

“Which is to be a centerpiece,” Grace said.

“Precisely.”

Hanna was Polish, thirty-four, twelve years older than Grace, whom she treated like an unexpected and unwanted little sister. Hanna was small and thin as a young boy, with closely cropped blond hair and blond skin and pale gray eyes. Her crisp androgyny was so thorough that it sometimes distracted older Parisians, who wanted to peg her as one sex or the other before selling her a sandwich. “Sans fromage,” Hanna would say. “Pardon?” they would respond, still looking for clues. “Sans fromage, pas de fromage,” she would repeat, blinking, her frame as straight and pert as a parking meter. She wore silver-rimmed glasses and clothes only in shades of beige.

When Grace had started at Zanuso, she’d hoped that her humble beginnings would appeal to Hanna’s arrogance, which had been obvious from the start. She’d thought maybe Hanna would help her, out of either pity or some sense of big-sister altruism. But Hanna had no such inclinations. She was one of six daughters of a rural Polish grocer and she hadn’t seen her family in more than a decade. No one, Grace gathered, had ever helped Hanna do a goddamn thing. Grace and Hanna’s friendship was an often crabby by-product of professional respect: Grace had done well at Zanuso without asking for help, and *that* Hanna noticed. Grace envied Hanna’s unfiltered confidence, her clipped and precise judgments. Grace struggled to calculate the probable reactions to nearly everything she said before she said it, looking for risk and reward and hidden pits she might trip in. She’d never met a woman who cared so little about causing offense.

Now Grace pulled her stool around to Hanna’s table, where a long row of wires was arranged by size. She pulled a ruler from Hanna’s cup and saw Hanna flinch a little. She would have preferred that Grace use her own tools. Grace took the first of the hundred wires, set it against the ruler, and recorded the measurement on the list Hanna had laid out on a sheet of graph paper. Nineteen centimeters. She placed the wire back in the row, just to the left so she wouldn’t accidentally measure it again, and picked up another. Eighteen and three-quarters centimeters.

Grace had met Riley when she was in sixth grade, just turned twelve. He was a year older. At her first middle school dance, he had plucked her from a gaggle of girls she wanted badly to impress, and she and Riley had swayed, arm’s length apart, to the ballad over the loudspeaker. He’d invited her to his house for dinner, where Mrs. Graham gently chatted to Grace about school while her husband and four sons stripped three roast chickens in ten minutes. Riley, the youngest, was the worst, lunging for the last of the potatoes while Grace was still figuring out how to cut her chicken breast with her fork and not make so much noise against the plate. Mrs. Graham reached to still Riley's hand and suggested he save seconds for his friend before he helped himself to thirds. "Some chivalry, please," she had said. Grace had read the word in books, but she'd never heard anyone say it out loud.

Grace tried not to stare at her, but Mrs. Graham pulled at her attention whenever Grace looked away. Mrs. Graham was thin and tan and freckled, with sleepy green eyes that turned down slightly at the outside. She had a slow blink; Grace thought she could feel it herself, as though a light had briefly dimmed. Her cool, feathery brown hair curled under where it hit her collar. Grace admired the light shimmer on her high cheekbones, her sea-glass earrings, her low and tender voice. Her fingers were long and delicate, nails polished with a milky, translucent pink, knuckles unfairly swollen from arthritis. That Grace's own nails were bitten to the quick had never bothered her before.

At the end of the week, Riley had kissed her in the school hallway between bells, so quickly that she wondered later if she had imagined it. Within a month he had bought her a necklace, a gold dolphin on a thin chain, and pledged his love. She felt as if she were in the movies.

What she wouldn't give to see herself and Riley like that, from above—to watch a flickering reel of Riley, his hair still victory red (it hadn't yet begun to fade), pulling her toward him on the sweaty, squeaking floor of the gym. Had she been scared, excited, smug? She'd been just a child, and then she had entered a *we*. An *us*-ness. She and Riley had seemed cute to his parents and their teachers, something from *Our Gang*, but Riley had three older brothers and the precocity that came with them, and Grace had no one else.

Tomorrow, Riley and Alls would be released.

She felt as if she had been standing in a road at night, watching a car's distant headlights approaching so slowly that she had forever to step out of the way. Now the car was upon her, and still she had not moved. She imagined what tomorrow would look like: Riley's parents, or maybe just his father, going to pick him up at the prison. Dr. Graham would bring him a change of clothes. Riley had worn a thirty-two-thirty-two. Did he still? He would look different. He would be paler, less freckled, from lack of sun. And he would be older, of course. Twenty-three. She kept thinking of them as boys, but they weren't boys anymore.

Dr. Graham would bring Riley's old clothes, a pair of worn khakis and one of his paint-stained button-downs with holes in the elbows. *Here*, the bundle of clothes would say, *this is who you were and will be again*. Grace imagined Riley riding home in the passenger seat of the Grahams' ancient blue Mercedes wagon, the diesel loud enough to bring the neighbors to the windows. Everyone would know today was the day. Mrs. Graham would have made barbecue, probably pork shoulder. And Riley's brothers would be there. Grace didn't know if all three still lived in Garland, but they probably did. The Grahams belonged to Garland as much as Garland belonged to them. She imagined Riley excusing himself from the cookout and going inside to sit on his bed in his old bedroom, which would be his room again, at least for a while. She wondered if he would go upstairs, to the attic bedroom Mrs. Graham had made up for when Grace stayed over.

Where would Alls go tomorrow? Did his father still live in Garland? He would have no welcome-home party. She imagined Alls and his dad driving through Burger King on the way home, unless he went home with Riley. He would have, before, but that meant nothing. The line between before and after couldn't be sharper.

When people had read about the Wynne robbery as a footnote in a national newspaper, small-town folly picked up on the wire, they'd probably laughed or shaken their heads. *Listen to this one*, millions of people would have said over the breakfast table. But those stupid boys had been Grace's. She used to think she knew Riley so well, she could peel off his skin and slip it over hers and no one would ever be the wiser.

They had gone to prison because of her, really. Grace longed to tell someone what she had done. She'd never had friends, just Riley and now Hanna. Grace could have only one friend at a time. Any more and it became harder to keep track of how they knew her, what she had told them, which pieces went where.

She had not been in Garland the day of the Wynne robbery. She was already in Prague then, at a summer study abroad program. Riley had paid for her tuition and ticket; Grace didn't have that kind of money.

Grace had read of the robbery online the night it happened, on the home page of the *Albemarle Record*'s website: A young white male had entered the main house of the Josephus Wynne Historic Estate, in Garland, Tennessee, on Tuesday, June 2, between eight and ten in the morning, and locked the docent in an upstairs bedroom. The groundskeeper was found unconscious in the foyer; he was at Albemarle Hospital in critical condition.

She had not heard from Riley since the day before, but she knew he had done it. Four days later, he, Alls, and Greg were arrested in Tennessee. Greg was first, alone at his parents' cabin on Norris Lake. Hours later Alls and Riley were arrested at the boys' rental house on Orange Street, where Grace also had lived, until she went to Prague at the end of May. She was sure that Greg had turned them in.

She received just one call from the police, after the arrest. The front desk matron sent her son, a dull-eyed boy of about eleven, to knock on the door of Grace's shared dorm room. She followed him downstairs, her heart beating so heavily that her chest cramped.

The American detective asked if she knew why he was calling. She said she did. He asked her to tell him. She said that her boyfriend had been accused of robbing the Wynne House.

"You mean your husband," he said.

"Yes," she said. She and Riley had never told anyone they had married.

He asked when she had last communicated with Riley. "A few days ago," she said. "Five days. He e-mailed me, very normal, nothing strange. He said he was going to his friend's house, on Norris Lake. He couldn't have robbed the Wynne House."

"How did you find out about the burglary?"

"I read it in the paper," she said. "Online."

"You're reading the local paper while you're in Prague?"

"I've been homesick."

"You didn't talk to your husband at all after you heard about the burglary?"

She had not. She told the detective that she knew Riley wouldn't e-mail her from the lake. They always started drinking before they unhitched the boat, and they only dried out when it was time to drive home. Grace herself had just taken a trip to Kutná Hora, to the bone church underground, where the bones of fifty thousand people had been strung into altars and chandeliers by a half-blind monk. The bones belonged to victims of the Black Death and the Hussite Wars. That some idiot had stolen Josephus Wynne's old silverware didn't seem very important, she told the detective.

She shut up—too much.

He asked her half a dozen more questions, but they weren't difficult ones. Grace told him that he'd made a mistake, that Riley could not have done that. He has such a good life, she said. We're happy. He doesn't need money. His parents help him. And besides, she said, *I* would have known. He couldn't have kept anything like that from me. He tells me everything. Everything.

Perhaps the detective was a man whose own wife believed that he told her everything.

What the detective did not tell Grace, what she learned days later in the news, was that Riley, Alls, and Greg had confessed fully and readily. The detective was crossing off his to-do list. He'd needed nothing from her.

This was how she imagined the robbery: Riley slipping a sweaty five-dollar bill into the recommended donation box and smiling at the tiny old docent on duty, following her through the downstairs rooms as she recited footnotes of Tennessee history. Riley had been through the house half a dozen times over the years; they all had. The Wynne House was the closest and cheapest school field trip. But on a summer Tuesday, the place was dead.

He stopped hearing the docent's voice clearly, as though he were underwater. He followed her upstairs. Her legs, ninety and blue and veiny in her whitish stockings, shook less than his did. At the top of the stairs she turned back and moved her mouth, looked at him expectantly. A question? She had asked him a question.

"Yeah," he said. "Yes, ma'am." He hoped it was the right answer.

He followed her from room to room, nodding and scrawling gibberish in his notebook. Outside the door to the tiny windowless study, he rolled his notebook and stuck it and his pen in his baggy front pocket. She opened the door outward and he followed her inside. He pointed with a trembling finger at the tiny print over the toilet table.

“Can you tell me who the artist is who made that?”

“That one? I don’t remember. Let me get a better look.”

She stepped forward and peered at the signature, which he already knew to be indecipherable. He held his breath and tried to back quietly out of the room. The edge of the rug caught under his heel and he stumbled.

She turned around. “Are you all right, hon?”

He jerked his foot free and made for the door, slamming it behind him. He grabbed the ladder-back chair that sat next to the door and wedged the top rung under the doorknob. He breathed.

Now that she was safely penned, he could hear her voice leaking under the door. Not screaming. Asking. She was asking again, something; he didn’t know what—just the sensation of her tinny voice from far away, like a house cat trapped in a basement.

He went downstairs and opened the front door. Alls and Greg came in quietly with scrunched-up nylon grocery bags and three pairs of thin gloves. They dispersed into the rooms, filling their bags with needlework samplers, old desk clocks, a silver-hilted hunting knife. They had a carefully made list of treasures: nothing large or cumbersome, nothing one of a kind. They did not expect the front door to open. A man they had never seen before stepped in with a garbage bag to empty the small wastebasket by the door. He was the groundskeeper, and he always came on Mondays, never Tuesdays. But here he was, seeing them.

The groundskeeper, who was past seventy, fell to the floor.

The boys grabbed the bags they had filled and fled.

Because the groundskeeper was too long returning to the office, where he was supposed to leave his keys, the administrator who worked in the Wynne House’s cottage office came out looking for him. She found him sprawled on the foyer floor, and then she heard the warbling cries of the docent, still locked in the windowless upstairs study.

The prosecutor later said that the boys had intended to fence the goods in New York, but they had not even left the state. Grace watched the headlines change from her concrete dorm room in Prague: NO SUSPECTS IN WYNNE HEIST; WITNESS SUFFERED STROKE AT SCENE; GROUNDSKEEPER'S CONDITION STILL CRITICAL. There was a police sketch from the docent's nearsighted description, but Grace was relieved to see that the drawing looked nothing like Riley. It could have been anyone, really.

Grace knew that Riley would worry about the groundskeeper. She could imagine him pacing, holding his fist against his mouth. That the man could die would have shaken Riley from his fantasy: the rakish glamour of a small-town antiques heist by a gang of wild boys, an intricate prank. But they had scared an old man to near-death. If he lived, he would surely identify them. But if he died, was that manslaughter? Could they call it murder, even? Grace imagined Riley's spinning thoughts as though they were her own.

She was right to be worried. When the police found a suspect in Gregory Kimbrough, twenty, of Garland, Greg's parents said that was impossible because he had been at the family cabin on Norris Lake for the past several days. There was one cell phone with network activity on the Wynne property at the time, the police told them, and it's yours.

Grace hadn't even known they could do that.

He'd probably been checking a sports score or something.

The police took the Kimbroughs into custody too, as the phone was technically theirs, and drove to the cabin with Greg's parents in the backseat. Mr. Kimbrough was a criminal defense attorney. Greg wouldn't have an opportunity to say anything without a lawyer present. At his parents' urging, Greg rolled like a puppy. Alls and Riley were arrested hours later.

Grace watched the arrest, the trial, and the sentencing through the foggy pinhole of the *Albemarle Record* and its local correspondent's maddeningly elliptical reporting. Cy Helmers had been three years ahead of the boys in school and four ahead of her. He'd gone to Garland College and become the county paper's cub reporter when he graduated. He reported the Wynne heist as if he were above gossip, as if he couldn't stand to make his old schoolmates look worse than they already did.

The Czech front desk matron sent her son to fetch Grace twice more. No other student had received a phone call, and Grace felt conspicuous and exposed as she conducted these conversations, despite the fact that the woman spoke no English. There was a plastic window over the counter, through which students passing through the lobby could see her. Grace faced the wall.

The second phone call was from Grace's mother, whose very voice seemed to go pale when Grace said that no, she would not come back in time for the trial; no, she did not know when she would come back at all. Her mother, whose maternal passions were seldom if ever directed at Grace, now implored her: How could she just abandon Riley like this?

"Abandon *him*?" Grace was incredulous on the line. "The person I built my life on, the last decade and my entire future, the one and only person I can call mine"—this was a dig—"just committed a whole parade of felonies with his idiot friends. And you think I should come home to *support* him?" She was shaking when she finished. Her mother had little to say after that.

The third and last call was from Riley's father.

The boys had been released into their families' custody, awaiting trial. It was evening in Prague, morning in Tennessee, and Dr. Graham was calling from his office at the college.

"I think I understand," he began, "why you would not want to come back for this."

Grace had nothing to say. It had not occurred to her that he would call. "I can't believe this is happening," she said. A truth.

"Us too. And him. He may be having the hardest time believing it."

"I don't think he knew what he was really doing," she said. "He couldn't have. People make mistakes without realizing—one bad decision can just carry you away. And the three of them together. You know."

"We should have checked him more," Dr. Graham said quietly. "I guess you seemed to keep him in line enough." He laughed, a little drily. "Grace, you know we love you as our daughter."

They had said this for years: not *like a* daughter but *as our* daughter, and Grace had bloomed under those words and their power to make her one of them. But it was Dr. Graham calling her, not Mrs. Graham, and he was calling her from his office, not from their home.

Grace remembered shooting skeet with the Grahams when she was fifteen, her first time. She had done well, as well as Riley and his brothers, and Dr. Graham had laughed with surprise and delight. “Goddammit, son,” he had said to Riley. “You’ll never do better.”

“If there’s anything you know that could help him,” he said now, “anything at all—”

“I’m sorry you’re going through this,” Grace said.

They were convicted two months later. Grace did not call. She did not write. Just before they went to LaCombe, she received a single letter from Garland.

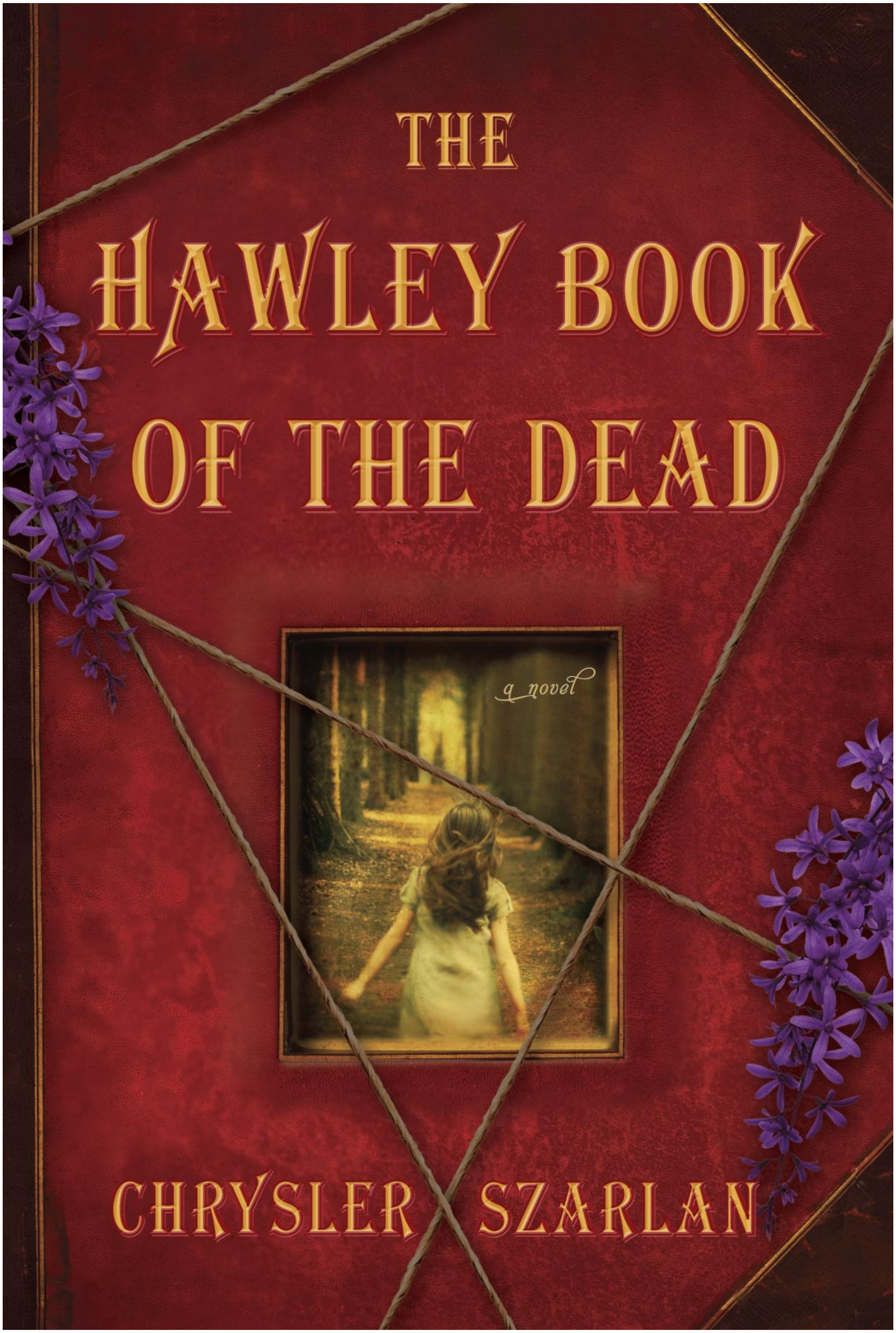
Dear Grace,

Love,

Riley

She never knew whether to read it as an indictment of her silence or a promise of his.

What he must think of her, what his family must think of her—what they must say. She hated to think about it. She worried less about what Alls thought of her now. He had known long before Riley how bad Grace could really be.



THE HAWLEY BOOK OF THE DEAD

a novel

CHRYSLER SZARLAN

Chapter 1

Las Vegas, Nevada—August 2013

1

On the day I killed my husband, the scent of lilacs startled me awake. We lived in the desert south of Las Vegas, where no lilacs bloomed for a hundred miles. I might expect to smell bee brush or desert lavender in the fragrant air, but never lilacs.

I pulled a strand of coppery hair across my face. The tang of magic lingered on me from our show the night before: the sweet of stage makeup, the bitter of smoke powder.

Jeremy was fast asleep, one arm flung out, reaching for something invisible, which he often did in his waking, working life. Never a white rabbit, a paper bouquet. Sometimes he'd conjure a peacock when a dove would suffice for other magicians, a javelin instead of a knife. I nuzzled his golden head. My lovely husband smelled the same as I did, of the theater, of magic.

He reached for me with his long hands, pulled me close. "Good morning, love," he murmured, his voice thick with sleep. "Sniffing for contraband?"

My sense of smell has always been keen. I use it to discover the secrets our daughters carry. Years ago, our twins Grace and Fai stuffed their backpacks full of Halloween candy, meaning to eat up every last scrap on the playground at school. I caught the scent of Snickers on them, nixed that plan. On their first day of seventh grade I began snuffling for cigarettes or pot on their clothes like a German Shepherd. They had just marked their fifteenth smoke--free birthday. Ten--year--old Caleigh only needed to be given the once-over for stray bits of cheese, her strange craving. She'd fill her pockets with cheese at school, come home reeking like a wheel of cheddar. At the theater, and at the barn where we kept our horses, I was always on the alert for any hint of smoke, of fire.

I curled my body into Jeremy's while he smoothed my tangled hair, his eyes still closed. He wasn't ready to leave his dreams yet.

"No, not contraband," I told him. "Lilacs. I woke up smelling lilacs."

His blue eyes sprang open. "I was dreaming of lilacs," he said. "Masses of them, growing by a white house. But no matter how many I cut, they always disappeared from my hands."

"Like magic," I said lightly, trying to shake the feeling of something impending, a shadow passing over us. The image made me shiver, and not with cold. "Imagine that."

He pulled me closer. "In the dream, I was trying to bring them back for you, Reve."

I searched his eyes for trouble, found none. I kissed his cheek, rubbed his face with mine, an old trick, older than our act together, older than our marriage. My way of claiming him.

By nighttime, he was dead. I had shot him, while the odor of lilacs still clung to us. Stronger than ever.

It haunted me all day, that purple, heady scent.

Jeremy rose first. He showered, then made us breakfast. Black coffee, fresh eggs scrambled with our housekeeper Marisol's green salsa, prosciutto pink as the Nevada dawn outside the window. Caleigh's version of green eggs and ham. It was a Saturday. The twins slept in, but Caleigh waited at the table for her food, weaving the supple white string she favored for her games. Caleigh, the prodigy of string. She fashioned intricate webs that seemed to foretell our future—-patterns she named "Chuck E. Cheese Sunday," or "Listen to the Rain" when Marisol complained her plants needed a real soaking. Somehow we would end up at Chuck E. Cheese's most Sundays, which we all despised except Caleigh, and it always did rain after she'd been weaving her rainy string pattern.

She plied the string that morning. She didn't look up when she asked if we were going to the barn.

"I don't think so. Grace and Fai need new sneakers."

"We get to go to the mall!" Up she jumped, did a little dance in her penguin pajamas, and showed us the pattern I recognized as "The Mall," an escalator she kept in motion with her busy hands. I poured coffee for myself, then grabbed a mug for Jeremy, the one that told him he was the World's Best Dad. The lilac smell was beginning to annoy me. I checked the collar of my robe. Not there.

Jeremy leaned into me, reaching for his coffee, a casual hand on my waist. "If you think of it, stop at Madame Lee's. We need more glow sticks for the fireworks illusion."

"I thought we got three cases last time."

"Went through them. Dan ordered more, but we need them tonight."

With a cast of nearly a hundred, performing illusions and tricks six nights a week, we were always running out of something, something was forever breaking. Jeremy was resigned. I was impatient.

"What do those girls do with them all?"

"I'll leave it to you to ask them, Revelation." He used my full name only when I became stern, when it suited me better than my dreamy nickname.

"You're afraid of them."

"Big strapping American showgirls? I should think so. Any of them could land me in the hospital with one swift chorus--girl kick to the bu . . . behind."

Caleigh twirled up to Jeremy. "Bum, bum, bum, you were going to say bum!" she sang. He swooped her up, smacked her cheek with a kiss.

"I can't get away with anything in this house, can I? So I'm off to the theater, where I might get some respect." He set Caleigh down, gave me a quick kiss, and there it was again. Lilacs. I pulled him to me, stuck my nose in his shirt collar. No. Only the scent of him. A nutmeg smell, and something indefinable, clean like freshly cut hay. I held him tighter, felt him breathe into me. He took my face in his hands and kissed me again, a deep kiss. Then he walked out into the Nevada sun, which was sharp as a knife that morning, the heat already settled into every crevice of the day.

Beyond that moment I'd never know what he thought, what he felt. He'd never tell me, after we'd gotten home and the girls were in bed. Not that night or any night after. Instead, what happened at the theater haunts me, in the dark and in the daylight. Whenever I close my eyes, the images come rushing at me, as crystalline and sharply focused as a movie in 3--D.

This is the way Defying the Bullets works: The magician appears to prepare the gun before volunteer audience members who examine the bullets, testify that they are real. It appears that the magician loads the gun, but he or she palms the bullets, the gun having been previously loaded with blanks. No real shot is ever fired. Unless someone switches the blanks for bullets. That had happened to magicians before. It happened to Chung Ling Soo in 1918. Whether it was an accident or not was never discovered. But Chung Ling Soo was no less dead.

2

I arrived at the theater early, just after four. I walked under the ladder of a man updating the marquee. The Bijoux was an old theater, and we liked to keep some things a little old--fashioned to match its age. We hadn't yet gone completely digital, like most of the Strip. The marquee proclaimed the great revelation and the maskelyne mind—-the amazing maskelynes' venetian carnevale—-mascherari.

When Jeremy and I began our act together, we played small houses, just the two of us, sometimes even bars and the occasional wedding. The basis of magic is a good story, and the stories we told at first were simple, like the Something Out of Nothing story, turning thin air into doves or ravens, always adding something a little disruptive, lovely, or large. We worked our way up, and in time the illusions got bigger and more splendid. We built enough of a reputation and audience to justify leasing our own theater. We discovered the Bijoux then, the magical elements still in place after all its incarnations.

The Bijoux's history mirrored the unsettled nature of our ever--changing city in the desert. Originally a vaudeville house built in 1913 on Fremont Street, it was revamped for magic when Harry Houdini came through, and trapdoors for every possible purpose were installed. In a fit of nostalgia, its owner moved it to the Strip in the 1960s, when Fremont Street was dying, and the Bijoux was repurposed as a supper club. Then the New York–-New York Casino was built around it, and it became a movie palace under the Statue of Liberty. When we leased it for our shows, we added lighting and fly elements. We built a turntable to revolve sets, and a huge lift. But much of the theater remained the way we'd found it, mysterious. The feeling prevailed that at any moment the ghost of Houdini or Al Jolson or Judy Garland might wander by.

An ancient man let us in through the stage door the day we first viewed it. He wore a stained red cardigan, faded overalls, and bedroom slippers. His hair was cropped short, his pink scalp showing through the white stubble. His eyes shone silver, clouded with cataracts. He locked the door behind us and shuffled down the hall without a word. He motioned to us to follow.

He led us backstage, through a maze of fraying curtains. Racks of sequined costumes bloomed with dust, last worn by chorus girls who were now grandmothers. Steamer trunks were stacked or spilled open, revealing the stage props of another age: top hats and bouquets of disintegrating paper flowers. A ventriloquist's dummy stared at us with his shrewd doll's eyes. The old man stopped at the edge of the stage but signaled us to walk onto it. Then he threw a switch and we stood blinking out at the candy box house, row upon row of velvet seats, gold balconies.

I jumped when he spoke. "You're standing on a trapdoor built for Harry Houdini. 1921. Of course, Houdini wasn't a true magician. Really only an escape artist." He said it dismissively. "I saw Devant's 'Asrah' here. Now that was magic. The lady I fell in love with was his assistant. 1919. And Chung Ling Soo was here, when I was a boy. 1914. Performed one of the greatest illusions I've ever seen. The one that finally killed him."

Jeremy and I glanced at each other, and I knew with the sure knowledge of the married that he was thinking the same thing I was. If this man was telling the truth, he'd have been over a hundred years old.

"Born with the century. December thirty--first, 1899." Maybe the old guy had a career as a psychic. "Never did see your great--great-grandfather, John Nevil," he said to Jeremy. "But your great--uncle played this theater. 1923."

Jeremy was descended from a magical family. Jeremy's great--great-grandfather, John Nevil Maskelyne, had been one of the few innovators in the long history of magic. He invented magical levitation, and when he retired, he sold that trick and others for an obscene amount of money. Some descendants of John Nevil struggled to make magic pay, squandering their inheritance from the Original Levitating Girl on magic ephemera, on water torture boxes and fancy dress for the stage and hiring the prettiest assistants. But Jeremy's grandfather and father coddled their share of John Nevil's profit. They shunned the stage, were bankers both, performed another kind of magic by making money appear. Jeremy didn't grow up with the magical arts as a kind of second language, touring En-gland and the Continent with magician parents as some of his cousins had. But when he was a boy, in the attic of the family home in Devonshire, he came across an old leather--bound book, scratched and shredding, full of odd symbols and drawings of elaborate machinery, written in code it would take him months to decipher. One of John Nevil's magic notebooks. It was Jeremy's start in stage magic, the start of his journey to Las Vegas, to me, and then the Bijoux. John Nevil Maskelyne's history was the spark to our success as magicians, in the tiny minority who actually made a living from magic. The old man seemed to know all about it.

On that first day in what would become our theater, Jeremy told him, "You have the advantage of us, I'm afraid."

He extended a gnarled hand for Jeremy to shake. “Pleased to meet you. Wesley Knowles. Otherwise known as one of the Five Chinese Brothers. Not Chinese, not even Asian. Not brothers. Don’t expect you ever heard of us. We were tumblers and jugglers. Minor act. Stopped performing after the Oriental craze went bust with the country. 1929. I stayed on here. Marooned. Before Vegas was even Vegas, only a railroad town. I’m the sole survivor. Now the oldest living authority on theatrical magic of the twentieth century. Last magic act to play this house was Blackstone. The father, not the son. 1957. Until you, that is. If you stay. Hope you do. Bring the magic back.”

Wesley had a keen knowledge of every trick or illusion ever performed, and often gave us ideas, solving problems we came up against with simple and elegant machinations. For he stayed with us or, rather, with the theater. He had rooms above the stage. As far as we could tell, he never left the building. Wesley was frail but not decrepit, whatever his age. If he was 103 when we met him, he would have been 113 on the day Jeremy died. He was there on that day of the lilacs. He always was.

Dan Liston, the prop master and general technician, worked with Jeremy on a new and improved water escape on the floor below the stage. Dan maintained every prop, from fly mechanisms we relied on to hoist us forty feet in the air, to every coin Jeremy palmed. He was a perfectionist, but I made it a point to go over the props before every performance. It was my old habit to check, clipboard in hand. Before each show I literally checked off every prop used by even the lowliest cast member.

That day, the prop tables were the same as they ever were. The guns we used for Defying the Bullets lay shining in their case when I opened the box.

Dan had outlined and numbered every item so we all knew which prop we needed to pick up for each trick. Wesley shuffled by, saluting me, as if I were a general and he a foot soldier in an army of magicians. Were his eyes bluer than usual, less watery? Did he seem taller? The silvery wisps of his hair combed over his pink scalp darker than usual? Not that I noticed. He seemed the same.

When I examined my conscience later, I could never say for sure. What I did remember was the scent of lilacs per-fuming the air near the prop table.

Wesley called ten minutes, then five. I could hear the dancers getting ready in the big green room, the currents of gossip and laughter drifting through my dressing room as they changed into their Carnevale costumes for the second scene. The opening scene, though, was just the two of us, Jeremy and I in a kind of silent passion play that ended in a magician’s duel, our version of Defying the Bullets.

Jeremy played the brilliant Faustian magician, the rival of my dark Mephistopheles. The interplay of darkness and light, God and the devil, was an iconic component of our magic. For Defying the Bullets, we didn’t speak at all. Later in the show, there was plenty of music and banter to set up the tricks, but for that first scene, we’d found that silence was more powerful than speech. We vied for the audience’s applause and love, until I challenged Jeremy to a duel. Two audience members were selected to act as seconds, to examine the guns that were “loaded” before their eyes. Then we would pace off, turn, and fire. I always aimed true, to complete the illusion. Anyone watching from the front row could see the angle of my aim, and its verity. Jeremy would stagger, then fall to his knees pretending to be mortally wounded while I feigned triumph. Then he'd pluck a gleaming bullet from his mouth, hold it up for the audience and the "seconds" to see, and rise to great applause. That was how it was supposed to be.

That night, we played against each other as usual, producing all kinds of unlikely things from the air, mailboxes and tea sets, fireballs and cascades of water to quench them, until I threw down the gauntlet. We chose our seconds, took up weapons, paced, turned, and fired.

But when I pulled the trigger, a red mist exploded behind Jeremy, spattering the gold curtain. Instead of taking a bullet from between his teeth, after he fell to his knees he kept falling, a look of surprise on his face. A woman screamed. I ran to him, caught him before he dropped to the stage. He fell into my arms, his weight already dead weight. I cradled his head, tried to hold in all the blood and bone and everything that made him my Maskelyne, my love. We were only mortal, after all.

After all the shrieking and running for exits was over, after the EMTs had tried and failed to work their magic, Jeremy's body was taken away. In the quiet of the nearly empty theater two police officers handcuffed me, led me out.

There was chaos outside the theater. Detectives questioned members of the audience, and our performers in their Carnevale costumes. They all looked wilted by the heat, still fierce in the August night. Even faces I recognized looked unreal to me, lit by the twirling, flashing firework lights of the Vegas Strip, like mannequins I'd once seen come to life in a Twilight Zone episode. At the top of the theater steps I stumbled, my knees buckling. The dark velvet cloak I was wearing was heavy with its own weight and Jeremy's blood. My body and mind throbbed dully. Nothing was familiar, or whole, or right. When the policemen pulled me to my feet again, my head jerked up, and I thought I saw Wesley Knowles walking away, his blood-red cardigan flapping, his silver hair lit by neon. Leaving the theater, which I'd never known him to do, and walking faster than I'd ever seen him walk. He glanced back once, glanced back and smiled.

Nico, our lawyer, found me in a holding cell that stank of urine and vomit with overtones of Lysol. I was pacing, the same three steps over and over across that cell. I hadn't spoken. I hadn't cried, either. The closest I'd come was when one of the woman guards had told another, "Yeah, I'd kill my old man, too, if I had the guts. I wouldn't do it onstage, though."

I grabbed at the sleeve of Nico's pinstriped suit, still perfectly pressed at midnight. "The girls?"

"Marisol is with them."

"Do they know?"

"Marisol just told them you'd be late at the theater, made them go to bed." That happened often enough. My girls would have at least one more untroubled night. But the next day I would have to tell them of Jeremy's death. It would be the worst thing that they'd faced in their young lives. I had shot their father. And now they would be alone, without father or mother. I'd spend their childhoods in jail. With these thoughts running through my head, the next thing Nico said made no sense. "They're going to release you. You want to change, Dan packed your clothes."

I only pulled the cloak more tightly around me. Jeremy's blood had soaked through, and I could feel it drying on my skin. It seemed like the last thing I had of him.

"It doesn't matter, Nico," I told him. I started shaking. I thought I'd never be warm again. "I killed him. I belong here. I shot him."

"Shit, Reve, you're in shock. Listen to me. They're going to release you because you didn't kill him. You didn't have the intent, even if you did pull the trigger. You pulled it every night. It was a trick, an illusion, just part of the show. But it gave somebody an opportunity to switch your gun. Somebody who knew you always used the same one. Jeremy was his target, not yours."

I did always use the same gun. Mine was on the left of the case, Jeremy's on the right. Nico told me that a different pistol had been exchanged for mine, identical to it but for a hidden chamber that housed one bullet. I hadn't noticed the difference, it was done so cleverly. I hadn't noticed it was any heavier or changed at all. If I had, everything would have been different. Jeremy would be alive.

"But why? Why would anyone want to kill Jeremy?"

Nico shook his head. "That's anybody's guess right now. But that isn't all. The old guy who lives in the theater?"

"You mean Wesley?"

"Yeah. Wesley Knowles."

"What about him?" I couldn't believe that Wesley had any part in this, but then I remembered the old man's taunting smile.

"The cops found him tucked in a bathtub at an abandoned motel out on Sahara. They got an anonymous call from a phone booth at the airport. The last thing he remembers was heading to the theater bathroom sometime last night. He woke up duct taped and gagged, no idea who'd taken him there, or how. But from then on, some guy was impersonating him."

So the Wesley I'd glimpsed that day hadn't been Wesley at all. "That guy is Jeremy's killer," Nico told me. "Got to be."

3

That first morning of our bereavement I woke the girls and gathered them all in Fai's room. I tried not to cry, but my voice shook as I told them the bare facts: that someone had switched the gun I used in Defying the Bullets, that their father was dead. Grace threw herself down on the bed and howled. Caleigh latched on to me, buried her face in my hair. Fai collapsed to the floor, hugged my knees, whispered, "Please no, please no." After that first surge of anguish, we lay curled together on the bed, suspended in grief like bees in amber.

I had to make arrangements for the funeral, or I wouldn't have left the house. I couldn't bear for anyone else, no matter how close, to do those needful things. Choose a venue for the private funeral, plan for the service. Choose the coffin. Buy funeral clothes for myself, our daughters. These were the very last things I could do for my husband. My parents couldn't get a flight until the evening, so the next day Jeremy's cousin Nathan stayed with the girls while I discharged my terrible errands.

Nathan Landry had come to us when he was sixteen. He was the son of Jeremy's only American cousin. Nathan grew up in New Orleans. He also grew up gay in a family of Catholic Republicans. When he came out they disowned him, and he fled west on a Greyhound, to Las Vegas, to us. We were glad to have him. We were building our act and our career, and the twins were three-year-old terrors who needed constant supervision. Nathan finished high school while learning the family trade and helping with the girls. He'd always been interested in fencing and swordsmanship, and that became his domain. After graduating with a first in Renaissance studies from Oxford, he returned to us, almost unrecognizable from the shy boy he'd been. He'd transformed into a remarkable man: a swashbuckling blond Errol Flynn crossed with an easygoing, bookish southern gentleman. Nathan could wield a broadsword or the poetry of William Blake with equal aplomb. He choreographed all the staged sword fights and dances in our shows, and tutored the girls when we went on the road. He was like a son to us. He steeped the girls in Shakespeare, and they called him "coz."

He hadn't been in the theater that night, but when he heard what had happened, Nathan left his apartment in town to stay with us. "You're the only family I have left," he told me. "At least the only family who ever stuck by me. Let me return the favor, Reve." I let him. I needed to surround myself and the girls with people I could trust. However final it seemed, Jeremy's death wasn't an end. It was the beginning of a kind of hell I was not prepared for, beyond the usual grief and shock when one loses a spouse too young.

I was still a suspect in his murder. Nico told me the police would have me followed, hoping I'd lead them to Jeremy's killer. Maybe they were thinking they'd catch me in a tryst, or a business arrangement that would explain my husband's death. They still believed I was involved, especially since I'd inherited money, as well as our Henderson, Nevada, home, Jeremy's family home in England, and the cottage in Ireland where we sometimes spent summers. I was hardly on the Forbes 400 list, but it was a tidy sum, one that a woman less completely in love with her husband, less destroyed by losing the father of her children, might have thought worth killing for.

Nico was right. I spotted the unmarked car as soon as I pulled out of our driveway. It was parked in a less prominent place than the Las Vegas Star News van that had been there since the previous day. They both followed as I made my way from the Desert Palms Funeral Home to the District to pick up the girls' funeral dresses. A caravan for God's sake. But I didn't really care. I didn't feel much, couldn't feel much. I moved from choosing the coffin to choosing the service to choosing dresses for the girls mechanically. There was a veil of grief and shock between me and the rest of the world.

What I remember about that day, besides the despair that clutched me, was being cold. The District in Henderson is an open-air shopping mall, pretty enough on a fine day, but that day was not fine. It was too chill for the desert in summer, too wintry for Henderson. Rain threatened; the sky was gray as ashes. I'd thrown on clothes without thinking, had no coat, only a thin sweater. After I was done buying the girls' clothes, I had a long walk to the end of the shops for my widow's weeds. I was frozen at the core by the time I'd got to the café in the complex. I ducked in for something warm. I just wanted to hold a hot cup. The plainclothes policewoman followed me in at a discreet distance. I'd been pretending not to notice her as she'd pretended to shop for children's clothes. Maybe she'd pretend to get a coffee now. The boys in the news van had more respect. They just snapped pictures of me with their long lenses from inside the van.

I went up to the counter, ordered a large tea. A duck-tailed barista was moving in slow motion, listening to Elvis on his iPod. A wisp of "Love Me Tender" escaped his earbuds. The barista mouthed the words. A Young Elvis impersonator. I looked around. A man sat near the gas fire, in one of the leather chairs. His face was turned from me, toward the flames. He was dressed in a dark suit, reading a newspaper. Dark hair, I thought, but it was hard to tell in the shifting firelight. It was eleven in the morning, a strange time of day for an office worker to be lolling in a café, so the suit was probably the woman detective's partner.

When my tea arrived, I held it with both hands, made my way to the hearth, sat in the other leather chair. The woman detective fluttered near us, pretending to linger over her choice of milk or cream, raw or fake sugar. Still the man by the fire did not turn to look at me; he kept his eyes focused on his paper. I wondered how he could see to read. There were no windows in that corner of the shop; the fire was the only source of light.

"Not a very nice day," the man said.

I looked away, looked out the glass doors at the flat gray sky. I had no intention of engaging in conversation. I wanted only the warmth of the fire, and no detective could keep me from it.

"The weather's changed since last week," he persisted, his gaze fixed on his paper. I didn't see a headset for a cell phone, though, so he had to be talking to me.

"Now, last week," he continued, "it was sunny. Sunny altogether. Not too hot, either, for once. Last week you could think you were living in a kind of paradise."

I flinched. It was strange that a detective would bother to give me a weather report, but the man was right. It had been warm. It had been paradise. I'd been in the District, too, the week before, looking for a new bathrobe for Jeremy, and was informed at the menswear store that bathrobes were seasonal items. Not for summer. That night, when I told Jeremy bathrobes were seasonal, we'd laughed at the silliness of it. He flung his old terry cloth one off with a grand gesture. "A pox upon the man who wears bathrobes out of season. I will not be that man!"

My Jeremy. My Maskelyne. He'd be in the ground soon, where it was always cold. I rose, grasping my cup, the only heat I had. My hands were not steady, and it almost slid through my fingers.

“You’d better hang on to that,” the man warned. “It’s going to be colder soon, I’d say.” His face remained in the shadows, his eyes now riveted on the fire, watching the lick of flames. I turned and rushed out the door.

When I was finished with my last grim chore, I jogged to the car. The woman detective followed at a distance. I threw my bags in the backseat, started the engine, turned the heat all the way up. Then I saw the piece of paper fluttering under the wiper blade. I thought of turning on the wipers, letting it fly away altogether. But I leapt out again and grabbed it. A copy of an old handbill for a magic show. Chung ling soo, defying the bullets. A scream rose nearly to my lips before I bit it back. I ran to the car my detective friend had just stepped into. She and her male partner looked at each other in confusion when I signaled to them. The man rolled down the window. He was dressed in gray sweats, had a shaved head, might have been trying out for a remake of Kojak. Definitely not the stranger by the fire.

“It was him,” I said, and held out the flyer. “It was the guy sitting by the fire in the café. He killed my husband.” I don’t know how I knew. I just did. But the man was gone. Young Elvis hadn’t noticed him leave. He wasn’t a regular, either. I found out later that when my new detective friends had analyzed the flyer and the cup that remained on the table by the fire, neither held fingerprints, DNA from saliva—anything at all that might identify him. The man in the dark suit had vanished.

4

The funeral was a blur. My parents had come from Massachusetts. My aunts, Viv and Gwen, flew in from California. Jeremy’s parents had both died when the twins were small: his mother from cancer, his father from grief-fueled alcoholism a few years later. Only one Maskelyne relative came over from England, Jeremy’s cousin Bertie, who had to fly back immediately for his own wedding. We left Hope in the Desert Church after the brief service. It was finally raining, a rare desert rain that splattered up mud from the dry ground. The smell of the air was electric.

I knew I’d need a few minutes alone before I could gather my strength again. The girls were with my parents and aunts, talking to the pastor under the church portico. I slipped away, walked through the rain toward the car. I tried to ignore the photographers and news vans clustered outside the church gates, the police detail assigned to keep them out.

Before I could reach the car, a man appeared from the labyrinth walk beside the church. He was big-boned and tall, and so dirty he might have come through the desert on foot. Or perhaps was homeless. One of the funeral directors stepped between us, but I asked him to move aside. I had recognized the breeks the dirty man wore, the long wool socks, the pocketed waistcoat. Homeless or not, this man was dressed as a falconer. The only thing he was lacking was a bird on his leather glove. He held a small blue envelope instead of a hawk, and I reached for it, recognizing Nan’s handwriting. My Nan, my mother’s mother, at ninety-seven years old did not travel, although she was a master falconer and still held falconry clinics. Since Jeremy’s murder I had been hoping for some word from her. I’d grown up in Nan’s imposing presence. But as close as she and my mother had been when I was a child, a breach between them opened after I was grown and gone away from home. A breach I couldn’t fathom, although I tried for years to understand it. They held an uneasy truce at holidays, but I’d hardly seen or heard from Nan other than at Thanksgiving, Christmas, birthdays. Now here was a letter from her, brought to me in this strange way.

“You’re to open that before no one,” the falconer told me. I looked down at the turquoise envelope, the letters running in the rain, and when I looked up, the man was gone, had melted back into the desert. I tucked the letter into my bag.

I meant to read it when I was finally alone in the funeral limo, but I broke down instead. The leather upholstery smelled of other people’s grief, and I added mine to it. My sobs were drowned out by the howl of the wind, and I let myself keen along with it. Just for a moment. Just as a rest from the stunned shock that had gripped me since the night of Jeremy’s death.

When I looked up, I saw Grace stumbling toward the car. She was crying, too. Her flaming hair was wild, and the white dress she’d wanted for her father’s funeral clung to her long, stockinged legs. Our beautiful girl, undone by her grief. She seemed impossibly fragile. Of our girls, Grace was closest to Jeremy, but most resembled me. Grace had my temper. Only Jeremy could stanch our sudden flares of anger, soothe us, turn us to our best selves. What could I do for her? We were too much alike.

She flung her dripping body into the car, slammed the door. I braced myself for the storm I could see coming in her face. She turned to me, wet with tears and rain, her breathing hard and shallow, like water tumbling over rocks.

“I have to know. You have to tell me.” Her voice was rough and hopeless. “Did you mean to kill Dad?” Her blue eyes pierced me, held me as if I were a butterfly pinned in a specimen case.

“Oh, Gracie, no. Oh, honey . . . of course I didn’t mean to kill your father!” The simple words couldn’t exonerate me in my own mind, but when I reached for her, she collapsed against me, spent. Sobs racked her thin body, and I held her close until they stopped.

I’d forgotten about the letter, until after the grave site, after all the tears and hugs and Marisol’s feast at the house that we scarcely touched. Until everyone else was in bed, the girls with my mom in the guest bedroom, Nathan in his room, my dad snoring finally on the couch after keeping vigil with me. I didn’t think I’d ever sleep again. I shook the letter out of its rain-pocked envelope and read the spidery handwriting of an old and frail woman.

My Dearest Reve,

I trust Falcon Eddy will bear this message to you. You need to come home. Hawley Five Corners is waiting for you. You’ll be safe there. Don’t be your stubborn self. Find a way. Remember the story of the Fetch. And remember, history often repeats itself.

Yours in Haste,

Nan

My heart slammed in my chest when I read the word Fetch. Of course I remembered that story. I closed my eyes and tried to breathe, calm and steady. Crushed the letter in my hand.

But our home was here. I would stay, and damn Nan's tangle of stories. This was the real world, with a real killer who would be found. When that happened I would cobble our lives together again. What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.

Yet I thought, too, every day from then on, of Nan's letter, of what she had written. For of all her many stories, it had been the story of the Fetch that sparked nightmares when I was a child. I could still hear her voice beating inside my head, telling it.

"It was the winter of 1832," Nan would begin in the dusky light of my nighttime bedroom. She held my hand, and hers was warm and supple, not like a witch's claw at all. She dressed in practical clothes, jeans and flannel shirts, things her hawks couldn't ruin. But her thin face was steeped in shadow, her voice pitched to the timeless resonance of fairy tale, so she seemed otherworldly. She told a story better than anyone, and I always thrilled to hear her tell even this story, the one that terrified me so.

"The snow was deep. Lucius Gowdy could hear the wolves howl just past his fence line. But his family was safe now, he thought. He had cut enough wood to supply the five fireplaces in the house through the harshest winter. They had food stored in the cellar, venison dried to jerky, the good big pig killed in the fall smoked and hanging from a rafter. His wife had canned and pickled and preserved; row upon row of jeweled colors in glass bottles glowed in the shadows. He had moved his family more times than he could count, and he was determined to stay in the big house on the Plainfield flats that seemed to suit them so well. But it was a wraith that forced these frequent moves on him. A wraith that looked exactly like him. Often and often, when he was out mending fences, it would come in and sit down at the table in their other homes, and his wife would set a plate down before it, thinking it was her Lucius.

"The spirit began to follow him everywhere. When he plowed the fields, it would follow. When he went to hunt, it would appear clambering over rock walls and downed trees to get to him.

"His wife told him, 'It's surely a Fetch, come to take you. We must move, we must confound it.' For a Fetch was a shadowy figure, a creature made from earth by a wizard, meant to 'fetch' a living person to the fairy world. Lucius did not want to go to his grave, or to any fairy world. So they moved and moved. Each time his wife began packing their belongings, the Fetch would appear and cry out, 'No matter where you go, I'll find you! For I shall take you to my master after all! He'll have you yet.' And it was true: The Fetch always found the Gowdys, until they moved to the Plainfield house. There Lucius had gone through the summer and fall, and now in the midst of the harsh winter, neither he nor his wife or children had seen the dreaded thing.

"Then one day, the wind howled and the storm raged around them, more fierce than ever. Lucius had banked the fires well that morning, but by midday, the flames were nearly out. It wasn't like him at all to let the fires die on such a day, so his wife sought him from the top of the house to the bottom. In the cold cellar, she found the Fetch curled on the dirt floor. The thing was shivering, sick and pale, its skin nearly transparent. It scarcely resembled her husband anymore, and it seemed to be fading. Even so, it was full of venom. ‘You’ll not see your husband more in this life,’ it hissed at her. ‘I knew I should have him, and now I’ve taken him away.’

“‘Where have you taken him?’

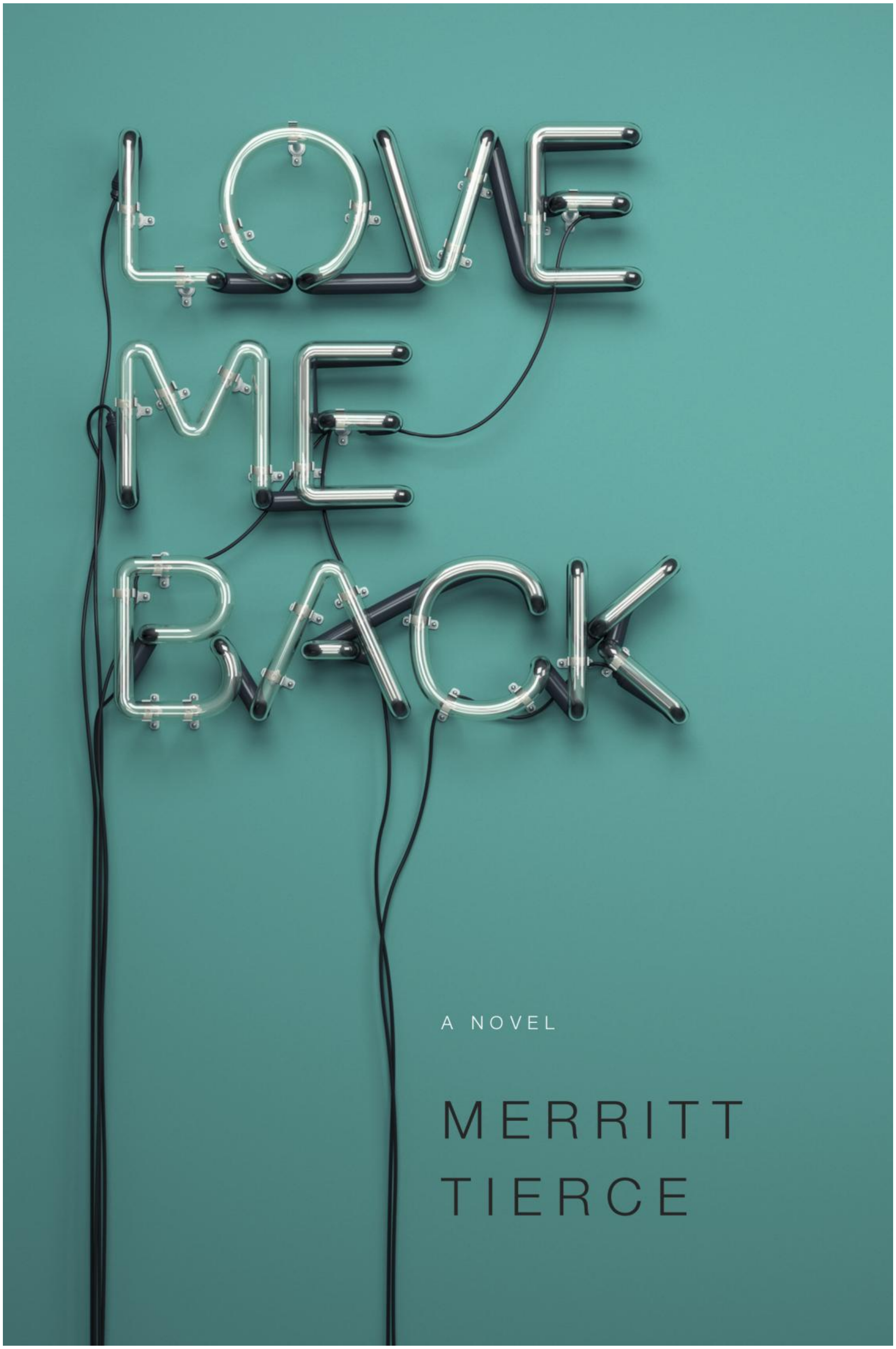
“‘He is with my master, where no mortal can follow.’

“But the wife was stubborn, and not exactly mortal. She took a warm cloak and went out into the snow and wind. She saw her husband’s tracks and followed them to where their field met the edge of the wood. There his tracks ended, and the tracks of wolves circled. One drop of bright red besmirched the blinding white of the snow. She thought of her husband, then of her children. She’d left them alone with the Fetch! The thing was weakened from its soul stealing, but might it recover, take another form, seek another soul? One of her children’s, while she had left them unprotected?

“Her tears froze on her cheeks as she turned and ran through the heavy drifts back to the house, where she found her children safe and warm, the Fetch nowhere to be seen. Lucius Gowdy’s wife hugged their children to her, and cried some, and sat with them around the leaping fire that seemed to be laughing and winking at her. For the fires in every hearth mysteriously blazed hot once more. And the fires burned merrily in every hearth all winter, without even the need for her to add a log. Sometimes, in the dead of night, the woman thought she saw eyes in the flames, watching her, watching her children, watching as she wrote in a book of her own keeping.

“The woman never saw her husband again. The next spring, they moved from that place, and kept on moving. The one thing she was certain of was that they’d never be entirely safe from the Fetch. For who knew what would satisfy his master?”

I tried mightily to put Nan’s story of Lucius Gowdy from me. Yet it haunted me, the tale of the Fetch, the stealer of souls. I tried to act like myself in the strange weeks that followed, made the girls go through the motions of regular meals and bedtimes, never let them see me when I wept. But every night I would go to a secret drawer in our bedroom that I’d forbidden Marisol to touch, take up the shirt Jeremy had put in the laundry basket to be washed the night before I shot him. I’d wrap myself in it, press the collar to my face, and breathe his scent in, pretend he was in bed next to me. Wake in the morning and weep silently into the shirt that was empty of my husband, my love. Whose soul had been stolen from me, from himself. And would we ever be entirely safe again? Like the woman in Nan’s story, I just didn’t know.


LOVE
ME
BACK
A NOVEL
MERRITT
TIERCE

Suck It

Suck it is Danny's favorite phrase, which he employs as a general greeting. Sometimes he inflects it as a question: Suck it? Directed at a female, it might often be appended: Suck it, sista. This is only for staff members, of course; our patrons will more likely get an egregiously enthusiastic What's up, my brother? accompanied by a handshake/backslap combination. (If you're one of his friends you might receive a more sincere What's up, my fucking brother?) Egregious enthusiasm is Danny's trademark—he can transmit his buzz and momentum to anyone at will. This is called charisma. His charisma—any charisma, I suppose—is entirely performance, yet in being never more nor less than a performer he somehow remains endearingly genuine. He might embrace a beautiful woman, kiss her on both cheeks, escort her to the bar—What do you like, sister, what do you want? Cosmo? Martini? Chardonnay? Tequila? Tongue kiss? That's what I thought—Ethan, get my lover here a glass of Mer Soleil, thank you brother—Good to see you, love—and as soon as he spins around to answer your question mutter Dirty whore, suck it.

Almost every question must be brought to Danny, because it's his restaurant. These people want a booth instead of a table, ask Danny. You want Friday off this week, ask Danny. The guy said his steak looked more medium than rare and he wants a different one, better check with Danny. Music's too loud, lights are too low, the room's too cold, tell Danny. You want to go to Silver City, ask Danny—he's king there and she'll fuck you for real in a back room at his word. You want tickets to the game or an eight o'clock reservation at Tei Tei, which doesn't take eight o'clocks—Danny will work it out for you. You need a bump, ask Danny—but not until after service, he never starts till almost everybody's out of the building.

Most nights he gets it from the undocumented Mexican and Salvadoran bussers and dishwashers. The Mexicans are usually from Guanajuato, some from Yucatán—the Yucas have a reputation for being lazy, the Guanajuatans for being easygoing and hardworking. Sometimes on his day off Danny comes up to the restaurant, ostensibly to check on us and grace the regulars with his presence like a politician, but he's also there to pick something up. He'll say to me Pablo working? Get me sixty? and I'll say Okay boss. I pick up a stack of dirty plates and silverware and head into the dish room, where I unload them and then hold up three fingers for only Pablo, who is polishing Bordeaux glasses, to see. He nods with his eyes. A few minutes later I'll come back to wash my hands or run some stock out to the line and he'll discreetly slip me a tiny square package, three twenty-bags wrapped up tight in a piece of paper towel. I'll wait for Danny to come find me, or sometimes he'll ask me to put it under a Le Volte bottle. The Le Volte is a Chianti in the uppermost corner of the French/Italian wine bin wall; I'm too short to reach it, so I have to climb up on a chair without being seen. If he pays me I pass the three twenty-dollar bills along to Pablo—back in the spring he used to ask me to front it for him and bring it to him somewhere, like the W or the alley behind the Fitz. I rarely have money I don't need to spend immediately on something or other, so sometimes I had to borrow from someone else to get it for him. The first few times he gave me extra cash when he paid me back, which I think was supposed to seal me into the whole thing, but since I quit using I've just been asking the bussers for it. They know it's for him, and somehow he knows I don't want to front it anymore, so he settles up with them when he's back in the restaurant. I hate this arrangement, because I'm both too timid and too interested in protecting my income to beg off, and the bussers are barely making a living as it is. They live in one-bedroom apartments with five other people and share broken-down cars and every one of them has a morning job in a different restaurant.

Lately they've been coming down harder on me. There's something wrong with Pablo's eyes; he has kind of a flat face, like you see in the pictures of fetal alcohol syndrome victims, and his pupils are strange. The top half of each is a cloudy blue, and the bottom half is an opaque dark, so when he stares at me and says Tellen, tellen Danny que necesita pagar, tellen Danny he pay, okay? Ten. Diez. I feel disarmed by his aberrant, unreadable gaze. He tells me in Spanish, then in English; then he holds up how many fingers to make sure I get it.

My friend Calvin says they're going to start cutting it worse for him, that even though he's their boss they won't tolerate it. We agree that he makes too much money to do it like this, that if he wants it he should just pay for it. Either give me the cash or get right with them straightaway.

Suck it is his favorite, but not by much—we joke that he has Tourette's syndrome, and I wouldn't be surprised if it were true. He might be looking over the seating chart for the night, trying to puzzle out how he can possibly fit another six-top in at seven thirty, and run through a litany like Suck it shit fuck cock 'n' balls shit fuck fuck fuck fuck suck it. He might hang up the phone after sweetly giving a stranger detailed directions and declare Filthy cunt whore suck my cock may I help you?

Every night he makes snap public-relations decisions with a ferocity that is unquestionable and an accuracy that is never less than dead-on. He is a fast-talking Italian fox from the Bronx who can get his way with anyone, can make any Mur feel like a VIP, and thus has been the general manager of a multimillion-dollar-grossing fine-dining steakhouse since he was twenty-four.

(*Mur* is a term that denotes any individual "we don't know." A Mur is just a regular customer, no one deserving of special treatment. This fairly benign significance is the standard, though it might also be used more pejoratively, to indicate that the individual is a nobody, a chump, a tool—all of which in turn signify primarily an absence of wealth.

Example: Honey-love, see those Murs hangin out in the fuckin doorway over there? Would you please take them in to twenty fucking seven. I once inquired about the etymology of Mur, and Danny said that he and his buddy, who is the general manager at our sister restaurant Il Castello, used to know a guy named Murray when they were kids growing up in the Bronx. Murray was a social misfit, soft or naive in some unforgivable way that inspired them to refer to any such person as a Murray, and later simply a Mur.)

But Danny is blowing his crystalline mind four square inches of shittily cut cocaine at a time, night after night. The urgency in his voice when he calls up the restaurant on his days off to ask me to get it for him—well, last night all he said was Four. Now.

Danny's appetite is the spirit of the place: the excesses of an entire microculture are concentrated in his one body. We are accustomed to businessmen arriving with clients whom they want to impress, we are accustomed to those businessmen spending our weekly incomes on several bottles of fine wine alone, we are accustomed to a per-person average that can linger fatly around $300. We are accustomed to Danny's binges, his unbelievable gluttony. He routinely fucks women in the restaurant—once there was a pink lacy thong on the floor by the trash can in the office on a Sunday, and he came up to The Restaurant with a friend, even though it was his day off. They were already out of control with their high and they were there for me to get them some more. Danny told the friend my name and he said Ooooh! and looked at me as if he cherished me, because Danny must have told him earlier who was going to help them along. While they were crashing around the office, laughing and pushing and glowing and shrieking, Danny told me and the wine manager how he had fucked this one girl by the trash can last night (above the thong on the floor, he reenacted his thrusting), and how he then fucked her friend in the same place. I guess that one wasn't wearing underwear, or kept it on.

There is a kind of partying undertaken by people of my age and station on birthdays, or on other momentous occasions such as the losing of a job. The kind of partying that leaves one wrecked for days, sometimes close to death. The kind of partying that concludes with the unconscious body of the individual being arranged by any remaining friends in such a way that it can be trusted not to aspirate vomit. This is the kind of partying that lingers so badly it causes one to leave off for another year or so. This is also the kind of partying that Danny rips through several times a week.

He was in the hospital last month. No one could remember a day when Danny didn't come in—in seven years he's never been out sick. He's been in all fucked up, for sure, but he maintains better than most people who aren't fucked up, so a hush came over us when they said he was in the hospital. They said it was something with his stomach, that he'd had unbearable pains and his dad convinced his friend Roman to drag him to the emergency room, where they gave him great quantities of morphine. He was out only the one day; the next day he was back, drinking flavored water instead of the four or five Cokes he habitually downs during the shift. On the third day he had returned to his usual pace. I saw him in the back talking to Pablo.

Our ladder-back chairs have a decorative hole in the top rung, and late one afternoon I came around the corner of the bar and saw he'd stuck his cock through the hole there. Just to shock me or anyone else who walked by. Somehow he knows which girls can handle this and which can't.

Other guys imitate him sometimes. Once Casey told me that he let his dick hang out underneath his apron all night, and because he's about six-three, when he was standing at his tables his junk would rest on the tabletop, hidden behind the apron. Then last Sunday I was in the office before the shift started, talking to Rich, the maître d'. Kansas John walked in to ask me if he could pay me to do his alcohol seller-server recertification for him. I said yes, so he was writing down his information for me, and behind his back Rich unzipped his pants and pulled it out. He wadded it up in his hand and waited for Kansas John to turn around. But before Kansas turned around, Anna walked in the door of the office. I don't know how Rich did it fast enough, but he covered it with his hands as if he just had his hands in his lap.

Danny and his roommate like to have the same women. Lou Ambrogetti is the Cuban-Italian chef at Il Castello. He is short, bronze, and beautiful, and though he's only thirty-four, the stubble atop his round head is pigeon-colored. His full lips hold still underneath a gaze that's pruriently curious, and a tattooed sun circumscribes his navel. One Saturday night I sucked him off at the bottom of the back stairs behind Cosimo, the nightclub affiliated with our restaurant. I was there only because one of the owners, Mr. Salvatore

Lissandri, brought me over from the steakhouse in his Aston Martin; it was Sal himself who'd given me a job at The Restaurant.

Lissandri philandered. But first—he came into the Dream Café, one of the two restaurants I was working in that year, a few mornings a week for breakfast. We fought over him, whoever else was on the breakfast shift and I, because he always tipped $15, which worked out to be one hundred sixty percent of his $9 tab. He ate steel-cut organic oatmeal with no brown sugar and soy milk on the side, followed by four egg whites scrambled with spinach and tomatoes. He drank water only, with a straw. He didn't say much to us and always had the paper with him. A native New Yorker and Mets fan, he stared at the sports section while he did business on his mobile phone all during his breakfast.

When Jamie started waiting on him he put the phone down. She was new, a yoga instructor from Woodstock, in town to save money by living with her folks so she could take a trip to India to develop her practice. Sal liked her—we all did, she radiated bliss and vigor. He flirted with her and told her she ought to come over to his restaurant, he'd set her up in the bar over there. She turned him down because she didn't want to work nights.

One Sunday Sal came in with his sometime companion, Laura, at the peak of brunch service. The Dream Café was not a well-run restaurant and as the strongest server I often took six or seven tables at once. From ten a.m. till about one in the afternoon I'd feel like I was continuously on the precarious edge of a sheer food-service cliff. What heroics I performed to get people their fucking brunch. Sal and Laura sat down on the patio that morning—I had never seen him in on the weekend, or even during the volume part of any weekday. I already had a half dozen booths in the lanai going, but as I flew past them he said Can you take care of us here? I said Absolutely. I rang in his food and miraculously it was on the table five minutes later. That day he left me $20, a raise.

The following Tuesday I woke up and knew he'd be coming in. (My daughter and I have this slight ability to sense things—mostly insignificant things. Once I decided in the shower to wear this purple shirt—I visualized it and she heard me somehow. She came to me in the bathroom and said she wanted to pick out my shirt. I looked into her eyes, which are the pure glittering blue of a sky far removed from any inhabited place, and thought about my purple shirt. She went to my closet and I followed. She reached up above her head and grabbed its sleeve.)

That morning I woke up in my shithole apartment in the warren of Latino complexes near Park Lane and Greenville Avenue. Black mold on one wall and in six months I had never cooked a meal there because it would have seemed de facto contaminated. I woke up and knew Sal would be coming in, so with my Dream Café T-shirt I put on some makeup and my grandmother's lapis bead necklace. I didn't usually bother with makeup at six a.m., but I wanted a different life. I wanted to ask him soon, before the memory of my Sunday service dissipated.

When I dropped the check I said I have a question for you.

Okay, he said, and sat back. I said I was wondering if you had any openings in your restaurant. He said Sure, I'll hire you. Come in on Friday, I'll tell Danny to get you going.

Easy as that.

* * *

So after I had been there a month I guess he decided he wanted to try me out, and on a Saturday night he put his hand on my elbow and said I heard you were gonna buy me a drink at Cosimo. I said Oh? He said Come with me. I told the closing manager that Sal wanted me to go with him, and I was abruptly granted amnesty from sidework, which didn't exactly do much for my standing with the rest of the waitstaff. I got into Sal's car and he told me I had to take off my vest and tie before we went in, so I left them on the white leather seat, along with my phone. At the club he schmoozed Dallas's most expensive, meticulously produced women, periodically coming back over to bump against me in my dirty dark gray button-down work shirt. When the lights went up at last call, he was gone, my phone and uniform with him. I don't know if he ditched me because he found something better—likely—or because he saw me with Lou—also likely. That was several weeks before I ended up at his palatial Highland Park house.

While he was stroking the glamorous ones I was meeting Lou. He opened his fly in the middle of the dance floor and let his penis hang out underneath his shirt, which concealed it, though not completely. It was an interview. It was a question about me, which I answered by grabbing it. The music thrummed so loudly he had to say in my ear What are you doing later? I said What are you doing now?

We went out the back door and down the stairs. At the bottom of the stairs he held his beer in one hand and took mine with the other. I went down on him and got him off before two minutes had passed. We went back upstairs and he told me his phone number, which I remembered and borrowed a phone to call when I found myself stranded at two a.m.

I took a cab to his and Danny's condo. Inside we did lines and fucked. Ambrogetti is the only guy I know who can fuck on coke. Everybody else it makes limp. The worst is, they're horny and limp. They want you to work hard on it but it never responds. I stayed up all night with Lou and Danny and two other guys who took turns with me.

And so on. In about three months' time I had sex with approximately thirty different men who worked for or patronized my steakhouse, the bar next door, Il Castello, and Cosimo. Three managers, one owner, two sous-chefs, one busser, one bartender, a dozen servers and as many customers, the latter group including Danny's father and a preponderance of surgeons and athletes. They began to say about me She don't play and She's for real. Once I was turning in my cashout, getting ready to leave for the night, and a server I hadn't yet been with asked me if he could buy me a beer next door. I said Do you want to fuck? He chuckled, taken aback, and said No, I just want to buy you a beer. You know, hang out and talk and stuff, that's all. I said Oh. No, that's okay. Thanks, though. In the days afterward I heard this story repeated while people were folding napkins or polishing silverware, and it became a totemic tale about me that people distributed to new servers.

Calvin was my confessor—every afternoon I'd tell him about the new ones and spare no detail, be it of ugliness or danger. He would call me out, question my judgment, show me a worry I wanted to feel for myself. I didn't hide from Calvin how much I pretended. Pretended to like it, pretended to want it, pretended to have orgasms. He didn't understand and I couldn't explain. It had something to do with love and something to do with grief. It was just this: I'd be down on the floor sometimes, picking up fallen chunks of crab cake near some diamond broker's shoe, with my apron and my crumber and my *Yes, sir, certainly, right away,* and I'd feel impaled by the sight and feel of the half-eaten crabmeat because it wasn't her sparkly laugh and it wasn't that place on her shoulder, right up against her neck, that smells like sunlight. *I am not a mother,* I'd think as I walked to the trash can. You can fuck a lot of people, Calvin would say to me, and still enjoy yourself. Make it about you, about pleasure. At least make it safe. But it wasn't about pleasure; it was about how some kinds of pain make fine antidotes to others. So when they gave me their numbers and they were old and I'd seen them with hookers, I said yes.

And so on. There was the night with Casey and Florida John. They got me high and then played Call of Duty while taking turns with me. I stayed in the bedroom on the bed. I would do a line and then a bong hit and one of them would fuck me. Then that one would go back out to the living room to play and I would do another line and another bong hit while I waited for the other one. I don't know how many times this repeated.

There was the night with Casey and Howard, and the night with Greg and Howard, and the night with Greg and Casey. There was the night I sat next to Greg on the sidewalk outside his apartment while he talked to his girlfriend on the phone. What are you wearing? he asked her. Then we went inside and I got down on the floor in a sandwich between him and Gray. I faced Greg because I didn't want to look at Gray, who was small and dour. Gray ground on me while Greg fucked me. Greg came fast and then Gray pushed into me but there was no rhythm or confidence in his motions and he couldn't climax. Greg laughed. Come on, Gray, you can do it, man! Let's take a break, I said to Gray. I went into the living room to find drugs or a drink. Someone who looked like a full-size, better, happier version of Gray was sitting on the couch. Who are you? I asked. I'm Gray's brother Blake, he said. He didn't say anything about whatever he had heard from the other room. Hey will you help me get on that thing? he asked me, pointing to an inversion table in the corner of the room. If I can have the rest of that, I said, holding my hand out for his drink. He gave it to me and I drank it. It was a screwdriver. We went to the inversion table and got him strapped in. I wasn't much help. Then he closed his eyes and flipped it and he was hanging upside down in front of me. He was wearing sweatpants. I knelt in front of him and grabbed the waistbands of his sweatpants and his boxers and pulled them away from his body and up over his cock. Whoa! he said. What are you doing? I don't know, I said, I've never done this before. Then I sucked on him and he said Okay, you can do that. His pelvis was directly level with my mouth. When I felt him getting close I put my hands on either side of the table and rocked it back and forth. It was a lot easier on my neck that way. Behind the table I saw Gray come into the room and stand there watching us. When Blake started to orgasm I saw Gray leave.

The next time Gray and I were on the same shift was a few days later. He came up to me by the lockers and said Hey I'm sorry about the other night, that I didn't—you know. He said it like it must have offended me. I was embarrassed for him, that he had been thinking about it. It's fine, I said. No big deal.

There was the Cajun sous-chef I spent two or three nights with, who told me his fiancée had hung herself. He pointed to one of the rafters in his loft. Later we had an intern from the local culinary school—I think she was only eighteen. They started her on the dessert line with the Cajun sous-chef training her, and I watched him macking on her hard and I watched her buy it. She got pregnant and they fired the Cajun sous-chef and hired a new sous-chef who was part Inuit. His name was Reggie but everyone called him Eskimo. He even had Eskimo embroidered on his chef's coat. One night I went to the Westin downtown with Eskimo. It was his suggestion and I'm not sure why he didn't want to go back to his house, but I didn't want to go back to my house either. He didn't have money for the hotel room though so I paid for it. I took a long shower hoping he would fall asleep while I was in the bathroom but he didn't. He was really heavy and graceless. When the culinary intern, who had continued to work at The Restaurant after the Cajun sous-chef was fired, had her baby they hired a Salvadoran woman to do desserts. I watched Eskimo train her, putting his hands on hers to show her how to pipe the whipped cream onto the cheesecake. She had a daughter the same age as mine, and she always said How's your niña? when she saw me. Eskimo got her pregnant—no lie. They didn't fire him. Maybe they were afraid if they fired him it would just happen again with the next sous-chef. The Salvadoran woman had the baby and married Eskimo, and when she left The Restaurant to stay home with her baby they hired a man for the dessert line. Everyone told him to be careful not to get pregnant back there.

One rainy night in April Danny took me into the office—he had to kick another manager out with a look—and bent me over the desk. My head knocked the phone off its cradle. He said I think Lou's waiting for you in The Private Room. I went into The Private Room and Lou bent me over. Lou went back to his date in the bar, and later she was so drunk she let him fuck her at the host stand. All the customers were gone, but Justin and I watched. Andy Vanderveer took a picture with his camera phone. That was one of my highest-grossing shifts, too—while I was getting fucked by the general manager and his best friend I had probably twenty-five covers running in the bar. I think I made around $700 that night. After Lou fucked his date I carried her out to the car. I'm not a big woman—I weigh about 115 pounds and I'm five-five. I was wearing a cocktail dress and heels, but I picked her up in my arms like a baby and put her in the front seat. Her name was Indica, a breed of marijuana plant.

When I'd puff it was so much easier to get down. I used to imagine a small tribe of aborigines living inside me, representative en masse of my true identity, and I always knew they thought me reckless whenever I'd end up in some dark place with some feral soul. I liked to smoke them out, to puff and puff until I got them all up in the hills so I could do whatever I was doing and they'd be unaware. For example, the ex-pro who stood seven feet tall and came into the bar in May. His enormous cock was the size of a rolling pin and not nearly as domesticated. He measured me in the restaurant: when I delivered his salad he said Whyntcha sit here fo a minute and pulled me down on his lap. I guess he judged my ass adequate and we met later at the W, where I slammed the shots he bought me, to demonstrate that I was not afraid of whatever debasement awaited. He noted this and nodded to the bartender for another as he said Like a champ, huh? Baby have one more, it'll help. In the corner of a dark parking lot we lit a blunt for more help. Eventually I felt that haze come between me and the natives, the little people inside, so I was separated from their judgments and they were protected from my actions for a while. He said What's up. You okay? Ready? I'm'onna give it to you. Inside the truck he fucked me in the ass, and his cock took up so much room in me it seemed logistically impossible that he'd done it. Like if you heard a school bus drove into a pup tent.

That could have been the last. After that one I wanted to say to my indigenous selves *This is fine, here's good, this is far enough. We'll camp here for the night and make our ascent in the morning*. But I didn't, and on June eighth at the bar next door Mickey, one of the senior servers, pimped me out. He told me to go outside with his friend James, who didn't work at The Restaurant and whom I'd never seen before. We got into my car and James told me to suck his dick. What reluctance I felt at the sight of his slack penis flopped over on his thigh. (By that time the natives didn't linger. They just slipped out the back of me quick and let the fire door slam.) When it got hard he wanted to fuck, so I got in the passenger seat underneath him. There were servers and kitchen guys in the parking lot drinking after work and I'm sure they all saw the car rocking. I was thinking it might be over soon when the passenger door opened and Mickey stood there, watching his friend fuck me. He got right down in my face and poured a Modelo Especial all over my head and neck. He said That's right you like it you're such a slut. He's fucking you good isn't he. I said Shut the door, Mickey, and wiped beer out of my eyes while James continued to fuck as if he were oblivious. Mickey slapped my cheek and said Shut up shut the fuck up. I said Okay and stared at him impassively. James fucked. Mickey opened the back door of the car so he could reach me better because the seat was reclined. He poured beer on me and hit my face and called me a bitch and hit my face, and I thought about her sleeping in her dad's living room half an hour away. I wondered which pajamas she was wearing and if he had found her missing favorite stuffed fox yet. After James got out of me and out of the car I quit using drugs and started parking in front of the restaurant so that when my shift was over I wouldn't have to walk past anyone who might offer me a beer, a drag, or a bump, or tell me they wanted their duck sicked.

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Yesterday Danny walked through the mother station—what we call the area in the back where we make tea and coffee and prep bread baskets—singing *Fuckin shiiiiiiiit, fuckin shiiiiiiiiit* to the tune of the *Rocky* theme. He went into the employee bathroom, where he shaves every day before service while conferring with one or the other of his inner circle. When he came out he said, as he adjusted his tie, Fuckin suck my balls, bitches. I'm starvin.

He strides lankily through the main dining room around five p.m. every day, half-dressed in his suit trousers and a Yankees T-shirt. He sees everything. He can tell if you're chewing gum from all the way across the cavernous dining room, which we keep so dark we have to give the guests flashlights to read the menu. He hates it when you don't make sure there's enough room to work around your tables—at the height of dinner service sometimes you have only six inches of space between chair backs, and the path from the kitchen line to the farthest tables becomes labyrinthine if not unnavigable. Danny will walk past your five-top and say Sister-love, would you please scoot this fucker a cunt hair to the right so we don't dump mac 'n' cheese all over the fat-ass in seat two?

Miguel Loera will be sending out the mac 'n' cheese when dinner service starts, but right now he's talking to one of the other servers about Chivas, the fútbol team favored and followed by most of our kitchen staff. Miguel runs the kitchen line for Chef. He is a magician, he never fucks up. He calls me Maestra, because I sometimes wear lentes that make me look bookish. I call him Miguelito or Maestro. He always leaves the second button on his chef's coat unbuttoned, for luck. When I first see him in the afternoon as I walk past the kitchen I'll catch his eye and pat my heart, where that button rests on his coat, in a gesture of solidarity. Yesterday he asked me if I had a good time with my family for Easter. Did you find eggs? he asked. You kid look for the little huevos? I said, Yes, we looked for little huevos. Did you look for eggs? I asked. No, he said, I no look. Ah, I said, but did someone look for your little huevos? Yes, he said with a grin, someone find my little huevos and they eat them.

When he calls me to run food he always says Maestra, don't hate me, you take one mash and one mush to twenty-three please. Or Maestra, ¿sabes que te amo, verdad? I do anything for you; just do this one poquito thing for me please. Sometimes he sneaks me a crab cocktail at the end of the night because he knows I love it, the tender jumbo lump crabmeat lightly dressed with lemon and parsley, a bit of cocktail sauce on the side.

Often the Mexicans ask me if I am enojada, or ¿Por qué estás triste, Mari? they wonder. ¿Que te molesta, Mariquita? It's because I'm perpetually lost in thought and wear a sunken, anxious face. I say No, I'm not mad. I'm not sad either. Nothing's bothering me. Miguel asks me Maestra, what are you thinking about? He doesn't love you anymore? I say He never loved me, he just fucks me. Miguel tells me that last year the woman he loved was pregnant with twins, his first children. For reasons no sabemos she decided to have an abortion and she left him. He tells me he couldn't work, he would cry while he was running the line every day, every night he would get so drunk. He kept trying to quit but Danny wouldn't let him. He says to me And now, Maestra, I'm fine. See? Look at me. I want to die then. But now—what can you do? Stop thinking about it, thinking is no good for you. I say Okay, Maestro, claro. No más thinking.

He's right, it's important to buck up every night and breathe deeply and be happy for the people so they'll want to believe you when you call the $140 Kobe filet the best beef in the world and promise it will actually melt in their mouths. You have to stay bright to get them on a bottle of Caymus or Cakebread, you can't be lurking in the back of your melancholy head. Sometimes I think this is why Danny says Suck my balls whenever I walk past him—it's spoken with the utmost affection and the utmost defiance. When he says Suck it he's saying It's a circus, honey-love, so fuck those motherfuckers. And when my retort is Get it out I'm saying Here we are being hard and relentlessly dazzling in spite of whatever shit. We are saying to each other If you have an affliction, any remorse or anguish, eat it, drink it, snort it, fuck it, use it, suck it, kill it.

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