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— FALL 2020 —



What Will You Read Next?



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Fall 2020 Debut Fiction Sampler

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A NOVEL



The
Push

Ashley
Audrain

VIKING

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Your house glows at night like everything inside is on fire.

The drapes she chose for the windows look like linen. Expensive linen. The weave is loose enough that I can usually read your mood. I can watch the girl flip her ponytail while she finishes homework. I can watch the little boy toss tennis balls at the twelve-foot ceiling while your wife lunges around the living room in leggings, reversing the day's mess. Toys back in the basket. Pillows back on the couch.

Tonight, though, you've left the drapes open. Maybe to see the snow falling. Maybe so your daughter could look for reindeer. She's long stopped believing, but she will pretend for you. Anything for you.

You've all dressed up. The children are in matching plaid, sitting on the leather ottoman as your wife takes their picture with her phone. The girl is holding the boy's hand. You're fiddling with the record player at the back of the room and your wife is speaking to you, but you hold up a finger—you've almost got it. The girl jumps up and your wife, she sweeps up the boy, and they spin. You lift a drink, Scotch, and sip it once, twice, and slink from the record like it's a sleeping baby. That's how you always start to dance. You take him. He throws his head back. You tip him upside down. Your daughter reaches up for Daddy's kiss and your wife holds your drink for you. She sways over

to the tree and adjusts a string of lights that isn't sitting quite right. And then you all stop and lean toward one another and shout something in unison, some word, perfectly timed, and then you all move again—this is a song you know well. Your wife slips out of the room and her son's face follows robotically. I remember that feeling. Of being the needed one.

Matches. She comes back to light the candles on the decorated mantel and I wonder if the snaking fir boughs are real, if they smell like the tree farm. I let myself imagine, for a moment, watching those boughs go up in flames while you all sleep tonight. I imagine the warm, butter-yellow glow of your house turning to a hot, crackling red.

The boy has picked up an iron poker and the girl gently takes it away before you or your wife notice. The good sister. The helper. The protector.

I *don't normally watch* for this long, but you're all so beautiful tonight and I can't bring myself to leave. The snow, the kind that sticks, the kind she'll roll into snowmen in the morning to please her little brother. I turn on my wipers, adjust the heat, and notice the clock change from 7:29 to 7:30. This is when you'd have read her *The Polar Express*.

Your wife, she's in the chair now, and she's watching the three of you bounce around the room. She laughs and collects her long, loose curls to the side. She smells your drink and puts it down. She smiles. Your back is to her so you can't see what I can, that she's holding her stomach with one hand, that she rubs herself ever so slightly and then looks down, that she's lost in the thought of what's growing inside her. They are cells. But they are everything. You turn around and her attention is pulled back to the room. To the people she loves.

She will tell you tomorrow morning.

I still know her so well.

I look down to put on my gloves. When I look back up the girl is standing at your open front door. Her face is half lit by the lantern above your house number. The plate she's holding is stacked with carrots and cookies. You'll leave crumbs on the tile floor of the foyer. You'll play along and so will she.

Now she's looking at me sitting in my car. She shivers. The dress your wife bought her is too small and I can see that her hips are growing, that her chest is blooming. With one hand she carefully pulls her ponytail over her shoulder and it's more the gesture of a woman than a girl.

For the first time in her life I think our daughter looks like me.

I put down the car window and I lift my hand, a hello, a secret hello. She places the plate at her feet and stands again to look at me before she turns around to go inside. To her family. I watch for the drapes to be yanked closed, for you to come to the door to see why the hell I am parked outside your home on a night like tonight. And what, really, could I say? I was lonely? I missed her? I deserved to be the mother inside your glowing house?

Instead she prances back into the living room, where you've coaxed your wife from the chair. While you dance together, close, feeling up the back of her shirt, our daughter takes the boy's hand and leads him to the center of the living-room window. An actor hitting her mark on the stage. They were framed so precisely.

He looks just like Sam. He has his eyes. And that wave of dark hair that ends in a curl, the curl I wrapped around my finger over and over again.

I feel sick.

Our daughter is staring out the window looking at me, her hands

on your son's shoulders. She bends down and kisses him on the cheek. And then again. And then again. The boy likes the affection. He is used to it. He is pointing to the falling snow but she won't look away from me. She rubs the top of his arms as though she's warming him up. Like a mother would do.

You come to the window and kneel down to the boy's level. You look out and then you look up. My car doesn't catch your eye. You point to the snowflakes like your son, and you trace a path across the sky with your finger. You're talking about the sleigh. About the reindeer. He's searching the night, trying to see what you see. You flick him playfully under the chin. Her eyes are still fixed on me. I find myself sitting back in my seat. I swallow and finally look away from her. She always wins.

When I look back she's still there, watching my car.

I think she might reach for the curtain, but she doesn't. My eyes don't leave her this time. I pick up the thick stack of paper beside me on the passenger seat and feel the weight of my words.

I've come here to give this to you.

This is my side of the story.

1

You slid your chair over and tapped my textbook with the end of your pencil and I stared at the page, hesitant to look up. “Hello?” I had answered you like a phone call. This made you laugh. And so we sat there, giggling, two strangers in a school library, studying for the same elective subject. There must have been hundreds of students in the class—I had never seen you before. The curls in your hair fell over your eyes and you twirled them with your pencil. You had such a peculiar name. You walked me home later in the afternoon and we were quiet with each other. You didn’t hide how smitten you were, smiling right at me every so often; I looked away each time. I had never experienced attention like that from anyone before. You kissed my hand outside my dorm and this made us laugh all over again.

S*oon we were* twenty-one and we were inseparable. We had less than a year left until we graduated. We spent it sleeping together in my raft of a dorm bed, and studying at opposite ends of the couch with our legs intertwined. We’d go out to the bar with your friends,

but we always ended up home early, in bed, in the novelty of each other's warmth. I barely drank, and you'd had enough of the party scene—you only wanted me. Nobody in my world seemed to mind much. I had a small circle of friends who were more like acquaintances. I was so focused on maintaining my grades for my scholarship that I didn't have the time or the interest for a typical college social life. I suppose I hadn't grown very close to anyone in those years, not until I met you. You offered me something different. We slipped out of the social orbit and were happily all each other needed.

The comfort I found in you was consuming—I had nothing when I met you, and so you effortlessly became my everything. This didn't mean you weren't worthy of it—you were. You were gentle and thoughtful and supportive. You were the first person I'd told that I wanted to be a writer, and you replied, "I can't imagine you being anyone else." I reveled in the way girls looked at us, like they had something to be jealous about. I smelled your head of waxy dark hair while you slept at night and traced the line of your fuzzy jaw to wake you up in the morning. You were an addiction.

For my birthday, you wrote down one hundred things you loved about me. *14. I love that you snore a little bit right when you fall asleep. 27. I love the beautiful way you write. 39. I love tracing my name on your back. 59. I love sharing a muffin with you on the way to class. 72. I love the mood you wake up in on Sundays. 80. I love watching you finish a good book and then hold it to your chest at the end. 92. I love what a good mother you'll be one day.*

"Why do you think I'll be a good mother?" I put down the list and felt for a moment like maybe you didn't know me at all.

"Why wouldn't you be a good mother?" You poked me playfully in the belly. "You're caring. And sweet. I can't wait to have little babies with you."

There was nothing to do but force myself to smile.
I'd never met someone with a heart as eager as yours.

O*ne day you'll understand*, Blythe. The women in this family . . .
we're different.”

I can still see my mother's tangerine lipstick on the cigarette filter. The ash falling into the cup, swimming in the last sip of my orange juice. The smell of my burnt toast.

You only asked about my mother, Cecilia, on a few occasions. I told you only the facts: (1) she left when I was eleven years old, (2) I only ever saw her twice after that, and (3) I had no idea where she was.

You knew I was holding back more, but you never pressed—you were scared of what you might hear. I understood. We're all entitled to have certain expectations of each other and of ourselves. Motherhood is no different. We all expect to have, and to marry, and to be, good mothers.

1939–1958

Etta was born on the very same day World War II began. She had eyes like the Atlantic Ocean and was red-faced and pudgy from the beginning.

She fell in love with the first boy she ever met, the town doctor's son. His name was Louis, and he was polite and well spoken, not common among the boys she knew, and he wasn't the type to care that Etta hadn't been born with the luck of good looks. Louis walked Etta to school with one hand behind his back, from their very first day of school to their last. And Etta was charmed by things like that.

Her family owned hundreds of acres of cornfields. When Etta turned eighteen and told her father she wanted to marry Louis, he insisted his new son-in-law had to learn how to farm. He had no sons of his own, and he wanted Louis to take over the family business. But Etta thought her father just wanted to prove a point to the young man: farming was hard and respectable work. It wasn't for the weak. And it certainly wasn't for an intellectual. Etta had chosen someone who was nothing like her father.

Louis had planned to be a doctor like his own father was, and had a scholarship waiting for medical school. But he wanted Etta's hand in marriage more than he wanted a medical license. Despite Etta's pleas to take it easy on him, her father worked Louis to the bone. He was up

at four o'clock every morning and out into the dewy fields. Four in the morning until dusk, and as Etta liked to remind people, he never complained once. Louis sold the medical bag and textbooks that his own father had passed down to him, and he put the money in a jar on their kitchen counter. He told Etta it was the start of a college fund for their future children. Etta thought this said a lot about the selfless kind of man he was.

One fall day, before the sun rose, Louis was severed by the beater on a silage wagon. He bled to death, alone in the cornfield. Etta's father found him and sent her to cover up the body with a tarp from the barn. She carried Louis's mangled leg back to the farmhouse and threw it at her father's head while he was filling a bucket of water meant to wash away the blood on the wagon.

She hadn't told her family yet about the child growing inside her. She was a big woman, seventy pounds overweight, and hid the pregnancy well. The baby girl, Cecilia, was born four months later on the kitchen floor in the middle of a snowstorm. Etta stared at the jar of money on the counter above her while she pushed the baby out.

Etta and Cecilia lived quietly at the farmhouse and rarely ventured into town. When they did, it wasn't hard to hear everyone's whispers about the woman who "suffered from the nerves." In those days, not much more was said—not much more was suspected. Louis's father gave Etta's mother a regular supply of sedatives to give to Etta as she saw fit. And so Etta spent most days in the small brass bed in the room she grew up in and her mother took care of Cecilia.

But Etta soon realized she would never meet another man lying doped up like that in bed. She learned to function well enough and eventually started to take care of Cecilia, pushing her around town in the stroller while the poor girl screamed for her grandmother. Etta told people she'd been plagued with a terrible chronic stomach pain, that she

couldn't eat for months on end, and that's how she'd got so thin. Nobody believed this, but Etta didn't care about their lazy gossip. She had just met Henry.

Henry was new to town and they went to the same church. He managed a staff of sixty people at a candy manufacturing plant. He was sweet to Etta from the minute they met—he loved babies and Cecilia was particularly cute, so she turned out not to be the problem everyone said she'd be.

Before long, Henry bought them a Tudor-style house with mint-green trim in the middle of town. Etta left the brass bed for good and gained back all the weight she'd lost. She threw herself into making a home for her family. There was a well-built porch with a swing, lace curtains on every window, and chocolate chip cookies always in the oven. One day their new living-room furniture was delivered to the wrong house, and the neighbor let the delivery man set it all up in her basement even though she hadn't ordered it. When Etta caught wind of this, she ran down the street after the truck, yelling profanity in her housecoat and curlers. This gave everyone a good laugh, including, eventually, Etta.

She tried very hard to be the woman she was expected to be.

A good wife. A good mother.

Everything seemed like it would be just fine.

2

Things that come to mind when I think about the beginning of us:

Y*our mother and father.* This might not have been as important to other people, but with you came a family. My only family. The generous gifts, the airplane tickets to be with you all somewhere sunny on vacation. Their house smelled like warm, laundered linens, always, and I never wanted to leave when we visited. The way your mother touched the ends of my hair made me want to crawl onto her lap. Sometimes it felt like she loved me as much as she loved you.

Their unquestioning acceptance about where my father was, and the lack of judgment when he declined their invitation to visit for the holidays, was a kindness I was grateful for. Cecilia, of course, was never discussed; you'd thoughtfully prefaced this with them before you brought me home. (*Blythe is wonderful. She really is. But just so you know . . .*) My mother wouldn't have been someone you gossiped about among yourselves; none of you had an appetite for anything but the pleasant.

You were all so perfect.

You called your little sister “darling” and she adored you. You phoned home every night and I would listen from the hallway, wishing I could hear what your mother said that made you laugh like you did. You went home every other weekend to help your dad around the house. You hugged. You babysat your small cousins. You knew your mother’s banana bread recipe. You gave your parents a card every year on their anniversary. My parents had never even mentioned their wedding.

My father. He didn’t return my message informing him I wouldn’t be home for Thanksgiving that year, but I lied to you and said he was happy I’d met someone, and that he sends his best wishes to your family. The truth was we hadn’t spoken much since you and I met. We’d communicated mostly through our answering machines, and even then it had become a series of stale, generic exchanges that I would have been embarrassed for you to hear. I’m still not sure how we got there, he and I. The lie was necessary, like the scattering of other lies I’d told so that you didn’t suspect just how fucked up my family was. Family was too important to you—neither of us could risk how the whole truth about mine might change the way you saw me.

T*hat first apartment.* I loved you the most there when it was morning. The way you pulled the sheet over you like a hood and slept some more, the thick boyish smell you left on our pillowcases. I was waking up early then, before the sun most of the time, to write at the end of the galley kitchen that was always so damn cold. I wore your bathrobe and drank tea from a ceramic cup I’d painted for you at one of those pottery places. You’d call my name later on, when the floors had warmed and the light from behind the blinds was enough

for you to see the details of my flesh. You'd pull me back in and we'd experiment—you were bold and assertive and understood what my body was capable of before I was. You fascinated me. Your confidence. Your patience. The primal need you had for me.

N*ights with Grace.* She was the one friend from college I stayed in touch with after we graduated. I didn't let on how much I liked her because you seemed a bit jealous of her time with me and thought we drank too much, although I gave her very little as far as female friendships go. But still, you gave us both flowers on Valentine's Day the year she was single. I invited her to dinner once a month or so, and you'd sit as our third on the garbage pail flipped upside down. You'd always stop for the good bottle of wine on your way home from work. When the gossip took over, when she brought out the cigarettes, you'd excuse yourself politely and open a book. One night we heard you speaking to your sister on the balcony while we smoked inside (imagine?). She was going through a breakup and she had called her brother, her confidant. Grace asked me what was wrong with you. Bad in bed? Temper? There had to be something because no man was this perfect. But there wasn't. Not then. Not that I understood. I used the word "luck." I was lucky. I didn't have much, but I had you.

O*ur work.* We didn't speak about it often. I envied your rising success and you knew it—you were sensitive to the differences in our careers, our incomes. You were making money and I was dreaming. I had made next to nothing since graduating, except from a few small freelance projects, but you supported us generously and gave me a credit card, saying only: "Use it for whatever you need." By then

you'd been hired at the architecture firm and promoted twice in the time it took me to write three short stories. Unpublished ones. You would leave for work looking like you belonged to someone else.

My rejection letters came in like they were supposed to—this was part of the process, you reminded me, kindly and often. *It'll happen.* Your unconditional belief in me felt magical. I desperately wanted to prove to myself that I was as good as you thought I was. “Read to me. Whatever you wrote today. Please!” I always made you beg and then you'd chuckle when I feigned exasperation and agreed. Our silly routine. You'd curl up on the couch after dinner, exhausted, your office clothes still on. You would close your eyes while I read you my work and you would smile at all of my best lines.

The night I showed you my first published story, your hand shook as you took the heavy-stock magazine. I've thought of that often. That pride you had in me. I would see that shaking hand again years later, holding her tiny wet head, marked with my blood.

But before then:

You asked me to marry you on my twenty-fifth birthday.

With a ring I sometimes still wear on my left hand.

NO HEAVEN FOR GOOD BOYS



A NOVEL

KEISHA BUSH

No Heaven for Good Boys is a work of fiction. Apart from the well-known actual people, events, and locales that figure in the narrative, all names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to current events or locales, or to living persons, is entirely coincidental.

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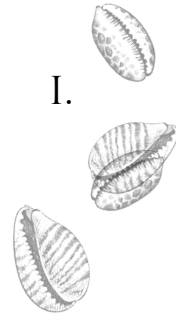
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Ibrahimah slumps against the trunk of an ancient baobab tree and sets his red tin can between his feet. The tree’s gnarled, flowerless branches twist and bend over a wide, empty road with only a single white line running down its middle. It is late morning and the road is quiet, free of people, traffic, houses, or businesses. Just dry, parched earth stretching as far as the eye can see, with a scattering of baobab trees. Above, the sky is overcast and gray, but the air is warm. While his cousin Étienne and the other boys from the daara debate how to spend the afternoon, Ibrahimah’s eyelids hang heavy and his thoughts drift to his mother. The warmth of her touch, the sound of her voice, and the scent of her skin exist now only in memory.

Just as his daydream is about to take full possession of his consciousness, a ball of fire streaks toward him, landing on his knee. His slack muscles spring tight and his almond eyes stretch wide as teacups—the apparition is a tiny red bird cocking its head, as if to get a good look at him. Not knowing whether to shoo the bird away or call for his cousin to witness the spectacle before him, he watches quietly and hopes that it is some kind of fairy, like the one his sisters told him would come for a tooth beneath his pillow.

“Fairy godmother?” Ibrahimah squeaks in Wolof.

The creature shakes its small head.

“You can understand me?”

The bird moves its head up and down.

Ibrahimah’s mouth forms a circle and his eyebrows arch.

“Are you here to help me?”

The bird tilts its head back and sings a melody that the boy has heard before. He sees his village, Saloulou, and his mother flipping small pieces of lamb on the grill. His sisters chase one another, pulling the pigtails they can catch, and his father carries a box of vegetables from their farm. The image of home gives way to the small red bird’s fleeing tail feathers. Ibrahimah’s eyes linger on his knee, where the bird had landed, then he turns toward his cousin, who stands beneath another tree several feet away, out of earshot.

“Étienne! Did you see?” Ibrahimah yells, jumping to his feet.

Étienne turns away from the conversation he is having with Abdoulaye and Fatik, two other boys from their house. “See what?” Étienne shouts back.

“The bird! On my knee! He could understand when I talked.”

Ibrahimah races over to explain.

“So do you want to go or not?” Abdoulaye asks.

“Go where?” Ibrahimah asks, his mind still focused on the bird.

“The zoo!” Abdoulaye says, scratching at a patch of eczema on his bald scalp.

“You should have seen the bird on my leg! It talked to me!”

A silver Mercedes Benz passes by, its tires sticky against the newly paved road. Ibrahimah turns his head, but the car is going too fast for him to ever have a chance at begging from its occupants.

“Cousin, the day is passing, and once people get out of school and work, they may not let us in,” Étienne says, impatience lurking at the corners of his mouth.

Ibrahimah’s eyes drift back toward the empty sky. “You missed it,” he mumbles, following behind the three older boys.

Ibrahimah stands below the chipped blue arch that poses as the entrance to the Parc Zoologique in Hann Mariste, on the eastern rim

of Dakar. The zoo is a little over an hour away by foot from Marabout Ahmed's house in Ouakam, but the boys rarely abandon their normal route unless they hear of a good opportunity like free food, or a chance to make money. Excursions like this take too much time, and as the Americans like to say, time is money. But with Marabout gone, the hours from sunrise to sunset belong to the boys, and not even Étienne has been to the zoo before in the five years he has lived in Dakar. Ibrahimah's cousin walks up to the window now and strains his neck to speak to the woman sitting on the stool inside the booth.

"*Niaata* for four boys?"

The young woman looks down at Étienne.

"Six cent."

Étienne begins to count out six hundred francs from the coins in his palm, but the young woman slaps her hand on the counter to get his attention.

"No, just go in," she says, pointing to the black gate that spontaneously clicks open. Étienne looks up at her in surprise. She replies with a wink of her eye.

"Give them a tour. The rush won't arrive until later, when school is out," she calls over to a man standing on the other side of the gate, wearing a dark-green park uniform.

The man pulls the gate further open. Excited, Ibrahimah pushes past Abdoulaye and Fatik and bumps into the slim, dark-skinned park ranger. Lush tall trees sit behind the man, and a dirt path. It doesn't look like anything exists inside. Ibrahimah is curious to see what lies within.

"Are you ready?" the man asks.

"Yes!" Ibrahimah squeaks in excitement.

"Have you seen lions before?"

Ibrahimah shakes his head no. The others mimic him.

"Pumas?"

"No."

"Gorillas?"

The boys look at one another.

“Hyenas?”

Silence again. The man chuckles and motions for the boys to follow him.

“What do I smell?” Ibrahimah asks, scrunching up his nose after taking a few steps.

“The chimpanzees,” the guide tells him as they come upon a large metal cage to their right.

A large chimp gazes at the boys in boredom.

“Wow, it’s a monkey!” Ibrahimah says, moving closer to the cage to stare at the animal. He has seen small monkeys climbing in the trees back home, but he did not know they grew to be so tall and fat.

“Dance, dance,” the man instructs the animal, clapping his hands.

The chimp stands up and flaps its arms, then flips over backward and swings itself toward them, sticking his arm through the fence. The man hands Fatik, the boy standing closest to him, a piece of banana from the bucket near Tiki’s cage. Fatik pops the banana into his mouth and chews without a second thought. The chimp screams at them, jumps up, and bangs its hands against the fence.

“No, no!” the man says, stepping forward to hand the chimp a chunk of banana. “You’re supposed to give Tiki the banana after he dances. He dances for the food.”

Fatik’s eyes open wide with embarrassment as Ibrahimah, Étienne, and Abdoulaye fall into a fit of laughter.

“Dance, dance,” Ibrahimah instructs Fatik.

“Shut up.” Fatik pouts.

The man digs out an additional four bruised bananas from the bucket and hands them to the boys.

“These are for you to eat.”

Ibrahimah sets his banana in his red tin can for later.

“Dance, dance,” Ibrahimah shouts to Tiki.

The chimpanzee stands up, flaps his arms, does a half flip, and then swings his body over to the gate and shoves his arm out, palm facing up. Ibrahimah accepts a chunk of banana from the guide and passes it to the animal. Tiki’s palm feels cold and rough, and he meets Tiki’s eyes for a second before the monkey swings away

again. The guide ushers the group along, with Ibrahimah bringing up the rear of the pack.

He whispers the word “chimpanzee” to himself as the guide winds them down a narrow dirt path hugged by trees and plush grasses. The low growl of a beast rises up from behind a small group of park rangers and Ibrahimah’s heart beats faster in anticipation. Within another cage, this one smaller than the chimpanzee’s home, is a large four-legged golden-brown animal. Its skin is smooth and taut, its square jawline similar to Fatik’s face.

“This is a lion. He is Lion King. King of the jungle,” the guide says to the astonished faces of his group.

“Oh!” Étienne says.

The lion paces back and forth about ten feet, the length of its mosaic-tiled home, in a hurried manner.

“Why does he do that?” Étienne asks.

“He is restless,” the guide says. “*Calmez-vous, Lion King. Calmez-vous.*”

The lion growls, then releases a deep sigh of resignation and plops his large muscled body onto the floor.

“He is sad,” Ibrahimah whispers.

“Why?” Étienne asks.

“This is not his home, just like Dakar is not our home,” Ibrahimah says, and walks away leaving the group and the beast behind.

The guide tells him to hold on and wait for him, but Ibrahimah continues to walk; he is too impatient to wait. He wants to see everything, right now. His sisters would love to see all of these wild animals. Fatou, his eldest sister, would surely be able to identify each of them from her studies in school, and Binta, the youngest girl, would be scared, with Aisha somewhere in between trying to be brave like Fatou but really feeling scared like Binta.

Ibrahimah approaches a cage with a golden-brown beast standing inside its metal-and-ceramic holding pen. This animal does not have a large furry sprout of hair framing its face; instead it’s got a bald head, like himself and Étienne. He wonders if this creature is

as unhappy as the Lion King. When the group catches up to Ibrahimah he turns and asks the guide, "Is this the Lion Queen?"

The man raises his eyes in amusement.

"Not quite," the ranger says, "but you are a smart one, young man. This is a female lion. She does not have the large mane as the adult male lion does. Her name is Nala."

Ibrahimah steps closer to the cage, and the lion lets a low growl escape from the back of her throat. Before the guide can stop him, Ibrahimah grabs onto a bar of her cage. She looks at him, her head tipping to the side for a fleeting second before she approaches.

"No!" the guide yells out.

The lion licks Ibrahimah's fingers and he giggles. He lifts his hand from the fence and sticks his arm inside, petting the creature's head with the light touch of a child. The lion turns her head into his arm and licks his wrist. The guide snatches Ibrahimah away from the cage.

"That is not safe, young one. You have to behave or the tour will end early."

Nala roars and jumps up onto the fence, standing on her hind legs, front paws resting on the bars.

"This is not your baby," the ranger says to her, motioning toward Ibrahimah as he pulls him away from the cage.

Nala roars again, louder.

Ibrahimah turns his head as the man pulls him away and catches the lion's eye. She drops down from the fence and watches him before slinking away.

"The animal likes you, Ibrahimah!" Étienne exclaims, resting his arm across the back of Ibrahimah's shoulders.

"She does!" Ibrahimah says as he peels his banana. He offers Étienne a piece but his cousin shakes his head no.

"But I guess you should be careful like the man says. Life would be much harder if you only had one arm," Étienne says.

Ibrahimah gasps but then sees that Étienne is joking. Still, he cannot deny that his cousin is telling the truth.

"Remember when that dog attacked the boy?" Étienne asks.

"Yes, what about it?"

“That’s what I’m talking about. The lion is much bigger than the dog.”

“Ton-ton, can a lion eat a dog?” Ibrahimah asks the guide.

“Like that,” the guide says with a snap of his fingers.

Perhaps the animals are spirits here to protect Ibrahimah, because the lady lion surely was not interested in eating him. The next cage they approach has an animal that looks like Nala but has dark spots.

“This is an African lion,” Abdoulaye proclaims with authority, mimicking their guide with a puffed-up posture.

“How do you know?” Étienne asks.

“His skin has black dots on it.”

That does not make sense to Ibrahimah. The lion’s skin would have to be the color of all the dots to be African.

“No, no, little ones,” the tour guide interjects, “all of these animals are African, and this one is a cheetah. He is a fearsome beast. He runs faster than any animal alive. He can get to top speeds faster than most cars.”

The animal walks around his small pen in a slow methodical manner. If only Ibrahimah had the power of a cheetah, he would return home and nothing could stop him.

“How did you capture this cheetah if he’s the fastest animal alive?” Étienne asks.

“The only way man knows,” the guide tells them. “With guns. They shot him with medicine so strong that he fell to the ground. One minute he was king, and the next he was like the rest of the animals here. At the mercy of mankind.”

“Does he ever get to run?” Ibrahimah asks.

“If we let him out, he would run and never return. But he has been away from his home so long that he would just terrorize the people of Dakar, because he has no way of finding his way back to South Africa.”

South Africa is as far away as America. Two years ago, his sister Aisha drew a map of the world at school and brought it home to put up on the wall in the bedroom that he shared with his three sisters. He would gaze at the picture, amazed at how many other places

existed in the world. One day, Fatou showed him where South Africa was on the map, although he was more interested in learning about America. His mother was always talking about a girl from America who had lived in their village many years before.

“The girl was so nice,” his mother would say.

His mother would be proud of him and the new things he learned today. Soon, he will return home, and when he does, he will tell her everything he saw, how the lion licked his hand, the cheetah couldn't outrun its captors, and the red bird sat on his knee.

II.



The morning air is cool against the nape of Ibrahimah’s neck; his body aches in symphony with the churns of hunger that assault his belly. Marabout Ahmed has returned from his travels, and the lazy days of the week before, and the visit to the zoo, are but a distant memory. Across the street, nestled beneath the shade of a large tree, sits a vendor with a bounty of fruit at his wooden stand. Ibrahimah salivates at the sight of the bright-yellow bananas and plump, juicy mangoes. He does not have enough money to buy any food, as he has yet to meet his daily quota of three hundred francs for Marabout Ahmed. He assesses the vendor; the man seems nice enough to possibly give him a piece of fruit for free. His eyes linger on the colorful ensemble of food, but before he can ask, someone calls out.

“Boy!”

Ibrahimah turns his head in the direction of the voice. Two older Talibé boys are running toward him and his heart stops a moment; they aren’t brothers from his house. With mouths wide, baring teeth, he knows these boys are determined to take what he’s got—even if it’s not much. He flees, turning down Rue Deux, a quiet residential street lined with single-family homes, but the two boys are not far behind, their legs are longer than his. Clouds of dust trail

behind him as he crosses over asphalt to dirt roads. Pebbles and stones scrape at his callused soles.

“Stop now and we won’t beat you!” one of them calls out.

Clutching his red tin tomato can in one hand, a twenty-five-franc bronze coin in the other, Ibrahimah dashes across the busy road with nary a glance to check for oncoming cars. A moment’s hesitation would give the boys the gain they need to catch him.

The four sugar cubes that he’d been saving in his can fall out of it. His heart skips another beat as he questions whether to stop and pick them up. Marabout takes four cubes with his morning café, but gifts don’t replace his daily quota of three hundred francs. Money is everything. Ibrahimah doesn’t stop.

The billowing dust sticks to his sweat-drenched body. His oversized T-shirt, his only piece of clothing, is filthy and plastered to his frame, but he’s lived out on these streets too long to be ashamed of what he looks like. He glances behind him once more to check on the boys. To his surprise they’ve stopped to pick up the fallen sugar cubes. With a bolt of strength, he pushes his body harder and takes the next bend in the road, disappearing behind La Piscine Olympique.

A quarter mile later he stops, on Rue PE Vingt-Trois, to catch his breath behind a navy-blue Peugeot, parked up on the sidewalk beneath the shade of a tree. Wedged between the car and the cement wall that caches its owner’s house from passersby, he replays his narrow getaway in his head. He peeks out to see if the two boys are still in pursuit, but after several minutes pass, he’s convinced the coast is clear. He abandons his quiet hideaway in search of rich people and his cousin, who was supposed to come back and get him.

The wide one-way street, lined with two-story houses, soon fills with the sound of young Wolof men dragging their plastic-flip-flopped feet across the pavement, calling out the inventory of the wares they have for sale. The aroma of hot shawarmas and fresh-baked chocolate croissants from Les Ambassades entices anyone within thirty feet of the restaurant. Cars honk their horns incessantly with impatience. Sizing up the pedestrians, Ibrahimah spots

a young white woman bouncing along to a separate beat all her own. Checking the road to make sure there are no other Talibé around, he approaches her.

“Money for my marabout,” he mumbles in Mandinka.

When tired, Ibrahimah reverts to his native tongue without even realizing it. The young American woman looks down at him. She doesn’t need to understand the words. No one can mistake the sight of a Talibé: the economy-sized red tin tomato can, bare callused feet, shaved heads patched with eczema, skinny bodies, and faces of children without love.

“*Je n’ai pas d’argent,*” she says, looking straight ahead as if he isn’t there.

“Money for my marabout,” he mumbles again, this time in Wolof, the widely spoken dialect in Dakar. If he accepted every refusal he received, he’d never raise any money. His legs do triple time to keep pace with her long-legged strides.

“*Va-t’en!*” she snarls.

He’ll follow her to her destination if necessary. Foreigners don’t like to be followed, and just as he expects, within moments she heaves a sigh of exasperation and digs through her straw bag with the letters J C R E W at the bottom. Ibrahimah doesn’t know what the letters say but he assumes it’s English, because that is what Americans and British people speak.

She drops a hundred and fifty francs into the red tin can, ignoring his outstretched hand. Without thanking her, Ibrahimah turns to the next person on the street, but the young Ivorian college student with the armful of textbooks walks past him in the direction of Dakar University. A ghost among thieves, beggars, and vagabonds, Ibrahimah is months past the hurt of being ignored. He walks farther down the road and approaches a Senegalese woman selling peanuts on the sidewalk beneath a tree that offers her thin shreds of shade. Her dark, smooth skin is taut and healthy; she looks like the women in his village. She offers him a small packet of peanuts. He takes it and offers her one of his coins but she tells him to keep it.

“Thank you, ta-ta.”

“What village are you from?” she asks.

“Saloulou,” he says, proud that he remembers his home.

“My village is near there. You remind me of my son when he was your age.”

Ibrahimah sits down on the curb near the base of her table, eating the nuts. It’s high noon and the sun beats unrelentingly against the earth. Pedestrians and cars alike are few on the road during lunchtime. When the packet is half-finished, he twirls the plastic closed and sets it in his can. With a quick survey of the area to ensure that no Talibé are lurking nearby, he takes his money out of his can. He has three small silver franc pieces and a big bronze coin—almost enough for Marabout. Ibrahimah remembers back when he was just a baby and did not know anything about money. He just liked how shiny the coins looked. Now he knows the value of a franc. He squints up at the sky and smiles. Soon he won’t have to care about money or his marabout. Ramadan is near, marking his seventh birthday. “One year,” his father told him before he left for Dakar with Marabout Ahmed. Just a year and then he can return home.

“Ibrahimah!”

He looks over to his right to see Étienne bounding down the road toward him.

“Étienne!” he cries, and jumps up from the curb.

Étienne slings his arm across Ibrahimah’s shoulders. “Where’d you go? I was looking all over for you.”

Ibrahimah relays the story of his narrow getaway to his older cousin.

“You’re lucky you run fast!”

“I ran faster than a cheetah,” Ibrahimah says, smiling.

“You can’t wander off like that. You were supposed to stay at the parking lot of On the Run. I can’t protect you if I don’t know where you are.”

Ibrahimah nods while keeping pace with Étienne’s longer legs. He got distracted thinking about his family, Marabout, and food. His mind goes to sleep during the day sometimes and when it wakes up everyone is gone.

They pass by a woman getting ready for the lunch rush and Ibra-

himah tugs on Étienne's arm. She has a table set back from the road and a small grill. The smell of roasting meat fills Ibrahimah's nostrils, and his mouth becomes wet.

"Maybe," Étienne says.

A dirty white hen runs by screaming as a rooster chases it around in circles, cock-a-doodle doodling. Étienne approaches the woman.

"Ta-ta, money for my marabout, or food?"

Étienne's eyes wander to the sizzling grill behind her. The short, stout woman wears a colorful head wrap that matches her green-and-yellow ensemble perfectly. Her round face is pleasant and her eyes twinkle when she speaks.

"You're the first person to ask me for food today. This is my *teranga* for the day," she says, handing Étienne a meat patty.

Étienne motions to Ibrahimah, who lingers behind. Noticing the tiny boy for the first time, the woman calls him over and also hands him a patty. Ibrahimah takes it and begins to devour it. The meat burns his mouth but he doesn't care. Étienne nudges him in the side.

"Say thank you. A rude Talibé is a hungry Talibé."

"Yah," Ibrahimah says with a mouth full of patty, the flavor of the perfectly seasoned ground lamb reminding him of his village. "Thank you, ta-ta."

The woman bends over and touches his cheek.

"Eat it slow to make it last." She turns back to her makeshift kitchen to flip the meat over. On a separate fire, hibiscus leaves are boiling. They will leave a dark-red tea that's sweetened and served on ice. An old blue sheet hangs above her table to protect hungry patrons from the piercing sun and suffocating car fumes.

The boys sit down behind a car, hidden from the street.

"I can eat these all day!" Ibrahimah exclaims, the flaky crust of the patty flying out of his mouth.

"Me too."

Ibrahimah's face turns solemn. "I don't like Marabout."

Étienne stops eating and looks away. "Marabout takes care of us."

"Let's go back to the village. It's better there."

“We can’t go back. Our papas have sent us here. We belong to Marabout Ahmed, he’s our teacher. You think about it too much,” Étienne says.

“I didn’t do anything bad. I don’t have to stay! My father said I can come home after a year. When Ramadan arrives again.”

Ibrahimah hits the ground with his free hand to make his point, but drops his meat patty in the process. Diligently picking the flaky food up with both hands, his panic passes once he resumes eating.

“We’re not here ‘cause we’ve been bad,” Étienne says, looking down at the last smithereens of his fataya. “We’re good Talibé. Marabout says good Talibé go to Paradise and we’ll get seventy-two virgins.”

“Twenty-seven what?”

“No, no. Seventy-two virgins. Good Muslims go to Paradise when they die.”

Ibrahimah frowns. “What’s a virgin?”

“A girl.”

“How many is seventy-two?”

“More than the Talibé at Marabout’s house.”

Ibrahimah scrunches up his face in disbelief. He does not want to live with seventy-two girls in Paradise. He and Étienne barely find enough food to feed themselves now. How is having to share food with seventy-two girls a reward for being good?

“Where’s Paradise?”

“In the sky.” Étienne points up to the cloudless blue space above them.

“Paradise! Where airplanes go?”

“Yeah,” Étienne says, as if he himself had planned it that way.

“I don’t want seventy-two dirgins. Would you be in Paradise with me?”

“It’s virgins. Yeah, I’ll be in Paradise with you.”

Ibrahimah looks over at an old abandoned truck set upon four cinder blocks, its wheels long gone.

“Why is everything so hard,” he whines, “and expensive?” Ibrahimah pops the last of his meat patty into his mouth, dusting his hands on his dirty shirt hem.

“I don’t know.” Étienne furrows his brow in thought. “It was like this before we got here.”

Ibrahimah stares blankly at the tire of the old car that hides them from any passersby and inquiring Talibé. He recalls standing in the kitchen with his mother and sisters, the feel of the flour on his fingers as he spread it across the counter before his mother slapped the wet dough down. The heat from the oven leaving his body sweaty, his belly always full of something good to eat.

“God must not like us.”

“Don’t say that, he loves you,” Étienne says, frowning.

“If he loved me, I would be in my village with my family. My mother and father love me. My sisters love me. Marabout doesn’t love me.”

“How can you know what God’s love is supposed to look like? God is bigger than Marabout. His love is stronger,” Étienne says, looking at Ibrahimah quizzically.

He rarely disagrees with his cousin, but there is nothing Étienne can say to change his mind. If God is so mighty, then he will return Ibrahimah home; until then it seems Marabout has an edge on God, and so believing in God is like believing his empty red tin tomato can will somehow produce food out of thin air and protect him from Marabout’s cane.

He gets up from the ground and surveys the road for the direction with the most opportunity. He had stopped depending on God months ago.

“Give me money,” Ibrahimah says to the passenger in the taxi, already scoping out the passenger in the next car. His red tin can presses against his chest in a tight hug.

Étienne nudges him.

“*Allahu Akbar*,” Étienne starts, reciting a verse of the Quran in Arabic while holding his hand out, palm facing up.

Ibrahimah picks it up about halfway in, mumbling over most of it. He doesn’t really see the point in trying to learn them, or recite them for that matter; people are going to give, or not, regardless of

how much of the prayer he knows. With a friendly face and an inviting smile, the British man searches through his satchel and hands each of them a hundred-franc piece, along with a banana for Étienne and an opened pack of cookies for Ibrahimah.

Over the next five hours, Ibrahimah follows Étienne's lead, repeating the same script coupled with empty thank-yous and tepid smiles. When the sun begins its descent, after a long day of work, the sidewalks fill with students, cashiers, errand boys, and street vendors walking four, five, and six miles home from downtown Dakar, forgoing the bus fare of one hundred fifty francs. By the time dusk finally settles, Ibrahimah, Étienne, and some of the other Talibé brothers from their house gather in the parking lot of the On the Run Gas Station & Food Plaza, one of the popular hangouts in midtown Dakar. The South African-owned plaza offers one of the few options for pizza and burgers in the neighborhood of Point E. Foreigners, university students, and locals fill the tables located on the outdoor covered porch to eat beef and chicken burgers, pizza, and calzones for dinner. A mini market sits between the two fast-food restaurants and offers a larger selection of yogurt, juice, soda, and other groceries than the local boutique does.

Cars line up to fill their tanks at the gas pump while hip-hop music plays over the parking lot. Those taking their pizza and burgers to go navigate through the bodies of Talibé boys and the scattering of Mauritanian and Senegalese women, begging with outstretched palms while the other hand straddles a toddler to their hips.

Étienne, a Talibé for more than five years now, taught Ibrahimah that he's better off getting someone's leftovers rather than spending the money he makes on food. Every coin earned is essential for surviving the day with Marabout. But right now, Ibrahimah would rather sleep than eat or beg for more money. He lies down on the sidewalk, next to the computer shop that sits directly across the street from the action in the parking lot of On the Run, and nods off to sleep.

"Boy. Get up. You shouldn't sleep on the curb like that," someone says, shaking Ibrahimah awake.

Ibrahimah opens his eyes. Above him, the wide, shiny face of the computer-store clerk looms just inches from his own. The pavement scratches at his cheek.

“Are you okay?” the clerk says, his eyes feigning concern.

Ibrahimah sits up. He doesn’t remember falling asleep. He rubs at his eyes and looks around before catching sight of Étienne, who beckons at him now in a hurried manner from across the street.

“Thank you, ton-ton,” Ibrahimah, still groggy from his nap, mumbles to the clerk.

He remembers to look both ways before propelling himself across the road.

“Come quick!” Étienne urges, once Ibrahimah is within earshot.

Étienne leads him to the far end of the parking lot, behind the food plaza, out of sight from the Rue de Ouakam, where they find several boys and a small bowl of rice. At the sight of food so near, his senses reawaken. He and Étienne wiggle their way into the circle, pushing and shouting as they clamor for a few handfuls of rice and fish bone. In just moments the bowl is scraped clean. Ibrahimah stands up, hungrier than before, when Étienne reaches into his can, and grabs a big shiny coin.

“No! Don’t take my money! Give it back.” Ibrahimah hits Étienne’s arm.

“No, Ibrahimah, we share,” Étienne says, holding it up above his head. “I gave when you didn’t have enough, remember? Don’t be a baby. You have enough.”

Étienne pushes Ibrahimah’s hands away, warding off his cousin’s flailing arms. Ibrahimah lunges at his cousin, his lips in a defiant pout.

“Marabout will beat me!”

“But I don’t have enough.”

“Give me my money. Here, I’ll give you these peanuts,” Ibrahimah says, shoving the half-empty packet of nuts at Étienne.

“Look”—Étienne waves the peanuts away—“I’ll buy you a Coca.”

Ibrahimah raises his eyebrows, his fist suspended in the air. A Coca is just what he could use right now.

“How much money do I have now?”

Étienne looks into Ibrahimah's can and grabs the coins, counting.

"Two hundred fifty."

"I need three hundred for Marabout!"

"I have even less—Marabout won't be mad if you're short. You're the baby. But if I'm short, I'll get beat. Plus, I'm sure you'll find more money before we get home, it's only *vingt-un heures*."

Ibrahimah snatches his can and stomps off. During the hour-and-a-half trek back to the two-room shanty Marabout rents in the working-class neighborhood of Ouakam, Ibrahimah contemplates how to get his money back from his cousin. Passing by a boutique, he stops short.

"I want my Coca!"

"Aye! Wait. I promised him Coca," Étienne calls out to the boys walking up ahead.

The group turns back and gathers in front of the boutique, waiting for the customer at the counter to finish.

"Give me a big coin," Étienne says, holding his hand out.

"What?" Ibrahimah asks, frowning at Étienne.

"I'm buying you Coca. Give me the money for it."

"No. You said you were buying me Coca after you took my big coin. Now do it! I can't give you more money!"

"Well, I don't have enough to buy you Coca, so I guess nothing for you."

"You're a liar. Give me back my coin!" Ibrahimah yells, pushing Étienne.

"No, you already gave it to me."

"You took it. You lie. No!"

The two cousins stand off like two rams ready for a showdown when the customer ahead of them, a light-skinned black man dressed in a dark-blue suit, crisp white shirt, and a crimson blood-red tie, turns to walk past them. His dark-brown leather shoes are shiny even on the sandy walkway. Étienne rushes up behind the man, leaving Ibrahimah with dried snot crusted on his upper lip and a frown.

"*Bonsoir, monsieur, l'argent, s'il vous plaît,*" Étienne says.

“I want Coca!” Ibrahimah yells at Étienne.

The man turns around and looks down.

“*Bonsoir, petit gars, qu’est-ce que tu veux?*” he asks with an American accent.

“*L’argent, s’il vous plaît,*” Étienne says to the man again.

The man runs his hands over his flat pockets. “*Pour manger?*”

The other boys have crept in closer to hear the exchange and sing out a unified “*Oui!*”

“Oh! It’s a group of you,” the man says in English, laughing as the boys circle around him.

“Give the man space! Don’t harass my customers!” the clerk behind the counter scolds in Wolof, though the boys ignore him.

“Okay then, *qu’est-ce que tu vas manger?*”

“Coca!” the boys yell out in unison.

“Coca-Cola? You all look pretty dehydrated to me.”

The blank expressions on the faces of the boys remind the man to revert back to French.

“*Tu ne veux pas de l’eau?*” he asks.

“Coca!” they scream out again, giggling.

“Why is this man talking about water? I want Coca,” Ibrahimah grumbles.

“He’ll buy us Coca, don’t worry. He’s nice, I can tell,” Étienne assures, looking the man up and down.

“If he doesn’t buy us Coca, you better give me my money back!” Ibrahimah threatens.

Ibrahimah looks around at the other boys pushing up against his small body. He’s not convinced they’ll get what they want from this man. He inches over to Étienne, who is distracted with the lure of food, and slides his hand into his cousin’s can. Étienne moves before Ibrahimah can grab the money inside.

Laughing, the customer takes several sodas out of the lukewarm refrigerator and hands them over to the boys with the instructions to share. He starts to pull money out of his pocket, then stops and grabs several yogurts, placing them on the counter alongside seven plain madeleines. He pays with a bright crisp ten-thousand-franc note. The clerk smiles at the man and thanks him for his kindness.

The boys gather outside by the entrance of the boutique, filling their bellies with Coca-Cola, French pastry, and sweet-flavored yogurt in plastic tubes that they can suck out.

The clerk behind the counter scolds them again about their bad manners. They yell out in thanks after the man, and he turns around in time to see them reciting prayers while cupping their hands in front of their faces. He smiles and waves before turning the corner.

“See, Ibrahimah?” Étienne says between gulps of Coca-Cola. “You shared your money with me and you get more in return. You have Coca, cake, and enough money that Marabout won’t be too mad.”

Ibrahimah’s cheeks are too stuffed with cake to argue. Maybe Étienne is right.

Dingy white walls greet him inside the two-room house. Ibrahimah lines up with the other boys in two rows, his can clasped tight to his chest. His sugar high from the soda and cake is tempered by what is to come next.

“Diatu! Bring me my water,” the woman next door yells at her daughter. The walls are so thin she sounds like she’s standing right next to Marabout Ahmed. Ibrahimah hopes his teacher is in a good mood.

“You’re back early. I assume this means everyone is successful,” Ahmed says.

Ibrahimah stares at the man in front of him and hopes someone else will approach first, but no one budes. He glances at a Quran sitting on the shelf above Marabout’s head. A thick layer of dust blankets the dark-green book.

“Don’t stand there looking stupid. Bring me my money!”

Nine-year-old Abdoulaye steps forward and drops three hundred francs into Marabout Ahmed’s hand. Marabout counts it carefully, and when the amount is confirmed, he grunts in approval. Abdoulaye then hands him four sugar cubes and a packet of raw peanuts. Ahmed motions for the boy to drop the expensive little white cubes in a bowl beside him and waves the peanuts away. Abdoulaye stifles

his smile, walking over to the far corner of the room to stuff the raw nuts into his mouth. No other boy in the house dares try to steal them from him with Marabout in the room.

Ibrahimah loathes the evenings. None of the walking or begging he does all day compares to the pain he experiences every time he hands his hard-earned money to the ugly, sweaty man in front of him. His heart races in fear as Marabout counts the dirty coins before placing them in the long black stocking he keeps with him at all times.

“Where is the rest?”

Ibrahimah would never share his extra food with Marabout; the man is fat enough, with his big bloated belly.

“It’s all there,” Ibrahimah says in a small voice, wishing he hadn’t dropped the sugar cubes earlier that morning.

Marabout Ahmed wears the same dull, black boubou every day, the traditional African robe, purposefully designed three times the size of the person wearing it. His boubou has lost its luster after so many washes, yet it never loses the scent of the strong oils he wears to mask the smell of his sweat. Ibrahimah still finds his teacher stinks.

“You’re missing fifty francs,” Marabout Ahmed says, ignoring Ibrahimah’s assurances.

Ibrahimah drops his head.

“I thought I counted right. I’m so stupid. Please have mercy on me, Teacher.”

Ibrahimah sneaks a peek over to Étienne, who is looking down at his feet. Ibrahimah stands there for several moments, his body clenched tight in anticipation of the wooden cane. Without warning Ibrahimah’s stomach gurgles loudly into the quiet room and Marabout laughs out loud.

“Get out of my face,” he says with a wave of his hand.

Ibrahimah does not need to hear him twice. He heads out of the house before any of the other boys. Outside, the streets are pitch-black but for a lantern or candle flickering inside someone’s small shanty. Ibrahimah stands at the bottom of the front stairs while his eyes take a moment to adjust.

“One day I will be a marabout,” Abdoulaye states, bounding down the stairs.

“That’s stupid. Marabout is lazy and mean,” Ibrahimah says, turning to look at his friend.

“Lazy, mean, and rich.”

Ibrahimah broods over this a moment. Étienne exits the house with Fatik close on his heels.

“You’d beat your Talibé?” Ibrahimah asks.

“I don’t know. I haven’t thought about that,” Abdoulaye says.

“Would Talibé work hard if they didn’t get beat?” Étienne asks, walking past Ibrahimah and motioning them to follow him out onto the road.

“Maybe,” Abdoulaye says.

“Marabout is wicked,” Ibrahimah says.

An awkward silence falls upon the small group.

“I’m going to play football for Senegal!” Fatik interjects.

Eleven-year-old Fatik’s face is hard and weathered and he doesn’t tug the heartstrings of adults as easily as Ibrahimah, the youngest boy in the house. Stepping on a stone, Ibrahimah yells out in pain.

“Be careful!” Étienne says, grabbing his elbow.

“I’m okay.”

“I play football better than you,” Abdoulaye challenges.

“What? You play stupid. I beat you every time!” Fatik exclaims, slapping at Abdoulaye’s shoulder.

“How will you play for Senegal, eh? You’re just a Talibé, nobody cares about you,” Abdoulaye says, pulling a few steps away from Fatik’s reach.

“How will you be a marabout?” Fatik asks, his lips pursed in doubt.

With only a sliver of moonlight present the boys walk in silence down the wide streets of Ouakam, in a loop around their block, as Ibrahimah ponders the major question in their lives. What do Talibé become when they grow up and Marabout no longer wants them? He shakes the thought from his mind. He’s going home soon; his parents *want* him back.

Back in front of the two-room house they spot the rest of their

brothers, the last seven of the houseful of twenty-one boys, entering with hunched silhouettes and tattered clothes. They arrive late every evening and within moments Marabout's voice can be heard from inside.

"I house you, feed you, and teach you the Quran! All you have to do is bring back money to make this possible. What am I to do with one hundred francs! You play all day, not work!"

The sound of Ahmed's cane pounding against the body of a boy travels out the front door and into the street where they stand.

"He doesn't feed us or teach us the Quran. He does nothing," Fatik grumbles.

Abdoulaye shushes him for fear that Ahmed will hear them.

"He can't hear us out here, he's too busy with that stupid boy who eats his money and gets beat every night," Fatik says, louder this time with more confidence.

An hour after the candles are blown out and the boys are ordered to go to sleep, Ibrahimah stares out into the dark and sinister space before him.

"Ibrahimah!" Ahmed calls again, from the cracked bedroom door. Ibrahimah's eyes well up with tears of dread. Rising to his feet he starts toward the voice. Fear grips at his stomach and his bare feet skim the cool tiled floor when a thought flashes across his mind and he turns back to his mat.

"Étienne," he whispers.

"What?"

"You go. It's your turn."

"What? No," Étienne whispers back.

"You took my money today and I didn't have enough."

"But he called *your* name!"

"I'm sick. I poo-poo everywhere," Ibrahimah says, giving his cousin the lie to convey to their marabout.

"Don't let me come out there!" Marabout threatens from his bedroom doorway.

Ibrahimah lies back down on his mat, his arms crossed against his tiny chest. "You want me to share my money so you don't get beat, you go."

Étienne gets up with a sigh of resignation and maneuvers through the gridlock of bodies on the floor.

“Where’s Ibrahimah?” Ahmed asks, annoyed at the sight of Étienne. “He was short my money so he makes it up to me tonight.”

“He’s sick,” Étienne says. “He poos everywhere.”

“Eck. Leave him then. Shut the door,” Ahmed says, spitting out the shell of a sunflower seed onto the floor. The candle on the nightstand casts dancing shadows across his sweaty face and long white dashiki.

The low rumble of Marabout’s voice can be heard outside the closed door as Étienne’s howls of pain diminish to grunts, then a low whimper. Twenty sets of eyes are open as the boys lie on the ratty pieces of cardboard. No one makes a sound or moves an inch in the mosquito-infested room. One boy throws his hands up to cover his ears, and begins to murmur something under his breath. He receives a frantic jab in the ribs from the boy lying down beside him.

“Shut up!” the boy hisses.

Ibrahimah lies there quiet, too afraid to breathe or blink. He’s filled with relief that it’s not him with Marabout tonight, but knowing that Étienne is inside bearing the pain alone leaves him no peace. With tears in a free-fall down his dirty cheeks, fatigue overtakes his tiny body. He falls into a fitful sleep as he runs from the devil, fast on his heels.

When the five o’clock morning prayer call sings out across the dark sky from the nearby mosque, Ibrahimah notices Étienne sound asleep next to him. The memory of evening rushes back and he touches his cousin’s arm, thinking back to the day he left his village.

“When Ramadan comes again it will have been a year and you will return home to me and your mother. It will come faster than you know,” his father told him that morning as he pulled Ibrahimah into a hug before Marabout Ahmed grabbed his hand and dragged him away, complaining that they were already late.

Ahmed comes into the room with his dark-brown wooden cane and hits at the sleeping bodies. The sun has yet to rise.

“Get up or I’ll beat you awake,” he mutters.

Ibrahimah pokes Étienne awake and the two boys hop to their feet before Ahmed can make his way over to them. Having already performed his ablutions out back, Ahmed returns to his room and lays his prayer rug down on the floor. The boys scuttle out to the back of the house to the basin, filled with day-old water, pushing and shoving one another as they try to scoop out enough water to splash onto their heads, hands, and feet. They quickly return to the room and fall into formation, following Ahmed’s lead through prayer. Afterward, Ibrahimah lies back down; he’s not ready to be awake.

“Meet me out back,” Ahmed instructs them.

The line of boys begins at the basin, stretches through the house and out the front door. One by one Ahmed shaves each of their heads with a razor. Bald heads lessen the risk of fleas and lice.

With the sun fast on its ascent, the twenty-one boys prepare to go out. They stack their cardboard mats up against the back wall and grab their red tin tomato cans. And by seven o’clock in the morning they spill out of the house wearing the same dirty clothes they had on the day before. Maids, mechanics, errand boys, security guards, and other faceless strangers join the large gang of Talibé in their morning commute. Ibrahimah lags behind everyone and notices that Étienne is walking with a slight limp.

“Étienne, you okay?”

Étienne doesn’t reply.

“I’ll find us mango for breakfast,” Ibrahimah says, trying to sound hopeful for his cousin.

Once they make it to the Rue de Ouakam the large group splits into three packs of seven, and Ibrahimah and Étienne break off from their group in search of breakfast. They work better alone.



a novel

BESTIARY

K-MING CHANG

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

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MOTHER

Journey to the West (I)

Or: A Story of Warning for My Only Daughter

Moral: Don't Bury Anything.

Ba doesn't know where he buried the gold. Ma chases him around and beats him with her soup ladle. You've never been to a funeral, but this is what it looks like: four of us in the backyard, digging where our shadows have died. A shovel for Ba, a soup ladle for Ma, a spoon for me and Jie to share. We dig with what we don't want—piss buckets, a stolen plunger, the hands we pray with. We even use the spatulas gifted to us by the church ladies, after their days-long debate about whether Orientals even used spatulas. It was decided that we didn't but that we should. Hence our collection of spatulas, different sizes and metals and colors. Ma mistook them for flyswatters. She used them to spank us, selecting a spatula based on the severity of our crime. Be glad I use only my two hands on you.

I see the way you wear your hands without worry, but someday they'll bury something. Someday this story will

open like a switchblade. Your hands will plot their own holes, and when they do, I won't come and rescue you.

You've never been to this year, so let me live it for you: 1980 lasts as long as it rains. It rains the Arkansas way, riddling the ground like gunfire. Years after this story, you're born in an opposite city, a place where the only reliable rain is your piss. You ask why your grandfather once buried his gold and forgot about it, and I say his skull is full of snakes instead of brains. He's all sold out of memories. One time, he pees all over the yard and we follow his piss-streams through the soil. Pray they convene at the gold's gravesite. The gold in his bladder will guide us toward its buried kin. But his piss-river runs straight into the house and floods it with fermented sunlight.



When the church wives come to give us dishes of sugar cubes and a jar of piss-dark honey, my ma tells them that Orientals don't sweeten tea. Don't sweeten anything. We prefer salt and sour and bitter, the active ingredients in blood and semen and bile. Flavors from the body.

Ba says he'll find the gold soon. Ma beats him again, this time with a pair of high heels (also a gift from the church wives). Ba says the birds will tell him where he buried it all. Ma throws a flowerpot at his head (seeds via the church wives). Ba dances the shovel too deep and hits water. Except it isn't water, it's a sewage line, and the landlord tells us to pay for the damage. The rest of the month, we wade the river of everyone's shit, still convinced Ba can remember, still convinced memory is contagious. If we stand close enough to him, we'll catch what he lost.

The gold was what Ba brought from the mainland to the island. That's how soldiers bribed the sea that wanted to steal their bodies. He paid his passage with one gold bar the width of his pinky and swallowed the rest, the gold bleached silver by the acidity of his belly.

In wartime, land is measured by the bones it can bury. A house is worth only the bomb that banishes it. Gold can be spent in any country, any year, any afterlife. The sun shits it out every morning. Even Ma misreads the slogans on the back of American coins: IN GOLD WE TRUST. That's why she thinks we're compatible with this country. She still believes we can buy its trust.

After twenty years of gambling on the island, Ba lost all the gold and tried to win it back and back and back again. When they met, Ma already had three children and one dead husband who returned weekly in the form of milk-bright rain. The local men said she was ruined from the waist down but still eligible from the waist up. She wore a heavy skirt that tarped her like a nun. Ma donated her three daughters to her parents and birthed two new ones with Ba.

I'm the second of the new ones. We're the two she kept, brought here, and beat.

When Ma married him, he was twenty years older. Take the number of years you've lived outside of my body and plant them like seeds, growing twice as many: that's the thicket of years between your grandmother and grandfather. Except Ma doesn't measure her life in years but in languages: Tayal and Yilan Creole in the indigo fields where she was born blue-assed and fish-eyed, Japanese during the war, Mandarin in the Nationalist-eaten city. Each language was worn outside her body, clasped around her throat like a collar. Once, Ba asked her to teach him to write the Tayal alphabet she

learned from the missionaries. But she said his hands were not meant to write: They were welded for war, good only for gripping guns and his own dick. Jie thought this was funny, but I didn't laugh. I have those hands. When you were born, I saw too much of your grandfather in you: rhyming hairlines and fish-hook fingers, the kind that snag on my hair, my shadow, the sky. You made a moon-sized fist at every man, even your own brother, who tried to bury you in a pot of soil and grow you back as a tree. You think burial is about finalizing what's died. But burial is beginning: To grow anything, you must first dig a grave for its seed. Be ready to name what's born.

Decades ago in Yilan, Ba shat out his last bar of gold, along with a sash of seawater and silt. He buried it here, in this yard we never owned and that you were born far from. Ma liked Arkansas because it sounded like *Ark*, as in Noah's. All of Ma's words are from the Bible. Most are single-syllable: *Job*, *Ark*, *Lot*, *Wife*, *Smite*.

The only way we'll find the gold is if we shoot Ba's skull open, extract the memory of where he buried it. Ma tried it once. She pointed the shotgun at Ba's head and stomped the floorboards while saying *Bang*, believing the memory would evacuate from his head. Instead, Ba wet himself and Jie had to mop the floor with a dress. Apparently Ba needs a war to motivate him. Ba won't unbury anything unless there's a boat to be bought and married. We have a week to hire a war to come to our house. Or else, Ma says, the gold will stay buried and we'll have fed all we own to the trees that grow moss like pubic hair.

Jie suggests we hang Ba by his feet, upside down, so that all his memories flee upstream and pool in his skull. We'd have to unscrew his head somehow. I tell her it doesn't work

that way, but Jie's been taking anatomy lessons at the high school ten miles away, meaning she knows how to diagram a body, meaning she's drawn me a penis with veins and everything, shown me a hole or two it could go in. She pulls down her pants so I can see. I ask her to show me where all my holes lead to, and she says if I dig into the dark between my legs, I'll find a baby waiting to be plucked like a turnip. (Don't worry, I didn't scavenge for you. You were conceived the carnivore way.)

Ma shaves soft wood from our birch tree and skunk-sprays the strips with perfume to make incense, burning it in bunches. The smoke keeps mosquitos from marrying all our blood.

We pray to god and Guanyin, in that order. Pray for Ba's gold to fall as rain or grow a hundred limbs and shudder out of the soil like metallic shrubbery.

We consider other strategies: If we borrow a bulldozer, we can flip the whole yard like a penny. But we need our money for that, and our money is buried like a body.

—

By the creek, Jie teaches me to read out of the Bible. We sit under a grove of trees belled with apples. The branches applaud in the wind and drop what they hold, concussing us with fist-hard fruit. Last week, rain rutted a hole in our roof and everything flooded, so we're drying the Bible on a tree branch, its pages flapping like moths. I can pronounce only easy words, no proper names, no verbs. Jie says fluency is forgetting. Says I've got to un-name my mouth and crack my tongue like a whip. When I pronounce the word *tongue* with two syllables, Jie pushes me facedown into the mud.

When I get up from the riverbank, I swallow the mud of my tongue. Jie says she once saw two girl ghosts kissing in the creek. I mishear her and think she means they were cleaning the creek. *Why?* I say. Jie says, *Because a god made them want but didn't give them a word for it.* I think Ma is made that way too, unable to name her need.

Jie and I climb the trees and pretend to be monkeys, swinging to steal the neighbor's apricots like we're Sun Wukong thieving a peach of immortality from the garden of gods. He was punished for this, but we can't remember what the punishment was, so we swallow our apricots whole and without mercy. We shit the pits out, and they rattle the pipes of our toilet when we flush. Ma can't stand us dirty when we come in from the yard, but she's the kind who calls the sky a stain, who tries to bleach a bruise.

Two months ago the church people got a toilet installed for us. When we first used it, we squatted on top with our feet on the seat. It was Jie who told us we were doing it wrong: Our asses were supposed to go inside the halo. Don't laugh—there was a time you didn't know how to do this either, when I told you that the toilet is an ear that the sea hears through, and even now I sometimes see you with your head inside the bowl, conversing with another country.



A boy at the Old Colonial Diner teaches Jie how to make a metal detector out of a radio, a broomstick, cardboard, copper wire. I won't tell you all the details, in case you try to build one yourself. In return for the lesson, Jie lets him finger her in the back of the diner. Jie washes dishes at the sink while he

stands behind, three of his fingers spidering around inside her. His nails snag on her pubic hair and she hisses, twists the faucet hotter, scalds off her calluses.

We use the metal detector in the yard behind the house to search for the gold. Jie holds the broomstick and I hold the radio. The copper wire wraps around both ends of the broomstick and the radio is taped to one end, the hair-clump of extra wire dragging on the ground like a tail. Jie switches the radio to AM and the morning news sounds like someone getting strangled, all static, a sound like the sea muffled inside our mouths.

We discipline the dirt. Rake into rows and follow along. I warm the radio on my skin while it announces the weather: the sky cussing rain at us in the afternoon, more rain tomorrow morning. Jie skims the soil with the broomstick, sweeping its splintered end in half-circles, shushing me even though I'm not talking. When we're near metal, the radio will whine with another voice, a song in gold's frequency. I hear nothing until the static sours into something higher and raspier, almost Ma's voice. Jie says, *Dig here*. We're on a square of land where shadows don't seem to survive. We dig with our bare hands, but we're only a fist deep when we find an old lawnmower blade. The radio sings in three more spots, but the quicker we dig, the sooner we surrender to our suspicions: that the gold's gone. In its place: five spent bullets, a dog whistle, a saw blade, some pennies, a bike chain, a whisk, a blank dog tag. The bullets glisten like dog eyes and my toes remember when they were shot, their ache outdated and residing in my spine.

Jie finds and adds two more bullets to our metal shitpile. We've never seen the gold ourselves, and neither of us says it,

but we know there is nothing here. The radio's still tuned in to the soil's soprano, the static louder where we've dug up nothing but the dark. Jie throws down the broomstick, stomps on it with both feet. It breaks easy as bone. *I hope there's really nothing to find*, Jie says, though I disagree. I think it's better to have something to lose, even if the gold's now archived with the bones and the bullets. But Jie says the gold is better off buried, womb-safe, our lives spent waiting for its birth. Jie and I rebury everything we find. It feels like we've disturbed a cemetery, rifling through lives that aren't ours to remember. I keep the blank dog tag and promise to carve it a name worth carrying home.

We find Ba in the bedroom, bellydown on the mattress, his face so glossed with spit he looks candied. While he's asleep, Jie says, we should detect for metals in his body. Maybe the gold is still buried inside him. Maybe he forgot to shit it out after he got off the boat. I hover the broomstick over his belly and hands and head and hips and feet. I remember the first time he showed us the shrapnel. His back embroidered with bits of bullets, some of them showing, most of them shelled in his skin. We tapped on them in his sleep to test if they hurt, but he never stirred. He was scaled into some hybrid species, armored against Ma.

When I wave the broomstick, scanning him from head to ass and back up again, Ba's whole body sings. Wires smoking, the radio rides every note, high and low, transcribing the bullets under his skin into a song he wakes to. He opens his eyes and the shrapnel magnetizes, lifts him to our hands. I think about bringing the broomstick down on Ba's body, beating

him soft as peach meat, parsing through his bird-shy bones to find whatever gold is still bobbing in his belly. But there's nothing inside him we can spend, not unless grief is a currency.



Ma's started throwing things out the window, searching for the gold inside our home. We remove all the windowpanes so she can't keep beating them with her fists, bruising the sky behind them. Now the rain doesn't know to keep out. Floods are so sudden we never know if it's coming from inside or outside our bodies, if it's raining or if we're wetting ourselves.

The one thing Ma never throws is the three-legged card table in the kitchen, set up with a single photo of my half-sisters still on the island, plus a handkerchief with a bloodstain aged brunette and a piece of white jade the size of my thumb. I thought it was an altar, but Jie says altars are for the dead, and the sisters are as alive as the flies that feast on our boogers when we sleep. One of them might be married now, or at least pregnant. One is still being raised by my aunts. You've never met your great-aunts because they die faster than I can remember their names: A typhoon tore out the oldest one's legs, so she had to be piggybacked all day, and your youngest great-aunt picked chilies until her hands wore the seeds and singed the skin of everyone she touched.

In the photo on the card table, Ma is pregnant with Jie and holding two babies like they're grenades with the pins pulled out. She's waiting for this picture to be taken so she can throw them far out of frame. There's a third girl in a white dress standing in front of her. The photo's too water-wrinkled to see any of their faces, and the oldest girl is out of focus, a

streak like a tree. Ma never acknowledges the photo or the table, which makes their presence even more a punishment. Once, at dinnertime, Jie asks what their names are. Ma locks her out of the house that night, and in the morning, Jie is curled like a stray on our doormat, one arm jammed through the mail slot like she's been trying to fold herself into a paper daughter.

Ma stands at the not-altar, holding the handkerchief in her left fist and the jade in her right. There is no god we know better than her fist. Ma never looks at the photo. She turns to the kitchen window and watches the mosquitos fatten into moons, light salting all the lines on her face. She prays to the sisters whose names I don't know. Her prayers robbed of a god.

Jie and I were born thieves. Born to orphan our sisters by birthing our mother into this country. You don't know about gold, about grieving what you could have owned. Your grandmother's grief has grown its own body. She raises it like another child, one she loves better than me and my sister, one that can never leave her.

Today she complains she's married to a manhole, a shaft for memories to fall down, a man who can see only the sky above him. But Ba's smarter than she knows. The one time we got robbed, the thieves didn't know to dig. Couldn't find anything worth taking. Only our door was missing. We were sure they took something else from the house, but we didn't know what to look for. How to search for an absence.

When Ma stews the apricots we steal, she never asks where we get them. She knows nothing belongs to us, and that's why she won't let us sit on chairs until she wraps them in cheesecloth or scrubs off our skin. We can't put pictures on the walls, if we had any, or fully unpack—she still thinks we'll

have to give everything back. Jie's mouth is still magnetized to the word *sister*, but outside of her dreams she's stopped asking for names. Jie goes to church and her English has gotten so good she's started reading aloud the billboards outside our house. One of them is the phone number of a divorce lawyer. One is for bail bonds. One is for a casino, which tempts Ba until Ma throws her quilt basket at him, tells him to sit down or she'll snip his balls off and sew them to his earlobes. Jie and I can't stop imagining Ba wearing his balls like earrings, and we laugh until we piss, the stains in our laps symmetrical.



We dig beneath so many trees we've given them nicknames: The one with the bent knees. The one that sways like a drunk. The one with a woman's hips. The gold is under none of them. It's the earthquake that finally wounds a way to the gold: I sleep through it, but Jie claims it felt like the whole earth was operating on itself, scraping back its own skin, rearranging its organs.

On our porch, one of the floorboards splits open and shakes off its scab of moss. Light spits from it and we flock to the crack like moths. Underneath the porch is a finger of gold, bedazzled with flies and reclined on a sheet of butcher paper. Ma dances on the kitchen table for a whole hour, her feet forgoing gravity. She stacks the gold on the not-altar, directly to the left of the photo so flat and dull in its frame. The gold is too exposed, like looking directly at someone's bones. We are all looking at it now, the gold and the photo, our eyes alternating between the glow and its shadow, the payment and the cost.

THE
MERMAID
FROM
JEJU

A Novel

Sumi Hahn

This is a work of fiction. All of the names, characters, organizations, places and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to real or actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Philadelphia, 2001

That summer, the embolus lay snug in its hollow behind Mrs. Junja Moon's right knee. The little clot gave no twinge nor any other hint of its existence. Trembling in the brisk current of Mrs. Moon's bloodstream, it was unaffected by the hours she spent pickling her famous kimchi and unmoved by her strenuous attempts to improve her golf swing. The red blob was even impervious to her rare fits of homesickness, when she turned on the shower to muffle her sobs for Jeju Island, which she fled in the winter of 1948.

At 6:47pm on August 29, 2001, a sharp pain shot up Mrs. Moon's right leg. Did she forget to stretch after her golf lesson? She summoned her husband, Dr. Moon, from the living room, where he was watching an instructional video and practicing his putting.

"Time to eat dinner, yobo." She bent down to rub her calf, which felt a bit puffy. Dr. Moon grunted in acknowledgement as the golf ball rolled into the cup.

The family of four sat down and gave their proper Christian thanks for the food. As napkins were adjusted and chopsticks readied, Mrs. Moon gathered her thoughts to address her visiting daughters: Hana, whose name, the delivery room nurse had promised, sounded American, and Okja, who was named after her grandmother.

It was a matter of urgency that her daughters find husbands and that she be given grandchildren, preferably grandsons. As a pillar of the Korean-American

community in Philadelphia, Mrs. Moon wanted to plan weddings and 100th-day birthdays, instead of church dinners and golf games. Most of all, she longed to stop the polite inquiries about her daughters, who, though smart and attractive, were still spinsters at the overripe ages of 40 and 37.

Mrs. Moon cleared her throat to speak. The little clot popped free and fell into the red rapids of her bloodstream, where it took a short thrilling ride to the spongy swamp of her upper left lung. Mrs. Moon mistook her sudden heart palpitations for anxiety. She pounded herself on the chest as she gasped, recognizing the clamor in her body: She was drowning, even though she was on dry land. Her fingers scrambled at her throat, trying to seize oxygen from the air.

Her daughters and husband froze, chopsticks midway to their mouths, as Mrs. Moon rose from her seat, grabbed the edge of the table, and coughed out a spray of red that landed on an empty plate.

When his colleagues described the deadly embolism, Dr. Moon swayed on his feet as the floor betrayed him. All the scientific words receded from his head, which filled with a roaring mist. He had taken Junja away from her ocean home, and now she had journeyed elsewhere, without him.

A soft keening brushed his ear. Dr. Moon blinked at his daughters, whose tears splashed his face, filling his mouth with the warmth of salt. Their hands were holding his, their fists an anchor. He closed his eyes again.

He remembered a bright day on the Jersey shore, when the girls were small and quick like rabbits. They had been gathering stones to put into red plastic buckets. Junja squatted down, to watch. Her hands had stroked the sand as she talked.

“What you doing, Hana?”

“Working.”

“You so busy, Okja. Why?”

“We’re gonna catch fishies, umma.”

Junja’s voice had grown soft. “You have no fishing stick. No net. How you catch fish?”

Hana shrugged. “With our hands.”

Junja smiled. “You smart, like haenyeo.”

“What’s haenyeo?” Okja squinted at her mother as her big sister left to get another bucket of water.

“Haenyeo is like Korean mermaid. From Jeju Island, most beautiful place in Korea. I live there when I was small like you.”

“Are they real mermaids, umma? Or pretend ones?”

“Real one. They bring food for my family every day.”

“I wanna see them!”

Junja had stroked her daughter's hair. "When you bigger, I will take." She leaned in, to whisper. "Here is secret. Long long time ago, when I was girl, I was mermaid, too."

Part One

*The oar breaks, but never the true timber from Hallasan
The rope snaps, but never the strong coils from Seonheul Cape
Warship on the ocean, please go away
Any direction at all but here*

ONE
Jeju Island, 1944

“Junja!”

Hands shook her so hard her teeth clattered like pebbles.

“Wake up, Junja!”

She’ll be forced to scrub abalone shells and carry buckets of water to the cistern if she doesn’t obey. But she’s so tired, she’d like to sleep now.

“Junja!” A slap landed hard on her face.

Her eyes opened--too bright!— she shut them.

Out of her mouth spilled the tides.

Junja’s eyes blinked open as she gasped.

Mother was standing over her, the sea streaming down her skin like silver. Junja started sneezing. Mother fell to her knees and cradled her head on her lap, stroking her hair.

“You are alive, Junja,” Mother’s hands were so warm. “You dove too deep, but the sea king returned you, and you are safe on land again...”

Grandmother’s voice: “We must ask her what she saw while she was there.”

“Hush...not now,” said mother. “Don’t worry her.”

Grandmother's whisper was hot against her ear: "Remember your sea dream, Junja. When you wake up dry and warm, remember the true dreams you dreamt under water..."

Wrapped in Junja's fist was something hard and jagged that hurt. She opened her hand. Lying in her bleeding palm was a shell. She held it up to her mother, who shrieked while lifting it up high.

"She never let go!"

Shouts of joy and admiring murmurs. Junja looked around. She was lying in a circle of women all draped in wet ribbons of ocean like mother and grandmother.

"You are a true haenyeo now," whispered mother. "You belong to the sea, like I do, and like your grandmother. You have visited the sea king like Sim Cheong the beggar maiden and returned alive, bearing his gift."

Mother smashed the shell with a rock and clawed out the meat. "Eat this," she commanded.

Junja turned her head. She couldn't stomach any more of the sea.

But mother pushed the briny blob past her lips and made her swallow. The little piece of sea mass plummeted down Junja's body, making her cough as it settled deep inside her.

She spat out a stone.

Ever since her near-drowning, Junja was allowed to follow her mother and grandmother to the seashore, instead of staying home to watch her little brother. That task now belonged to second sister, Gongja, who was only 8, but already knew how to make a fine millet porridge.

“I could probably cook a chicken, too,” boasted Gongja.

“But you don’t know how to kill the chicken,” yelled Jin. “Or pluck out its feathers and clean the innards!”

“Pretty soon you’ll have to take care of yourself, useless boy,” said Gongja. “Because I’ll be old enough to do waterwork with ummung and halmung and Junja.”

“Hush,” mother said, crouching down to look her son in the eye. “Heed your noonah well. Don’t forget that Gongja is your mother while we are gone. Behave like a man. Both of you must weed the garden and feed the chickens. When you finish, write the alphabet three times. Over there, on the dirt near the garden fence, so the chickens can’t walk over it. Then, you may play.”

Mother rose to gather the supplies they needed for their day of work, dividing everything between her eldest daughter, her mother, and herself: picks, knives, scythes, hemp nets and rope, twig baskets, dried gourds, lengths of cloth, kindling, and fresh water.

The three of them walked down the rocky path towards the beach, large bundles balanced on their heads. The dawn sky was inky, but their eyes were accustomed to the

darker pitch of the ocean. They navigated the shadows, their bare feet steering.

“Aigoo,” said grandmother, “My feet are too old for these bad black rocks.”

“Aigoo,” said Junja, giggling, “My feet are too young for these bad black rocks.”

“Such noise!” scolded mother. “You will wake the clams in their beds.”

“Tell me, what do you remember of your sea-dream?” Grandmother asked, when mother walked a few steps ahead of them to kick the large stones away from the path. Grandmother had asked this question every morning and every night for weeks, hoping that something would dart out of the crevices of her granddaughter’s memory and be caught.

“I cannot remember much, halmung,” apologized Junja. “I remember falling and falling. Everything was dark and cold and wet. I couldn’t breathe, and I couldn’t move. I remember thinking, I am dead now. Instead of helping mother, I am only bringing her sorrow. Suddenly, I could move again. The sea king and his maidens watched as I swam back up. I kicked and pushed towards the light. When I woke, I was holding something in my hand, something I knew I couldn’t let go.”

“You kept the pearl,” said grandmother, “But you lost the treasure.”

Junja stayed silent.

“Your sea-dream was the true treasure, but the sea king tricked you with a pearl, so you’d return to this world holding onto a stone instead of the truth.” Grandmother sighed.

Mother had traded that pearl for a large sack of white rice and a new garden hoe. Junja didn’t understand how a dream could have been more helpful, despite grandmother’s stories about her great-great-grandmother, who had captured a sea dream and shared its riches with everyone in her village.

“She dreamed her entire life in that sea dream. After she coughed the ocean out of her body, her mind cleared, leaving behind a clear picture of everything that was going to happen. She knew when typhoons would blow, which winters would freeze solid, and which summers would shrivel up in drought. She knew which parts of the ocean were teeming with delicious living things, and where there were only barren rocks and sand. When she met the man she would marry, she told him, ‘I dreamed about you, and you will be my husband.’”

“It wasn’t easy to bear, knowing what would happen. Usually she would bite her tongue. But the day her mother drowned, she tried to stop her, begging her not to go out. The mother, wiser than her gifted daughter, continued on her way, because knowing never stopped the sun from rising or the tides from coming in.”

“Did your great-great-grandmother know how she’d die as well?” Junja wondered if knowing about your own death could somehow delay it.

Grandmother clucked. “She probably did, but she never told another person that secret. She grew so sad, knowing when everyone else would die, that all manner of troublesome spirits were able to enter and cloud her mind.”

“One night, she slipped and hit her head on some bad black rocks. When she woke up, she was as simple as a child of two. The villagers had to tether her to a tree, so that she wouldn’t wander off a cliff. But while no one was watching, she loosened the knots and slipped away. They found her body washed up on the beach, head cracked like an egg. It was the sea king’s way of reminding us that whatever comes from the sea will always return to it.”

On the beach, bonfires were blazing. Women scurried about, stoking flames, coiling lengths of rope, and inspecting gourds for breaks and nets for tears. Some of the divers were singing a song that keened like the wind. Others were rubbing their hands together as they chanted prayers to the sea god. Seabirds hovered as the sky began to brighten. Junja added her family’s kindling to the community pile.

“Gather your dol-chu,” an elder barked. Junja hurried to the water’s edge, where speckled black-and-white stones had been washed clean by the night tides. She found a smooth one, the size of a summer squash, and showed it to her grandmother, who hefted it with an approving grunt. The first group of divers were standing before the fire in their linen water clothes, eyes closed, faces glowing with heat.

“Water time! Water time! Go into the sea!”

The divers secured their seaweed scythes and shellfish picks. They spat into their masks and rubbed the bubbles over the glass. Junja's mother, hands in thick wool mittens, stirred the embers with a stick and pulled out stones to cool on the sand.

With the warm anchor stones nestled in their hemp slings, the first group stood ready, led by an elder who would guide them to the first dive site.

The barefoot women waded into the water, arms wrapped around their gourd-floats. The anchor stones warmed their bellies. Their linen swim suits darkened with water before puckering to cling to their skin. As they kicked their way through the waves, the sound of singing grew fainter, giving way to the slapping waves and the pounding of their pulse.

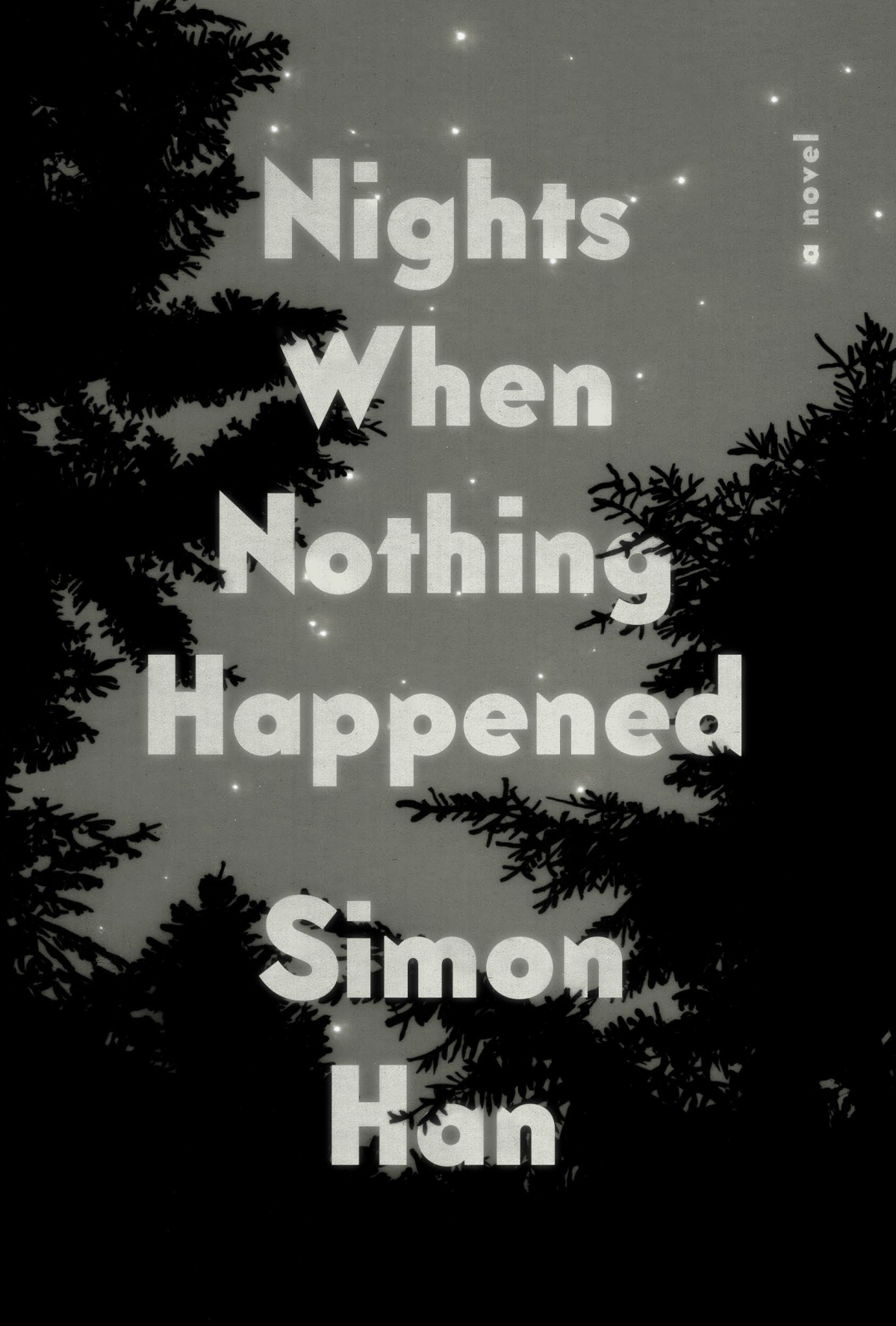
The ocean sucked each diver down greedily. But the women were prepared for battle. They swiped their knives at the fingers of sea grass that clutched at them. They used picks to pry away shells clinging to underwater rocks. They worked the waters, humming the chants of their forebearing mothers, who had explored the deep before them.

You must leave the ocean before your fingers and lips grow numb. Grab your fistful of treasure and fly back up towards the light. When your head breaks the surface, release the air you held captive in your chest, letting it fly away in a whistling scream.

Rest your cheek on the gourd, which bobs on the water, dreaming of the steady ground that once moored it. Place your shell inside the net bag and thank the sea king for his gift. Close your eyes and imagine the sun's fire sinking deep into your belly.

Swallow another gulp of shining air.

Dive into the depths one more time.



**Nights
When
Nothing
Happened**

**Simon
Han**

a novel



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1

Jack Cheng knew about protection. He knew who gave it and who needed it, and he knew that he was the one who'd found his sister curled around the toilet one night, sleepwalking into the swinging kitchen door another night, and that was a calling.

Most nights had limped along since his parents began putting Annabel to sleep in her own room instead of theirs. When sleep finally came to them, they would snore the way kings and queens with servants to adjust their pillows all night long snore, dreaming dreams that were not anyone's right to interrupt. At an hour when the house held its breath and waited for something to happen, Jack stayed up and read books in which characters died, literally, of fright. The sound of a leaf scraping

across the sidewalk could draw him downstairs in socks until he reached hardwood. Then, realizing that his sister was still safe upstairs, he would stand in the dark before his mother's favorite sheepskin rug and imagine that the rattling and scratching he was hearing behind the walls came from beavers, though he had never seen a beaver and confused them with raccoons.

Late one night in November, a steady pounding woke him up. He lay under the covers for some time, remembering that his mother had not been home when he went to bed, and wondering if she had come back from work or he had dreamed it. Downstairs, he found the front door open to the street. Had the calling moved beyond toilets and kitchens? He wandered outside without slapping on shoes, his mind still muddled with dream sounds. On the sidewalk, he skirted a pile of dog shit and an issue of *The Dallas Morning News* still wrapped in yellow film. The houses on both sides of Plimpton Court stood like tombs, each split down the middle by a cobbled pathway, one fledgling oak or elm on either side. In front of two houses, Christmas lights already spiraled up the thin trunks and framed the eaves, the work of professionals. From a balcony, an inflatable Santa raised a mitten in his direction and did not lower it. Jack had made a habit during the day of crouching by the window in the piano room and waving hello back, which always sent Annabel into fits of giggles. It had not occurred to him until

now that the Santa could be waving good-bye. He kept on, avoiding its eyes.

He found the first of Annabel's glow-in-the-dark slippers on the Brenners' front lawn. Crouching down, he brushed grass clippings from the plush cotton. He pressed a hand on a sunken patch of grass. He pressed here, he pressed there. A strange thought came to him: maybe the heartbeat he was feeling did not belong to him but to the grass, and to the earthworms slithering beneath. If he followed the trail of heartbeats between the Brenners' and the Driscolls' he would find the other slipper. He rushed forward, staying low and close to a brown fence at the corner of Plimpton and Main that still gave off paint fumes. There was no time to pull up his socks. The cracks between the planks glowed a phosphorescent blue. A swimming pool. There was something about a lighted swimming pool at midnight that reminded Jack of murder and intrigue.

A car passed on Main Street, its headlights flashing through the fence and illuminating the leaves floating in the pool. His sister could be drifting toward this vacant stretch of road where high schoolers tore through in trucks with wheels bigger than her, blazing a shortcut out to Sheridan. He followed the path he imagined her taking, between houses and down alleyways, until he reached the sewage creek that cut through

the community. During the summer, he remembered, the feet and underside of a duck had bobbed there for days. On the grass that sloped up from the creek, he spotted the glow of the other slipper.

His sister stood a few yards away, on the bridge that overlooked the creek. Under a towering steel streetlight, she swayed slightly. Her head was lifted, and a white glow bloomed from her neck, up to the stretch of baby fat under her chin. Her eyes were closed, as if she were basking in the pool of light. If Jack did not know better, he would have thought a spaceship had beamed her down to earth. He sidled beside her, a slipper in each hand. He was Annabel's protector, but sometimes he did not know what to do with his hands.

“Hear me in there? Knock-knock?”

Annabel blinked. “You found me, Daddy.”

A few dead crickets still clung to the lamp. The stink of the summer's crickets had carried through the end of fall, and perhaps would last through a winter that never arrived. It was no wonder he'd thought American air to be unsafe. In those early years in Plano, Jack had held his breath around diapers and hospitals and graveyards and urinals and police stations and fertilizer and roadkill and cameras and his father.

“Daddy,” his sister said.

“Okay,” he said.

“Daddy. Daddy. Daddy. Dad—”

“I heard you.”

Now, that call again. That *Breathe, Jack*. That *Take your sister away, Jack*. Away from the light. Away from the image of dead crickets falling, as faintly as the first snow in China, into her little mouth. It was a new day, and they needed to go back: to the sprinkler-fed grass, the potted mums, the vanilla-scented pinecones that would remind him, in any season, of this place he'd lived in Texas. *Take her back, Jack, take her back*.

This fall of 2003, Jack was eleven and his sister five, the span between them never changing, though he felt that it should. Six years contained an entire life. They equaled, he reminded himself, the number of years that he'd lived in China. The more years Jack had accumulated in Plano, the more he'd shed of that first life, and in the days before Annabel began sleepwalking, what he recalled most clearly was his own daydreaming, perched by the fourth-story window of his grandparents' apartment in Tianjin.

His earliest memories were of looking down at older buildings, while his later ones were of looking up: craning his neck toward condos and offices that sprouted in a matter of months, crammed in staggered formation so that where one building ended in the skyline, the next began. They bled into his view

of the muddy Hai River, the uniformed street sweepers, the market from which every few days his grandparents wheeled groceries home. There went the older buildings, the greenhouses growing like hair on their roofs. There went green itself.

The older and stronger Jack became, the more he saw the wobbly legs that held up his city. Beyond the high-rises were the cobblestoned streets flanked by forts and villa-style houses, complete with red tile roofs that Italian invaders had erected. The giant cross on a French cathedral bore down on pedestrians, slinging sun into their eyes. A Japanese house with manicured gardens had once been home to the last emperor of China, a traitor who'd sold out his country to the enemy. There were German barracks, British hotels, Austro-Hungarian mansions. Jack could not point on his grandparents' globe to where any of these invaders were from, but he could picture their faces, grinning demonically in the water swirling in Lǎolao's mop pail, or in the faded brown rings at the bottom of Lǎoye's teacup. With a swing of his sword, he knocked back bowls of their congealing soy milk, stabbed the heart of the electric fan that made the summers bearable. Lǎolao and Lǎoye saved their heads by ducking. They cursed the day they'd bought him the cheap plaything. What did it matter that Jack was defending them? They cared only about minor hazards

like crossing a street, ordering Jack to hold on to them. When he shattered a vase made in Belgium, they fought back. Their palms cut deeper than swords; it hurt to sit down at the dinner table. Sometimes they picked up the phone and, instead of bickering with the milkman, reported him to his parents.

His parents. His parents in America. Jack saw them as they were in the photograph that leaned against a tin of sunflower seeds on the cabinet. His mother's hair pulled back by a clip, a large vein visible on her forehead. Her eyes narrow and level, as if she were concentrating fiercely on not dropping the baby in her lap. She never scolded Jack as harshly as Lǎolao and Lǎoye demanded. *Do the shoes I had Dàjìu buy for you still fit?* she would ask. *Are you eating the pork I told Lǎolao to cook? Have you read the English book I asked Èrjìu to bring from school?* When his mother's words grew tiresome, he used his grandparents as models to imagine, on the other end of the receiver, her moving mouth: Lǎoye's long, drooping jaw lifted and chiseled into a robust square, Lǎolao's puckered lips pulled into a taut line instead of a perpetually surprised *O*. His father was harder to construct because he did not come from Lǎolao and Lǎoye—did not come from anyone or anywhere, it seemed, his past in the countryside muffled by the low voices other adults used when talking about him, saying things like *those people* and *places like that*. In the photograph leaning against the tin, Jack's father

wore a suit so big his shoulders appeared inflated, though his dress shirt underneath was too small, the collar unbuttoned to give his thick neck room to breathe. While baby Jack and his mother looked straight at the camera, his father stood beside the chair, staring off at a different angle, which Jack once projected with a ruler to about five centimeters from the upper-right corner of the frame.

“You’re a damned rascal!” Lǎolao said.

“You’ll make us die early!” Lǎoye said.

“Time to send you to America!” Lǎolao said.

“You think we’re bluffing?” Lǎoye said.

His grandparents, for all their embellishments, eventually reached a moment of truth. They dragged Jack onto a bus to the Beijing airport, where they delivered him into the trust of two family friends, childless āyís whose faces he would forget within months. At the security check, he looked back at his grandparents and realized that they had become undeniably, irrevocably old. As Lǎolao waved from a distance, he could see the redness of her palm and the swelling of her fingers; perhaps all the times he’d squeezed her wrist crossing streets had cut off the blood in her hands from the rest of her body. Lǎoye’s shoulders hunched forward, and without a cane he teetered at the edge of an imagined cliff, helpless in the midst of people who rolled their luggage past him, not knowing how easy it

would be to knock him over. Jack had made his grandparents frail, too frail to come with him. When they turned their faces away and dabbed their eyes with a single shared handkerchief, he wondered if they regretted sending him away. Maybe it wasn't all his fault for being a *dǎodànguǐ*, maybe his leaving was, as he'd been taught to believe, inevitable. He was going to live with his parents, who seemed to him not people so much as a destination he did not want to visit.

But he would. He would have to. In the plane, the *āyí* to his left asked him if he was as eager as she was to try airplane food for the first time, and the *āyí* to his right let him in on a rumor about the otherworldly flushing speeds of the toilets. When the plane crawled backward from the terminal, the two women smiled and reached past him, their fingers meeting in the space behind his head. One *āyí* stroked the side of the other's hand with her thumb, and the other extended a finger to tickle a vein under the wrist, and in the glimpses Jack allowed himself to take, their faces carried another message, shrouded in a language he could not access, lips that moved with words he could not hear.

Then from the ceiling, a voice spoke through warbled static, addressing the passengers first in Mandarin, then in English. *Please direct your attention to the flight attendants for an important safety demonstration.* Outside, the people wearing orange vests and

waving orange sticks disappeared, replaced by a runway dressed up with meticulously spaced lights. *There are several emergency exits on this aircraft.* Following the voice's instructions, Jack pulled out the laminated card in front of him, on which cartoon people encountered endless terrors but faced them without fear, without any feeling at all. *Remember to secure your oxygen mask first before assisting your child.* Where was he going, that the journey there could be so treacherous? After the smiling flight attendants began to blow into tubes on their life vests, Jack leaned forward and hugged his legs in the bracing position of the cartoon people. He did not move when one āyí placed her hand on his back and moved it in steady circles. *We remind you not to tamper with, disable, or destroy the smoke detectors.* He stared down, ignoring the āyí's hand and focusing on the card he'd dropped. In the last panel there was a boy, a smaller version of the cartoon man behind him. He wanted nothing more than to whoosh down the giant yellow slide with them, his arms pointed stiffly forward, halfway to solid ground.

He would take other flights, hear other safety demonstrations. But five years later, on the first day of middle school, when his teacher stood at the front of the room and ordered twenty-three sixth graders not to say *kill*, it was that voice Jack would

remember, arriving over warbled static, and the English that followed. That feeling of being in a cartoon.

“Do not say *die*,” his English teacher said. “Do not say *stab*, *murder*, *choke*, *shoot*, or *bomb*. Especially *bomb*.” Mr. Morris rolled up his sleeves. Veins snaked up his arms and under his shirt, like those of bodybuilders or the elderly—Mr. Morris could pass for either. “Never say *bomb*.”

It was August. Jack sat at his new desk-chair, not sure what to do with his legs. The formation of rows and columns left him feeling exposed. And girls—some wore perfume. Scents welled from below their necklines, calling back the candied fruit that he’d once swiped from the street vendors outside his grandparents’ apartment. He had not thought about the taste of glazed strawberries and pineapples and *shānzhā* for so long, the way he’d slid them up and off the skewer with his teeth. And the vendors, the spittle in their mouths as they raised their newspapers to whack him.

The girl in front of him turned around, the end of her ponytail whipping the top of his hand, to pass back a stack of letters, each addressed to the parents and signed by the principal. On his way to America, Jack remembered, he had carried a letter, too. A letter *from* his parents. A letter to prove that he belonged to parents, written in English.

“Is *punch* okay?” a boy asked from the back of the classroom.

“You can probably say *punch*,” Mr. Morris said.

“What about *assassinate*?”

“*Assassinate* is usually reserved for public figures.”

“What about *manslaughter*?”

“Manslaughter,” Mr. Morris said, as if trying out a name for a newborn. He fingered the swirl of his tie. “Well, manslaughter is not a verb. Speaking of verbs.”

A voice behind Jack said, “I’m scared.” Heads swiveled around, but no one could identify the speaker. Fingers were pointed in opposing directions, giggles shushed. After class, Jack wondered if he had been the speaker. If somehow he hadn’t known.

Jack should not have been scared. His parents had decided to live in Plano in order not to be scared. Plano had the lowest crime rate in Texas, highly ranked schools, churches bigger than schools, lighted tennis courts, malls that closed before 9:00 p.m. After he’d joined his parents, his mother had called his grandparents to let them know that he was *here*, he was safe. When a forgetful Lǎolao had asked where *here* was, she said *near Dallas*. Later, when she introduced Jack to their neighbors, she said that he was from *near Beijing*. Jack had wondered then if his homes were not only safe, but imagined.

He did not know, even by middle school, that in the late 1990s this affluent suburb had been dubbed “the heroin capital of America.” Nor that in the early ’80s, it had been called

“the suicide capital of America.” Every year, a new wave of residents diluted the collective memory of the city, like fresh customers unwittingly enlisted in a company’s rebranding. *Just say no* was as much as his teachers were willing to tell him. No drugs, no suicide, no fights, no sex, no drinking, no depression, no slacking, and now, no saying, *You wanna die?* No more, *I’m gonna kill you*. And though no one had taken those threats seriously before, banning the words morphed them into something serious. Something threatening.

That night, his mother brought the letter to his room. She lay at the foot of the bed, the balls of her feet pressed into the carpet. Lǎoye had talked about how, as a child, she’d walk over the knots of his back. “Should I worry?” she asked.

His mother had always been a bony person, a woman of acute angles and protrusions. In the photograph propped against the tin of sunflower seeds, baby Jack had seemed eager to get off her lap. He had not seen the picture since he’d left, but having his mother near made him want to remember her, the way she’d been when she was far.

“*Mom,*” he said.

Jack leaned against the headboard with another of his old *Choose Your Own Adventure* books in his lap. The books were too easy for him, but it was nice to fall asleep before reaching *The End*. When there were multiple endings in a book, the one he arrived at always left him bereft, though he could not say of

what. He lost his page. A few ends of his mother's hair fell over his toes. What would it feel like to touch his mother's face with his feet? A privilege reserved, perhaps, for babies and toddlers, who would grow up unable to remember what it had felt like to touch their mothers' faces with their feet.

Some children graduate to kisses. Like Annabel, who insisted on delivering one hundred each night before sleeping. She'd just started kindergarten at a new Montessori-inspired school, and their parents were using the transition to try to make her sleep in her own room. Was she the reason their parents never kissed each other? Was he? They had probably kissed more when it was only the two of them in Houston. In Tianjin, he'd pictured his parents in America funneling rice into their mouths and swaying to Kenny G and dozing off in front of the TV, but not until Annabel was born had he thought about them kissing. Now his father was across the hall, tucking Annabel in. Surely he'd let her drag out her kisses. *One hundred and two, one hundred and three.* Jack imagined Annabel pulling his father back to bed, her hand clamped around a finger; he imagined his father pretending she was stronger than she was. Once she started crying, he would not be able to leave. It would be another long night. In the morning, Jack would run his hand across the mattress, the dips here and there.

His mother dug her elbows into his bed and pushed herself up. Tomorrow, before Jack or the birds had woken up, she

would be gone, and no one in the house would remark on her absence; it had become normal again to start the day without her. Half of his mother was already on its way out of the room. She reached for the fan switch but changed her mind. Her finger hung in the air as if to say, *This is a fan switch. This is a wall.* “Close the fan,” she said.

“*Turn off* the fan.”

“Good night, jīn gǒu’r.”

Gold dog, his mother called him. The *dog* to ensure he’d grow up healthy and strong, a humbling nickname, only she’d added the *gold*. Gold, golden, goldest, she’d say, as if Jack’s growing up were a series of escalating adjectives. The woman had not flinched at the bad reports his grandparents had made about him. The boy who’d joined her in this country did not say bad words, let alone banned words. He did not break expensive vases, or steal from poor street vendors. He did not cling to her. He did not dare sleep with her. Here was Jack, a boy who took so little space he might as well still be in Tianjin.

MICAIAH JOHNSON

THE SPACE

BETWEEN

WORLDS



“Gorgeous writing, mind-bending world-building, razor-sharp social commentary, and a main character that demands your attention—and your allegiance.”
—ROB HART, author of *The Warehouse*

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First Edition

THE SPACE BETWEEN WORLDS

MICAIAH JOHNSON



CHAPTER ONE

When the multiverse was confirmed, the spiritual and scientific communities both counted it as evidence of their validity.

The scientists said, *Look, we told you there were parallel universes.*

And the spiritual said, *See, we've always known there was more than one life.*

Even worthless things can become valuable with rarity. This is the grand lesson of my life.

I'm at the base of a mountain, looking over a landscape I was never meant to see. On this Earth—number 197—I died at three months old. The file lists respiratory complications as cause of death, but the address on the certificate is the same one-room

shack where I spent most of my life, so I can picture the sheet metal roof, the concrete floor, and the mattress my mother and I shared. I know I died warm, sleeping, and inhaling honest dirt off my mother's skin.

“Cara, respond. Cara?”

Dell's been calling me, but she's only irritated now, and I won't answer until she's *concerned*. Not because I like being difficult—though there is that—but because her worry over a wasted mission sounds just like worry over me.

Behind me, information is downloading from a stationary port into a mobile one. When it's done, I'll take the mobile back to Earth Zero, our primary Earth, the one the others think of as real. The information I gather is divided up into light data—population, temperature fluctuations, general news—and dark data—what is affecting their stocks that might affect ours, or, if it's a future world, a full listing of where every stock will close on a given day. The existence of the dark data is a big secret, though I don't know why anyone would care. Insider trading doesn't even sound like a crime—not a real one, one with blood.

“Cara . . .”

Still just annoyed. I check the download's progress. Sixty percent.

“Cara, I need you to answer me.”

There we go.

“I'm here.”

There's a pause while she resets to apathy, but I heard the panic. For a second, she cared.

"You don't always have to leave me waiting."

"And you don't always have to plant me two miles from my download port, but I guess we're both a little petty, eh, Dell?"

I can hear her smiling-but-not-smiling from a hundred ninety-six worlds away. I've dodged the physical training for my job since just after my hiring six years ago. She's so uptight, you'd think she'd just report me, but forcing me on these long walks is her answer.

"You're wanted back. There's a file on your desk."

"I already have my pulls for the week."

"Not a pull. A *new* file."

"No, but . . ."

I put my hand against my chest, expecting to feel a divot, some missing chunk of flesh.

I want to tell her it can't be true. I want to tell her I would have known. Instead, I tell her I need an hour and cut the link.

If I have a new world, it means that Earth's me isn't using it anymore. I'm dead again, somewhere else, and I didn't feel a thing.

I'm not sure how long I sit, staring out at a horizon that's like mine, but not. The download *dings* its finish. I could traverse out from here, there's no one to see me, but I steal a little time exploring the place fate tried to keep from me.

Another me is gone. As I walk into the valley, I'm

a little more valuable walking down the mountain than I was walking up.

When I was young and the multiverse was just a theory, I was worthless: the brown girl-child of an addict in one of those wards people don't get out of or go to. But then Adam Bosch, our new Einstein and the founder of the institute that pays me, found a way to see into other universes. Of course, we couldn't just look. We had to enter. We had to touch and taste and take.

But the world said no.

The first people sent came back already dead or twitching and about to die, with more broken bones than whole ones. Some actually did make it through, and survived on the new world just long enough to die from their injuries and have their bodies recalled.

It took a lot of smart people's corpses before they learned that if you're still alive in the world you're trying to enter, you get rejected. You're an anomaly the universe won't allow, and she'll send you back broken in half if she has to. But Bosch's device could only resonate with worlds very similar to our own, so most of the scientists—with their safe, sheltered upbringings and long life expectancies—had living doppelgängers in the other worlds. Wiley City, where Adam Bosch's company is based, had practically eliminated childhood mortality, and most viral illness had been vaccinated to extinction.

They needed trash people. Poor black and brown people. People somehow on the “wrong side” of the

wall, even though they were the ones who built it. People brought for labor, or come for refuge, or who were here before the first neoliberal surveyed this land and thought to build a paradise. People who'd already thought this was paradise. They need my people. They needed me.

Of the three hundred eighty Earths with which we can resonate, I'm dead in three hundred seventy-two—no, three hundred seventy-three now. I'm not a scientist. I'm just what they're stuck with. The higher-ups call us traversers on paper. We download the region's information and bring it back for the great minds to study, no better than pigeons, which is what they call us not on paper.

One day, the Eldridge Institute will figure out how to remotely download information across worlds, and I'll be worthless again.

Back on Earth Zero, I go straight to my desk after changing into my office clothes. Dell stands out tall in the herd of desks, more than two-thirds of them empty now, her face all tight like she's been kept waiting.

“Slumming it, Dell? I thought coming below the sixtieth floor gave you hives.”

She smiles, less like she thinks I'm funny and more like she wants to prove she knows how.

“I'll survive.”

Of that I can be sure. Survival is Dell's whole problem. Here, in this world, she wanted to be a traverser. She was set up for it, too: an air force pilot

who'd had eyes on space before the possibility of other worlds opened up. But Dell comes from a good family, a family with money a long way back. In some worlds her parents never emigrated from Japan. In some she joined the private sector instead of this government–research institute hybrid. But she survived in more than ninety-eight percent of other worlds, and in most of those she thrived. I've seen three dozen Dells, and all but one wore clothes more expensive than mine.

When I take off my jacket, we both hide our wince. Bruises line my arms in jagged stripes, and those are just the parts she can see.

“It shouldn't be this bad,” she says, her eyes moving between quadrants of my body like she's doing hard math.

“It's only because I've been doubling up.”

“Which is why I advised against it.”

“I need the long weekend.”

We've had this conversation five times this week and it always ends right here, where her concern is outweighed by the effort it takes to argue with me. She nods but still studies my arms like a puzzle before looking away.

Early on, the professionals on the upper stories, scientists like Bosch and watchers like Dell, told me the bruising was from the resistance of an object from one world being forced into another, like the violence of north and south magnets being shoved together. Other traversers, and they are a supersti-

tious lot, told me her name was Nyame and her kiss was the price of the journey.

Dell touches the clear screen that's been delivered to me. It looks like a sheet of plastic, but once I activate it I'll know the basics of the world that's just been assigned to me. I learned quickly after moving here that the city loves plastic the way my town loves metal. Everything here is plastic. And it's all the same kind. When a plastic thing stops working they put it down a chute and turn it into another plastic thing, or the same thing but fixed. They've got plastic like the rest of the world has water; there's never any more or less of it, just the same amount in an endless cycle.

"Do you know what your new world is?" she asks.

"You haven't given it to me yet."

"Can you guess?"

I should say no, because I resent her asking me to do parlor tricks, but instead I answer, because I want to impress her.

"175," I say. "If I had to guess."

I know I'm right by the way she refocuses on me. Like I'm interesting. Like I'm a bug.

"Lucky guess," she says, sliding the screen to me.

"Not really. There're only eight options."

I sit and pull out the drive that contains the payload from my last job. As soon as I plug it in, the dark data will upload to persons unknown and delete itself. I send the light data to the analysts who will interpret and package it for the scientists.

Eldridge thinks we traversers don't know about

the first package of intel. Like the organizations responsible for space exploration in the past, Eldridge is technically an independent company, though it's heavily funded by the government of Wiley City. There is an industrial hatch outside the city limits, in the empty strip of desert between here and Ash-town, and the taxpayers and Eldridge's employees are supposed to believe that is how the company makes all of its profits that don't come through research grants. Sure, bringing in resources from another world so we don't have to harm ours is probably worth a mint. But that's not fifteenth-richest-man-in-the-city money, which is what our CEO and founder is.

Because no traverser has ever made a report to enforcement or asked questions, they think they've pulled this elaborate ruse on lower-level employees. But really, we just don't care. A job's a job, and people edging out other people to make money buying and selling something invisible just sounds like rich people problems.

I look up at Dell, still standing beside me. She's a rich person, but she's a rich person who's always going to be rich. Rich so far back it would take two generations of fuckups for her family to go broke. There's a lot of this up here in the city. Not new money rich people, like Adam Bosch, but whole rich families where the wealth is spread out among the members so it doesn't attract attention.

“Something else?”

“Saeed is gone,” she says.

“Star? They fired her?” When she nods, I ask, “Did she mess up?”

I hope she did. Starla Saeed is one of the last traversers remaining from before I started. She was born in what they call a civil war but was really just a ruler systematically killing his subjects. When she was twelve she took a journey across the sea that drowned more people than it delivered. She could travel to more than two hundred worlds.

If she screwed up, it’s just a firing, only interesting because we have the same job and were close once. If she was downsized, she’s a canary in the mine.

“175 was the last world only she had access to. When your death registered . . . Why pay two salaries and benefits when they can just put it in your rotation?”

What she doesn’t say, but thinks: why pay a decent salary at all for a glorified courier?

“You won’t be scheduled to go to 175 until next week, but it wouldn’t hurt for you to familiarize yourself over your long weekend. And pay attention to the bruising. I want to make sure it’s clearing before your next pull.”

Again, I can interpret her fear over a wasted asset however I want, and I choose to pretend it’s affection.

The long look she takes at my arms and chest makes me shiver. She sees my reaction and backs away, nearly running into Jean.

“Ms. Ikari,” he says, formally, the way she likes.

“Mr. Sanogo,” she says, also formally, the way he doesn’t like.

The famous Jean Sanogo has always just been called Jean, or Papa Jean by the papers.

“How is our best girl today?” he asks.

“Stubborn. She’s bruising more than usual; tell her to pay attention to it.” Dell glares over her shoulder. “She might actually listen to you.”

“I assure you, she ignores us both equally,” he says, and Dell walks away.

I’ve finished uploading the information packet under my username, so I log out and log back in with superior credentials. I use the stolen access to send a copy of the light data packet to my cuff so I can read through it later.

Jean has pulled over an empty traverser’s chair.

“Dell is tense. You need to stop teasing her when you’re off world.”

“But then how will she know I like her?” I say.

“You’ve been flirting with her for five years. She knows.” He leans forward, setting down a steaming cup, and adjusts his glasses to look at my progress screen. “Am I witnessing company theft in my name? My wounded heart.”

“Come now, old man. It can’t really be theft if I’m just reading. You can’t steal something that’s still there when you’ve taken it.”

“You’ll find a large portion of the judicial system here disagrees with you.”

I wave my hand. *Judicial* is a Wiley City word if I’ve ever heard one, and it has no place between us.

Jean knows what I'm doing. Not only was it his idea, but it's his credentials I use to send myself the info. He thinks if I study the figures and look for patterns the way analysts do, I'll be valuable to the company for more than my mortality rate. He thinks I can be more than a traverser, that I can be like him. With the number of desks sitting empty around me, I am desperate to believe he's right.

Jean was in the first group of surviving traversers. Before that, he lived through a rebel army's ten-year border war on the Ivory Coast. As a traverser, he could visit more than two hundred fifty Earths. He used to walk the worlds with us, but now he sits in a room and makes the policies surrounding world walking. When he goes out in public, people repeat his famous quote—*I have seen two worlds now and the space between. We are a wonder.*—from the moment he landed safely on the new world. They shake his hand and take his picture, but he is quick to remind me that he was once worthless, too.

Jean is the one who told me about Nyame, just like he tells every new traverser. It's the name of a goddess where he comes from, one who sits in the dark holding the worlds in her palm. He says the first time he traveled to another world, he could feel her hand guiding him. I've never had much use for religion, but I respect him too much to disagree.

"This is 197, yes?" he asks, nodding to the screen showing the info I've just pulled. "The sky scientists were braying over it."

"They're called astronomers, Jean. And yeah,

they put a rush on it. They want pictures of some asteroid that's too far away, and they didn't want to wait a week for." I try to rotate my arm and wince at the ache.

"They paid premium to rush a few pictures?" Jean makes a dismissive clucking sound. "Too much money, not enough purpose."

Jean's dislike of astronomers is an occupational hazard, and the dislike is mutual. Those working strictly in the field of space exploration haven't been fond of inter-universal travel, the new frontier that came along and snatched up a chunk of their funding. In return, those who work at Eldridge treat space exploration the way a young male lion looks at an older, sickly male lion: no outright violence, but maybe showing too much excitement in anticipation of the death.

Jean nudges the mug I'm ignoring toward me again. Sighing, I take a sip and barely keep from spitting.

"I was really hoping for coffee," I say, forcing myself to down the dark mixture of vitamin D, zinc, and too many other not-quite-dissolved nutrients.

"Coffee is not what you need," he says, in the accent my limited world experience first thought of as French. "Nyame kissed you hard this time."

"With teeth."

"So I see. Dell marked you for observation."

Of course she did. "I've only been scheduling pulls close together so I can take a few days off. I told her that."

“A vacation? I should think staying in place would have more appeal for you.”

“Not a vacation. It’s . . . it’s a family thing.”

At the mention of *family* he smiles, which just goes to show what he knows. In the worlds where he survived—where he wasn’t a child soldier, where he didn’t die trying to stow away into Europe—he did so because of the strength of his father and the bravery of his mother. From the worlds I’ve studied, his deaths are usually despite their best efforts.

Most of my deaths can be linked directly to my mother.

“Enjoy this time off. Don’t do too much studying.”

“I’ll try.”

But not very hard.

I’ve been staying up too late studying world stats and the company’s internal textbooks since he first mentioned the possibility of a promotion to analyst. My mother used to say I was born reaching, which is true. She also used to say it would get me killed, which it hasn’t. Not yet, anyway. Not here.

Before I head home, I swing by Starla Saeed’s place. I’m nearly too late, and I approach her apartment among a stream of people in uniforms moving out boxes of her stuff.

She’s standing in the yard, flanked on either side by immigration enforcement. Her eyes are glassy but clear. She might have been crying earlier, but she’s done with it now. She looks strong, defiant, head

held high like she hasn't lost everything in the world. I hope I look like that when they come for me.

“Star . . .”

When she turns to me she looks neither surprised nor particularly pleased, but when she looks down at the basket of apples in my hand, she gives me a little smirk.

“We're not all Ashtowners, Caramenta,” she says. “Some of us have tree fruit in our homelands.”

I look down. Most traversers come from the encampments outside of walled cities; I just assumed the other towns were like my wasteland. Starla comes from outside of Ira City in the Middle East, one of the biggest and oldest walled structures nestled in the space between what used to be Iraq and Iran. Maybe the settlements outside of Ira are full of fruit and white bread and everything else Ashtown doesn't have.

A man carrying a box walks too fast, and the sound of glass clinking against glass rings out between us. She watches him like he's dragging her baby by the foot. She looks like she might yell—she's known around the office for her quick temper—but her eyes flick to the enforcement agent standing closest to her, and she swallows it down. She's furious, but helpless.

“I just thought you'd like something. I know it's a long flight.” I hold out the basket. “You can still resent me, even if you take them.”

She smiles again, her mouth wide and full. “I intend to.”

She takes the basket, but it's more out of pity than wanting the fruit.

"I'll miss you," I say.

"So look for me," she says. "I'm only missing on a few hundred worlds, and this is just one more. I recommend Earth 83 me. She's my favorite."

A woman in a jumpsuit tells the agents they're done, and the men push Star along. She looks at me over her shoulder.

"Don't waste your time feeling guilty," she says. "It'll be you soon enough."

Over my dead body . . . but that's not what she needs to hear. So I nod a goodbye and turn away to avoid witnessing her walk of shame.

In my apartment I keep a collection of places I have been in sealed bags on the wall. I've never catalogued them, but I can identify each item on sight: dirt from the lot where my childhood home would have been in a world where the slums never made it that far; smooth rocks from a river that's been dead on my world for centuries; a jade earring given to me by a girl on another Earth who wanted me to remember her, but who only let me love her at all because she didn't know where I came from. There are hundreds, and when I get back from Earth 175, there will be one more.

The worlds we can reach are similar to ours, so most of their viruses already exist here. But just in case, I seal my souvenirs in the bags Eldridge used to use for specimen collection, before they got bored

playing biologists and shifted hard to mining and data collection.

I'm staring at my clothes, trying to figure out which to bring. It's hard, living in Wiley while visiting Ashtown. Not a lot of people go between. Sure, Wileyites will visit Ashtown like tourists, and Ashtown kids sometimes get scholarships to Wiley schools, but no one ever tries to fit in both places. Wiley City is like the sun, and Ashtown a black hole; it's nearly impossible to hover in between without being torn apart. I've spent my time in the city accumulating the kind of clothes that will make me look like I've never been to Ashtown at all. If I were smart I'd keep a set of Ashtown clothes for these trips instead of standing out like a mirror in the desert every time I go. But deep down, I don't want to fit in. I don't want to look like I belong there, because one day I want to pretend I never did.

I'm fingering a blouse I can't bring—true black synthetic silk, nothing a former Ruralite holy girl would wear—when my sister calls.

Instead of words, she answers with a grunt of frustration.

“Preparations going that well, huh?” I say, sitting on the bed. Esther is still just a teenager, but the amount of responsibility she's inherited makes her seem older.

“It's fine,” she says, voice primly forced. Ruralites aren't allowed to be angry, not at other people, because it would violate their code of endless compassion and understanding.

“Michael still being useless?”

No one tests Esther’s faith, or her temper, like her twin brother.

“Cara, you know all people have value and use in the eyes of God. Michael would be a valuable contribution to the dedication . . . if he’d shown up at any of the preparations.”

Ah, there it is, Esther’s rage—the venom no less potent for all its masking.

“And now we have cousin Joriah saying he might drop in and—”

I roll off the bed, my heart thudding. “Joriah?”

“Yes, you remember. Tall, red hair? He moved out here for a little while when we were young, but then left for the deep wastes as a missionary.”

Of course I don’t remember. I can’t.

“He’s based in some small town on the other side of the dead lands now, but Dad thinks he might make the pilgrimage.”

She goes on, but I’m not really listening. I reach under my bed, pulling out my box of journals. Esther said when *we* were young, so I pick a journal from after Esther’s father married my mother. *Caramenta, age 13* is written on its cover. Esther would have been five.

“Hey, I gotta go, but I’ll see you soon.”

I hit the button on my cuff to disconnect from Esther, then begin searching through the journal. Eventually I find an entry mentioning Joriah moving in and skim a bit longer until he moves away again, gleaning all I can about him. Apparently he was very

funny, though not great at personal hygiene. I find a few more references in later journals, but then it really is time to go. My mother won't yell if I'm late—not like she used to—but she'll cloak herself in this sad, martyred quiet I can't stand. I put the journals back. In them, Cousin Jorah is just called "Jori." I whisper both versions of the name so that when I say them out loud later, it won't sound like it's the first time.

I've gotten rid of a lot of things from my past, but I'll always keep the journals. I read them like data from another world, doing research on people who love me like they are a puzzle to be solved. I don't write now. I make lists in my current journal, but that only started as a way for me to practice writing in Eldridge's code, so I'm not sure it counts. In the box under my bed there is one journal for every year, two some years, but I've had the same one for six years now and haven't managed to fill it up. Maybe it's because there's so little I'm sure of these days.

I've been in Wiley City for six years as a resident. In four more, I'll be pronounced a citizen. For now, I'm nowhere. I live in Wiley but I'm legally still Ash-town's, and neither has a claim on me that counts. It's a space between worlds, no different than the star-lined darkness I stand in when I traverse. The darkness is worth it, because I know what waits on the other side.

Reasons I have died:

The emperor of the wasteland wanted to make an example of my mother, and started with me.

One of my mother's boyfriends wanted to cover up what he did to me.

I was born addicted, and my lungs didn't develop.

I was born addicted, and my brain didn't develop.

I was left alone, and a stranger came along.

The runners came for a neighbor, and I was in the way.

The runners came for my mother, and I was in the way.

The runners came for my mother's boyfriend, and I was in the way.

The runners came for no one, serving nothing at all but chaos and fear, and I was what they found.

Sometimes, I was just forgotten in the shed where she kept me while she worked or got spun, and in the length of her high and the heat of the sun I fell asleep alone and hungry and forever.

Reasons I have lived:

I don't know, but there are eight.

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CHAPTER ONE

PARIS

A foggy morning in the Place de la Concorde.

Poking above the rooftops of the left-bank of the Seine, a blinking red light was all that could be seen of the Eiffel Tower. David Weiseman shook the drizzle from his overcoat, and then dodged through the cars streaming into the Place de la Concorde. He hustled past the Hotel de Crillon and across to Avenue Gabriel. Get on with it, he told himself.

He strode past the US embassy, casting only a quick glance at the tough-looking French flics twirling police batons, staring down nosy American tourists. A clap of thunder hastened his step. Ten minutes later he crossed the ornate Pont Alexander III, homage to the Russian Tsar who concluded the Franco-Russian alliance that endured for some twenty years, until the guns of the First World War shattered a century of post-Napoleonic peace in Europe.

Diplomacy rarely if ever succeeded like that.

Across the Seine, he took in the Quai d'Orsay, said to be the home of the French mandarins who considered themselves masters of the stylized international ballet known as diplomacy. This fine art meant staying on one's toes, sustaining the process, never letting it break down. But it did break down, Weiseman knew, remembering Berlin ... the Gruenewald ... every twenty years or so in Europe, leading to the two world wars of the twentieth century.

And so he saw things differently, reminding himself diplomacy wasn't just about process, or compromise. It was about persuading the other country that it was in *their* interest to do what *you* wanted them to do. Trevor said Gramont, the man Weiseman was on his way to meet, could be trusted. Well, he didn't quite say that. Trevor—Weiseman's boss, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency—didn't trust anyone. He said Laurent Gramont was important, the door into the French elites.

At the Foreign Ministry, a young woman in outsized amber glasses led him to the secretary general's office. Gramont was with an aide, giving instructions. He held himself tall and straight in a perfectly tailored, double-breasted gray suit with a subtle dark stripe, a silver tie with a pearl tie tack, matching cufflinks on his white shirt. His hair was a richly toned silver gray. He was a French Trevor, knowing and discreet, no doubt ready to be ruthless.

"Monsieur Weiseman, quel plaisir."

Gramont's inner office was a gorgeous Empire spectacle, separated from the outer world by mauve, silk drapes. The gilt inlaid desk was devoid of any papers. A revolving globe stood to the right. Europe on top, France in the middle.

Weiseman gestured toward it. "Still the center of civilization, I see."

Gramont allowed the kind of half smile that also reminded Weiseman of Trevor. "It's our mission," he said. "But please, have a seat." He lifted the phone, whispered, *"Deux cafés."*

"Justin Trevor suggested I see you first. I'll be—"

"Yes, of course. I know your role. Justin called me from Washington."

I need you to find me someone to replace the Shah, to run the country for us. A general, a cutthroat, a cleric. But our man. Our entire position in the Middle East depends on it.

Gramont sat perfectly still, a modern day Renaissance prince, a Machiavelli waiting to grant a trivial favor. Like Trevor. What exactly is their relationship? Weiseman wondered.

"You and Justin go back a long way."

"Oh yes, one could say that. We were in Moscow together, as ambassadors, before he went to Prague. He told me about his promising young protégé during the Prague Spring, an idealist who stood his ground, made him reconsider his own positions. Not easy to do with Justin. So it seems you're *un homme sérieux*, someone we can work with."

“Well then, has there been any progress on the New Year’s Eve incident?”

“Ah, yes, the ritual executions. Quite grisly—in bed, nude, their throats were slit. The man was an anti-Shah exile, a bazaari, a businessman who came to Paris when things got hot.”

Weiseman took that in without comment. Gramont had been calm in relating the barbaric acts, but it was obvious that the French were concerned Iranian infighting in France might spread.

He asked, “Who did it? What do your services think?”

“*Tiens, tiens*, it’s a bit of a puzzle. The woman was a relative of Empress Farah. Fabulously wealthy. The word was that she liked to play.”

“A puzzle indeed,” Weiseman said, wanting him to get to the point.

Gramont turned his head ever so slightly, his Adam’s apple bobbing a bit, a trait Weiseman had noticed before among high French dignitaries.

“Perhaps a political assassination by SAVAK,” Gramont suggested.

Weiseman shook his head, recalling what Trevor told him. “The Shah’s security service? In Paris? Well, the French *would* say that, wouldn’t they. The Shah’s our man. The French are betting he’ll be gone soon, so they pin it on SAVAK and wait to displace our influence in Iran.”

“I see. Of course it’s not just a police matter,” he said. “Something political.”

“Oh, yes. With the Middle East it’s always political. In France we have bitter memories of the Algerian war, of blasts in our Metro stations. That was just twenty years ago. Our Muslim community has been quiet since then, but I have no illusions. New Year’s Eve and then the Sorbonne killing of that young woman. Suicide bombings are quite possible.”

“And?”

“We monitor the Iranian factions. They could wage a jihad against each other in Paris.”

Ah.

The door opened and a man in a white starched jacket with gold epaulettes came in bearing two white china cups and saucers and two tiny glasses of water on a silver tray. Gramont’s little finger rose ever so slightly as he drank down the espresso. “It won’t be easy,” he said morosely, “what Justin is asking you to do. You’ll rather stand out on the streets of Tehran. Of course, you’ll be monitored from the day you arrive. By SAVAK, and by the others.”

No doubt your people, too, and mine, thought Weiseman.

The phone rang and Gramont spoke softly into it, switching to an indecipherable Breton dialect. Weiseman looked around the office. There was a watercolor that looked like a Monet. He got up to examine a gold plaque on a nearby walnut table. The dedication was to Le Comte Laurent Gramont from former President Charles de Gaulle. Royalty then. And next to it was a facsimile of the ribbons in Gramont’s suit lapel: *Le Croix de Guerre*.

Gramont hung up the phone. He was sure, he said, that there was much he could offer a colleague of Justin Trevor’s as it affected matters in Iran. He would be honored to put his new American friend in touch with the right people. And then, smooth as silk, “Please, call me Laurent. You’ll come to dinner at my home on Saturday. We have to do our work quietly, under the radar, as Justin would say.”

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Saint-Germain-des-Prés was a short walk away, through the tangle of narrow streets and alleys that flowed up from the Seine, between seventeenth-century buildings once occupied by French royals, by the noble facade of the École des

Beaux Arts, on to the medieval church.

On the boulevard, a man with a salt and pepper beard, slightly stooped, was walking his dachshund, urging him on whenever he fell into a stubborn crouch, refusing to take another step. A young couple went by, holding hands, fingers linked, engrossed in each other. A beggar in baggy pants limped toward Weiseman, his cane tapping on the cobblestones, holding out his beret. Weiseman dropped in a franc and watched the withered old man hold it up, bite on it, then bow theatrically, sweeping the cap before him like some character in Molière.

Weiseman glanced across to the Café de Flore, where Sartre still held forth. During the war, many of the French intellectuals had taken care not to confront the Nazis, Weiseman knew. He himself had been a small child in Hitler's Berlin, but he hadn't forgotten what Johann had taught him about what it was like to live under a dictator. It's why he became a diplomat, to engage and make sure the horror didn't come again, didn't swallow up other innocents.

He paused and thought of Trevor, how the new CIA director had surprised him the day after Jimmy Carter's inauguration by plucking him out of the State Department and assigning him on detail as his personal agent to deal with the looming crisis in Iran, supposedly a reward for his work during the Prague Spring on his first Foreign Service assignment. There were others Trevor could have chosen—Mideast experts fluent in Farsi—but he had insisted on Weiseman, "because I trust you."

Weiseman had no illusions about the game of espionage, or who would take the fall should things go wrong ... as well they might.

He started up again, heading down Saint-Germain, turning left on Rue du Dragon, by the fast-food joints and oriental restaurants. He reflected on how Gramont could help him on Iran, on what Trevor had told him about Gramont's game, on whether the French count could be trusted. In a doorway of a *hôtel*

particulier, a woman in white platform shoes, a short red skirt, and a red beret tapped ashes of a cigarette against the building. She raised her eyebrows.

“*Non, merci,*” Weiseman said.

He picked up the pace and rounded the corner to Rue Grenelle, over to Boulevard Raspail. In less than five minutes he turned onto the Rue de Varenne, pushed on double doors, and entered an enclave, Rue Cité de Varenne, an upper class oasis insulating its residents from the hurly-burly of the city—the sounds and smells, the stream of pedestrians, the blaring Klaxons of speeding taxis. He started down a dark path, past enclosed tennis courts. Overhead lights came on, illuminating four white town houses. Number 8 was at the end of the road. He stepped up to the door and pressed the bell. A barely audible chime sounded. A maid in a black dress and white apron opened the door. “*Bonsoir, Monsieur Weiseman.*”

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A bronze equestrian statue with a stern Roman gladiator guarded the stairwell. At the top of the stairs, Laurent Gramont, in a three-piece, black-tie ensemble, stood on a finely woven Persian carpet—a Tabriz, Weiseman thought, based on the cream and red ornamental patterns. The town house was a *mélange* of East and West. The walls were a beige silk decorated with a motif that looked like Louis XV, before the revolution, when aristos still ruled the roost in well-guarded enclaves. Behind Gramont, guests whispered under the chandelier he had seen from outside. It was a formal affair—black ties for men, women in long silk dresses.

Like Trevor, Weiseman thought again, Gramont was tough, even ruthless when need be, but now the *bon vivant*. He followed his host into the salon, tasting his champagne. “This is David Weiseman,” Gramont announced, “en

route to Tehran.” Heads nodded ever so slightly. A muscular man with a shock of gray hair approached, followed by an elegant woman, offered his hand and introduced his wife. He was the minister of defense. Next, a shipping magnate and a younger woman, not his wife. A professor at ENA, the elite French *École Nationale d’ Administration*, his wife a couturier. Across the room, Weiseman saw a tall man with a white Van Dyck beard and sunken cheekbones, yet deeply tanned for all that, with a tiny white mustache beneath a prominent nose. “Someone you will want to meet,” Gramont said, and he led Weiseman over there.

“Alain de Rose,” the man said. He looked a bit like James Angleton, the old paranoid CIA counterintelligence chief—chain smoking, brushing ashes off his tux onto the superb Tabriz carpet. *Sûreté* was written all over him.

“Alain monitors the *Proche Orient* for our services,” Gramont confirmed. “The Near East from Egypt to Iran, the Saudis and Gulf emirates. And of course, Israel.”

“Then you’re involved in the investigation,” Weiseman said casually. He knew the Paris social scene, the little tricks and moral pieties that enabled one to inquire without breaching the code of the French upper crust.

“Yes, of course.” De Rose’s voice was gruff, almost as if his larynx had been removed. “The Iranian girl at the Sorbonne. But it’s more than one assassination. We’ve got a sticky web of Iranians in Paris, fighting it out by proxy over what will happen when the Shah goes.”

Well, this is someone worth talking to, Weiseman thought.

“You expect the Shah to be deposed?”

De Rose shrugged. “Everyone goes at some point. Your president was forced to resign, to avoid impeachment.”

Weiseman nodded, recalling past encounters as a young diplomat with Nixon, that working dinner at San Clemente when the president was drunk,

Nixon's diplomatic mastery in dealing with Kremlin leaders.

“Yes, we're all on short-term leases,” he conceded

Heels tapped. “*Et enfin,*” Gramont said. “Our hostess has appeared, finally.”

Weiseman turned to see a five-foot-ten woman in black silk; dark hair cut short, almost boyish; a rakishly tied belt that highlighted her narrow waist. This was Margot Gramont. She thanked him for the flowers he had sent along that afternoon, then introduced a lovely young woman in an emerald-green silk dress, with long, glossy, black hair. Yasmine de Rose was a student at the Sorbonne, and the daughter of Alain de Rose.

A tuxedoed waiter came up and whispered into Margo Gramont's ear. “Dinner is served,” she said. “There is one more couple expected, but we may begin.”

Weiseman offered his arm to Yasmine de Rose and led her to her place, held her chair. She smiled shyly and gestured to the place marker with his name. “*Asseyez vous, monsieur.*”

He sat at the place next to her and took in her porcelain-like facial features, her two luminous dark eyes, the way she lowered them modestly. Is she Iranian? he wondered.

A fork tapped on a glass. Laurent Gramont welcomed his guests with words that flowed like the Seine.

The maid entered and announced, “*Monsieur Schreiber et Madame d'Antou.*”

The chunky man wore a tuxedo with a red bow tie and pocket square, red braces and cummerbund—gray-black hair was combed straight back and brilliantined flat against his skull. The woman was altogether different: in her early thirties, slim, a gold gown highlighting lustrous blond hair in a chignon with a jeweled clasp.

The host and hostess embraced the woman, then shook hands formally with the man. Laurent Gramont said, “We’re pleased to welcome dear Françoise once again to our home. And Jacques Schreiber. Just in time for dinner.”

* * *

A black-tie waiter swept away the coquillage, a formidable array of prawns and scallops, clams and moules, oysters from Normandy. Seated between Yasmine de Rose and Françoise d’Antou, Weiseman chatted easily in French with each, aware of those across the table inspecting him. He asked Françoise what Jacques did, wondering, What is their relationship?

The waiter began to serve the grilled *turbotin* and to offer a sterling silver pitcher of hollandaise sauce. “Jacques is in the armaments business,” Françoise said.

“In the Middle East?”

“*Oui*. In Iran and Saudi, also in Libya.”

“And when he travels there ...”

“He goes alone.”

“And you?”

“I’m a diplomatic correspondent for *Le Figaro*, specializing in Iran. I speak Farsi and go there often, and to Iraq.” She sipped the wine, the napkin caressed her lips. She caught his eye. “We’re not a couple. *Vous comprenez?*”

Her glass was empty and Weiseman signaled to the waiter, who came over and filled it with more white wine. He gestured toward Yasmine and the waiter filled her glass, too.

“You were in Tehran recently, Jacques,” Alain de Rose said from the center of the table. “How goes the Shah?”

“Mohammad Reza Pahlavi,” he said, “is America’s puppet.” Jacques

Schreiber sliced into the *turbotin*. “All Tehran is waiting for him to fall. The factions are arming to the teeth.”

“Well, you would know, Jacques,” the ENA professor said. “You sell to all of them.”

“And why not?” Schreiber said. “Jobs for our people. But regrettably, the Anglo-Saxons keep the Shah well equipped. Perhaps it was American weapons that SAVAK used here in Paris on New Year’s Eve.”

Weiseman noticed Schreiber staring hard at him, daring him to respond. Françoise whispered, “Let it pass. Jacques is trying to bait you.”

“Do you know that, monsieur?” Weiseman asked. “That SAVAK carried out the murder?”

Schreiber rolled his eyes, as if only the village idiot would doubt it. Weiseman looked first at Gramont, then Alain de Rose.

“Of course, you’re right to ask,” Gramont said softly. “The matter is unsettled.”

De Rose shot Weiseman a glance. His lips seemed to synch, *Later ...*

Margot Gramont smiled sweetly, “Who would like more of the turbot?”

“But you know Jacques may be right,” the professor’s wife said. “The Shah is a tyrant. The Americans have been propping him up for years, averting their eyes from the torture.” A pause for effect. “Look, I don’t have any use for French arms dealers”—here, a nasty glance at Jacques Schreiber—“but why not give the Shah’s political opponents a chance?”

Weiseman wondered, Why not indeed?

“And who are these opponents?” he asked. “Would we want to see them in power? Religious fundamentalists are operating right here in Paris. Isn’t that true, Laurent?”

“Well, we’ve seen those reports,” Gramont said. “It’s very complicated, rather opaque.”

“Not so opaque,” Yasmine suddenly said aloud. “Iranian exiles at the Sorbonne are organizing into cells, pro and anti-Shah. There are SAVAK agents in training, religious fanatics spreading the word of the Ayatollah. Students are being beaten up—one was even killed. And that Iranian couple murdered here on New Year’s Eve—”

Weiseman thought she seemed extremely agitated. It was more than the usual fevered debate at a diplomatic dinner party.

Françoise d’Antou said, “I interviewed Ayatollah Khomeini in Iraq recently. He was expelled by the Shah years ago; he’s the Shah’s *bête noire*.” She stared directly at Schreiber who seemed about to burst a blood vessel. “One of your customers, Jacques, I believe.”

Weiseman looked down the table at Gramont and de Rose, studying their fingers.

* * *

After dinner, the men and women separated into two groups—the ladies in the salon, the men in a den where drinks and cigars were distributed. As Jacques went off to use the phone in the next room, Gramont led Weiseman into a huddle with de Rose. Gramont told him that Françoise’s father had been close to him. De Rose said Jacques Schreiber was a man of the far right, fiercely Catholic, a *collaborateur* who did the bidding of the gestapo in the war, a schemer who advanced himself on the backs of others.

“It’s a sordid story,” Gramont added. “He’s here because we find him useful.”

Useful?

“The violence at the Sorbonne,” Weiseman said to de Rose. “It’s not just old wounds.”

“Of course not,” de Rose said, “What my daughter spoke about is correct. Those things are happening now, and it brings back memories of our past. We haven’t forgotten the bombings. It’s still a scar on our politics. Now we see it coming again.”

Gramont led them to a corner set of three fauteuils. “You leave tomorrow for Tehran, David. You’ll want to meet everyone in the government, civil society, even the mullahs. But discreetly. There’s a man called Hanif; he heads SAVAK. Justin knows Hanif. So do I.”

Gramont paused, as if deciding whether to say more. “We know the opposition, even some ayatollahs.”

I’ll bet you do, thought Weiseman.

“And intermediaries?” he asked.

“Yasmine will introduce you to student leaders,” de Rose said softly. “She was born there. She’s very attuned to the *reseau*. The network.”

“And there are others,” Gramont said. “Françoise—”

Jacques Schreiber reentered the room. “It’s time to go,” he said abruptly.

Weiseman looked up, startled by the peremptory tone. What was this about?

Gramont led them back into the salon.

Françoise d’Antou appeared a moment later, stunning in a shimmering black fur cloak. She gave Weiseman a subtle but meaningful look, as if anxious to tell him something.

“Monsieur,” Jacques said crisply, then turned on his heel and headed toward the door.

Françoise stepped forward, slipped a note into Weiseman’s hand, then kissed him on both cheeks, and pulled her cloak tightly about her as she followed Jacques Schreiber out into the cold Paris night.

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Yasmine. Weisman had a feeling she would be able to tell him more about the murder at the Sorbonne. He excused himself and went to look for her.

He found her sitting alone in a small book-lined den. She appeared to have been crying. She looked up, but didn't say anything.

"When you spoke in there about the Sorbonne student being killed," he said, "it didn't seem like something you'd only heard about. If you can tell me, I'd like to know. Perhaps it would help."

Yasmine shook her head, was silent for a moment. "She was a friend of mine," Yasmine finally said. "A gentle girl named Shirin Majid. From a good family. Her father is a banker in Tehran. She was completely apolitical."

For an instant it looked as if Yasmine would resume crying, but she stifled it and continued. "It was the headscarf," she said. "Shirin wore it every day. It didn't cover the hair in the front of her head—that was her tiny statement, her freedom. They warned her to cover up, but she wouldn't wear the chador. She was a modern Iranian woman, like me. She told me she wouldn't abandon her identity. And now ..."

Weisman felt a gathering force in what she was saying, the way a small wave can crest into something terrifying. "Shirin was walking on the Boul'Mich," Yasmine said softly. "I was about a hundred meters behind her when I recognized her headscarf. I was about to call out to her when I saw three Muslim guys wearing skullcaps cross the street toward her. They grabbed her by the arms and pushed her against a wall. One of them pulled the scarf down over her hair so that all of it was covered. Then he tied it very tightly around her throat. Shirin started screaming. She pulled the knot open and fixed it again, her way. They started up again, and she screamed at them, saying she was a woman, not their property."

Yasmine's voice had risen, so that it seemed she was the one who was crying out against the attackers. Suddenly, she seemed to shrink down into her body, as if retelling the words had intensified Shirin's terror—and her own.

Weisman saw before his eyes the two slain nudes from New Year's Eve; he felt the wave swelling, ready to crash. "And then?" he said, urgently.

Yasmine took a deep breath. "A Mercedes was parked there. A man got out. He was huge, a big man in a jellaba."

Yasmine was sobbing now. He reached out to steady her, but she had to get it out, to tell everything. "The man drew a long sword out of his jellaba."

She sobbed hysterically as she relived what she had seen. "He raised the sword over his shoulder, and then he swung it at Shirin. She was standing there, and then—"

But the words wouldn't come.

"A lovely, heartrending story . . . An assured, confident debut by
a talented new author." —KRISTIN HANNAH,
#1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Nightingale*



FIFTY
WORDS
FOR
RAIN

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DUTTON

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PRELUDE

Kyoto Prefecture, Japan
Summer 1948

The first real memory Nori had was pulling up to that house. For many years afterward, she would try to stretch the boundaries of her mind further, to what came before that day. Time and time again, she'd lie on her back in the stillness of the night and try to recall. Sometimes she'd catch a glimpse in her head of a tiny apartment with lurid yellow walls. But the image would disappear as quickly as it came, leaving no sense of satisfaction in its wake. And so if you asked her, Nori would say that her life had officially begun the day she laid eyes on the imposing estate that rested serenely between the crests of two green hills. It was a stunningly beautiful place—there was no denying it—and yet, despite this beauty, Nori felt her stomach clench and her gut churn at the sight of it. Her mother rarely took her anywhere, and somehow she knew that something was waiting for her there that she would not like.

The faded blue automobile skidded to a stop on the street across from the estate. It was in the traditional style, surrounded

by high white walls. The first set of gates was open, allowing full view into the meticulously arranged courtyard beyond. But the inner gates to the house itself were sealed shut. There were words engraved at the top of the main gate, embossed in gold lettering for all to see. But Nori could not read them. She could read and write her name—*No-ri-ko*—but nothing else. In that moment, she wished she could read every word ever written, in every language from sea to sea. Not being able to read those letters frustrated her to an extent she didn't understand. She turned to her mother.

“Okaasan, what do those letters say?”

The woman seated beside her let out a stifled sigh of frustration. It was clear that she'd been a great beauty in her day. She was still gorgeous, but her young face was beginning to reflect the toll life had taken on her. Her dark, thick hair was bound behind her head in a braid that kept attempting to unravel. Her soft gray eyes were cast downwards. She would not meet her daughter's gaze.

“*Kamiza*,” she answered at last. “It says *Kamiza*.”

“But that's our name, isn't it?” Nori chirped, her curiosity immediately piqued.

Her mother let out a strangled giggle that made the hair on the back of Nori's neck stand up. The driver of the car, a man Nori had never seen before this morning, shot them a startled glance in the rearview mirror.

“Yes,” she responded softly, eyes alight with a strange look that Nori's limited vocabulary did not have the means to name. “That is our family name. This is where my mother and father live, child. Your grandparents.”

Nori felt her heartbeat quicken. Her mother had never be-

fore made any mention of relatives or family. Indeed, the two of them had drifted along in solitude so long it seemed strange to Nori that they could actually be anchored to a tangible place.

“Did you live here once, Okaasan?”

“Once,” her mother said dryly. “Before you were born. A long time ago.”

Nori scrunched her face up in a frown. “Why did you leave?”

“That’s enough questions now, Noriko. Get your things. Come.”

Nori obeyed, biting her lip to refrain from inquiring further. Her mother did not like questions. Every time Nori asked something, she was met with a disapproving glance. It was better not to ask. On the rare occasions Nori was able to please her mother, she was given a dry half smile in return. Sometimes, if she was especially good, her mother would reward her with some candy or a new ribbon. So far, in eight years of life, Nori had a collection of twelve ribbons, one for each time she’d been able to make her mother happy.

“It is good for a woman to learn silence,” her mother always said. “If a woman knows nothing else, she should know how to be silent.”

Nori stepped onto the pavement, checking to make sure she had all of her things. She had her little brown suitcase with the straps that were fraying apart and her purple silk ribbon tied around the handle. She had her blue satchel with the silver clasp that she had gotten for her last birthday. And that was all she had. Not that Nori thought she needed much more than that.

For the first time since she’d been roused at dawn that morning, Nori noticed that her mother was not carrying any bags.

The woman stood as if her pale pink satin slippers were rooted to the unnaturally white sidewalk. Her bright eyes were fixed on a spot Nori could not follow.

Nori took note of what her mother was wearing: a short-sleeved, baby blue knee-length dress. Tan stockings. Around her neck she wore a petite silver cross with a little diamond in the center. She had her hands clasped in front of her chest, so tightly that tiny blue veins had become visible beneath the delicate skin.

Nori reached out a hesitant hand to touch her mother's arm. "Okaasan . . ."

Her mother blinked rapidly and unclasped her hands, arms falling to swing limply at her sides. Her eyes, however, did not move from their perch.

"Noriko," she said, with such unusual affection saturating her tone that it left Nori in near disbelief, "I want you to make me a promise."

Nori blinked up at her mother, doing her best to look pretty and obedient and all that her mother would have her be. She would not spoil this moment with her clumsy tongue.

"Yes, Okaasan?"

"Promise me you will obey."

The request caught her off guard. Not because it was unlike something her mother would say, but because not once in her life had Nori ever disobeyed. It didn't seem like something that needed to be requested. Her confusion must have been evident because her mother turned and knelt down so that they were nearly eye level.

"Noriko," she said, with an urgency Nori had never heard before. "Promise me. Promise me that you will obey in all

things. Do not question. Do not fight. Do not resist. Do not think if thinking will lead you somewhere you ought not to be. Only smile and do as you are told. Only your life is more important than your obedience. Only the air you breathe. Promise me this.”

Nori thought to herself that this conversation was very odd. A thousand questions burned her tongue. She swallowed them back.

“Yes, Okaasan. *Yakusoku shimasu*. I promise.”

Her mother let out a ragged sigh, caught somewhere between relief and despair.

“Now listen. You will go inside the gate, Nori. Your grandparents will ask you your name. What will you tell them?”

“Noriko, Okaasan. Noriko Kamiza.”

“Yes. And they will ask you how old you are. And what will you tell them?”

“I’m eight, Okaasan.”

“They will ask where I have gone. And you will tell them that I did not tell you. That you don’t know. Do you understand?”

Nori felt her mouth begin to go dry. Her heart fluttered against her chest, like a little bird trying to escape a cage. “Okaasan, where are you going? Aren’t you coming with me?”

Her mother did not reply. She stood up, reaching into her pocket and pulling out a thick yellow envelope.

“Take this,” she urged, pressing it into Nori’s sweaty palm. “Give it to them when they ask questions.”

Nori’s voice began to scale up in panic. “Okaasan, where are you going?”

Her mother looked away.

“Nori, hush. Do not cry. Stop crying this instant!”

She felt the tears that had begun to well recede inside her eye sockets with frightening speed. It seemed that they too were bound to obey.

“Noriko,” her mother continued, tone softening to a whisper. “You are a good girl. Do as you are told and everything will be fine. Don’t cry now. You have no reason to cry.”

“Yes, Okaasan.”

Her mother hesitated, searching for words for several long moments. Finally, she decided there were none and settled for patting her daughter twice on the top of the head.

“I’ll watch you go. Go on. Get your things.”

Noriko picked up her belongings and proceeded slowly towards the gate. It towered over her. Her steps grew smaller and smaller as she approached it.

Every few steps she’d peer over her shoulder to make sure that her mother was still watching. She was. Noriko swallowed.

When she finally reached the gate, she paused, unsure of how to proceed. It was open, and yet she was quite sure that she should not be entering. She waited for her mother to instruct her, but the woman remained on the sidewalk, watching in silence.

Step by step, Nori inched up the walkway. When she was halfway up, she paused, unable to continue any farther. She turned in desperation to her mother, who by now had made her way back to the car.

“Okaasan!” Nori whimpered, her previous calm leaving her in one terrifying moment. She wanted to run back to her mother, but something kept her pinned to the spot.

That something held her there, relentless and pitiless in the strength of its grasp. It did not let her move, nor breathe, nor cry

out as she watched her mother give her one last, strangely bright gaze before getting back into the car and shutting the door behind her. She could not so much as blink as she watched the car speed down the street, around the corner, and out of sight.

Nori was not quite sure how long she stood transfixed. The sun was high in the sky when she finally resumed her slow march up the walkway through the courtyard. Still in a trance, she raised her tiny hand to knock lightly on the gates that obscured the house, leaving only its upper floors and looming roof visible. No one answered. She pushed, half hoping they would not open. They didn't, and they were far too heavy for her to make another attempt.

She sat. And she waited. For what, exactly, she was unsure.

A few moments later, the gates opened, moved by an invisible force. Two large men in suits emerged, peering down at her with disdain.

“Go away, little girl,” the first one said. “No beggars.”

“I'm not a beggar,” Nori protested, finding her feet. “I'm Noriko.”

They both stared at her blankly. Nori extended the envelope her mother had given her with a trembling hand.

“Kamiza Noriko desu.”

The two exchanged an indecipherable glance. Then, without another word, they disappeared back behind the gate.

Nori waited. Her head was spinning, but she forced herself to remain standing.

After another long moment, the first of the men returned.

He crooked his finger at her. “Come on.”

He snatched up her belongings and marched ahead, leaving her to rush after him. The house was beautiful, more a palace

than a house, but Nori's attention quickly focused on the figure standing in front of it.

An elderly woman, with her mother's eyes and streaks of silver in her neatly coiffed hair, stared down at her in utter disbelief.

Because there was nothing else to do, Nori did as she was told.
“*Konbanwa, Obaasama. My name is Nori.*”

CHAPTER ONE

WATER SONG

Kyoto, Japan
Summer 1950

It came quickly, the pain. It arrived with startling fanfare. Nothing could stop it once it had set on its morbid path.

The pain came quickly. It was the going that took longer.

Nori almost welcomed the onset of the pain, knowing that it was the best of what was to come. First there was the tingling, like a little feather tapping out a jig on her skin. Then there was the slow burn. One by one, every nerve in her body began to scream until they were screeching in unison, forming a chorus of protest. Then there were the tears. Nori had learned in her younger years not to fight the tears, as it only made them worse.

The fight would lead to her gasping for air, sucking it in through her nose in ragged spurts and feeling her rib cage squeeze tight. Snot would dribble from her nose and mingle with her tears, forming a sickening brew that too often dripped into her open mouth.

It was better to accept the tears, with as much grace and dig-

nity as could be mustered. They would fall silently down her cheeks, constant and cool like a babbling brook.

There was some self-respect in that, at least.

“We’re done for today, Ojosama.”

Nori forced her stinging eyes to focus on the speaker: a maid in her early thirties, with a round, jolly face and a warm smile.

“Thank you, Akiko-san.”

The maid gently helped Nori rise from the porcelain bathtub, offering an arm for the ten-year-old to lean on as she stood.

The sharp gust of air on her naked body made her let out a little cry, and her knees buckled. Akiko stopped her from falling and, with strength that was surprising for her petite size, bodily lifted Nori from the tub and into a waiting chair.

Nori began to rock slowly back and forth, willing the constant motion to steady her shaking core. After a few moments, the pain had subsided just enough so that she could manage opening her eyes. She watched as Akiko washed the mixture of warm water, bleach, and murky specks of almond-colored skin—her skin—down the drain.

“Is it working, do you think?” she inquired, resenting the eagerness that crept into her voice. “Akiko-san, do you think it’s working?”

Akiko turned to look at the child who had been left to her care. Nori couldn’t read the look on her face. But then Akiko offered up a tiny smile, and Nori was flooded with relief.

“Yes, little madam, I think so. Your grandmother will be pleased.”

“Do you think I shall have a new dress?”

“Perhaps. If she gives me the money for fabric, I will make you a summer yukata. Your old one scarcely fits you anymore.”

“I would like blue. It is a noble color, isn’t it, Akiko-san?”

Akiko lowered her eyes and proceeded to re-dress Nori in a fresh cotton slip. “Blue would look very pretty on you, little madam.”

“It is Obaasama’s favorite color.”

“Yes. Now, run along. I’ll bring you your meal in an hour.”

Nori forced her limbs to move, ignoring the dull thump of pain. They were working, she knew they were, the daily baths. Her grandmother had sent all the way to Tokyo for the finest magic bath soap that money could buy. Nori bore the pain willingly, as she knew in time that the results would be worth any sufferings. She would stay in the bath all day if Akiko would let her, but her skin was prone to burning and she was only allowed to stay in it for twenty minutes at a time. Her left leg had a mottled purple burn on it that she had to hide with extra-long skirts, but she did not mind so much because the skin around the burn was wonderfully fair and bright.

She wanted all of her skin to look like that.

She padded through the hall, careful not to make any noise because it was afternoon and her grandmother preferred to sleep in the afternoon. Especially in winter, when it was too cold to pay social visits and the sun set early.

She scurried towards the stairs to the attic, avoiding eye contact with the staff, who seemed to stare at her whenever she crossed their path. Even after two years living in this house, they were still clearly uneasy with her presence.

Akiko had assured her that it wasn’t that they didn’t like her; it was simply that they weren’t used to having children around.

Either way, Nori was relieved to live in the attic, away from everything and everyone else. When she had come to stay here,

her grandmother had instructed that the attic be cleaned out and converted into living quarters.

The attic was very spacious, and it was full of things, more things than Nori had ever had before. She had a bed, a dining table and three chairs, a bookshelf, a basket full of knitting and sewing materials, a little altar for her prayers, a stove for the winter months, and an armoire to keep her clothes in. She had a small little vanity with a stool that, according to Akiko, had once belonged to her mother. She still had her brown suitcase with the purple silk ribbon tied around the handle. She still had the pale blue satchel with the little silver clasp. She kept these two things in a far corner of the room so that she would always know where to find them at a moment's notice.

But her favorite thing, by far, was the half-moon-shaped window above her bed that overlooked the gardens. When she stood on the bed (which she was not supposed to do but she did anyway), she could see the fenced-in yard with its green grass and its overgrown, ancient peach trees. She could see the man-made pond with the koi fish swimming in it and splashing about. She could see the faint outline of neighboring rooftops. As far as Nori was concerned, she could see the entire world.

How many times had she spent all night with her head pressed against the cool, damp glass? Certainly very many, and she considered herself quite fortunate that she had never been caught. That would have been a guaranteed beating.

She had not been allowed to leave the house since the day she arrived. And it was not a terrible sacrifice, not really, because she had rarely been allowed to leave the apartment she'd shared with her mother either.

Still, there were rules, many rules, for living in this house.

The cardinal rule was simple: stay out of sight unless summoned. Remain in the attic. Make no sound. Food was brought to her at set intervals three times a day; Akiko would take her downstairs to the bathroom. During the midday trip, Nori would have her bath.

Three times a week, an old man with a hunched back and failing eyesight would come to her attic and teach her reading, writing, numbers, and history. This one did not feel like a rule—Nori liked lessons. In fact, she was quite gifted at them. She was always asking Saotome-sensei to bring her new books. Last week, he'd brought her a book in English called *Oliver Twist*. She could not read a single word of it, but she had resolved to learn. It was such a pretty book, leather-bound and glistening.

And so those were the rules. They weren't too much to ask, she didn't think. She didn't understand them, but then, she didn't try.

Don't think.

Nori crept onto her small four-poster bed and pressed her face into the coolness of her pillow. It distracted her from her skin's persistent tingling. The instinctual desire to escape from pain soon lulled her into a listless sleep.

She had the same dream as always.

She was chasing the blue car as it drove away, calling out for her mother, but could never catch it.

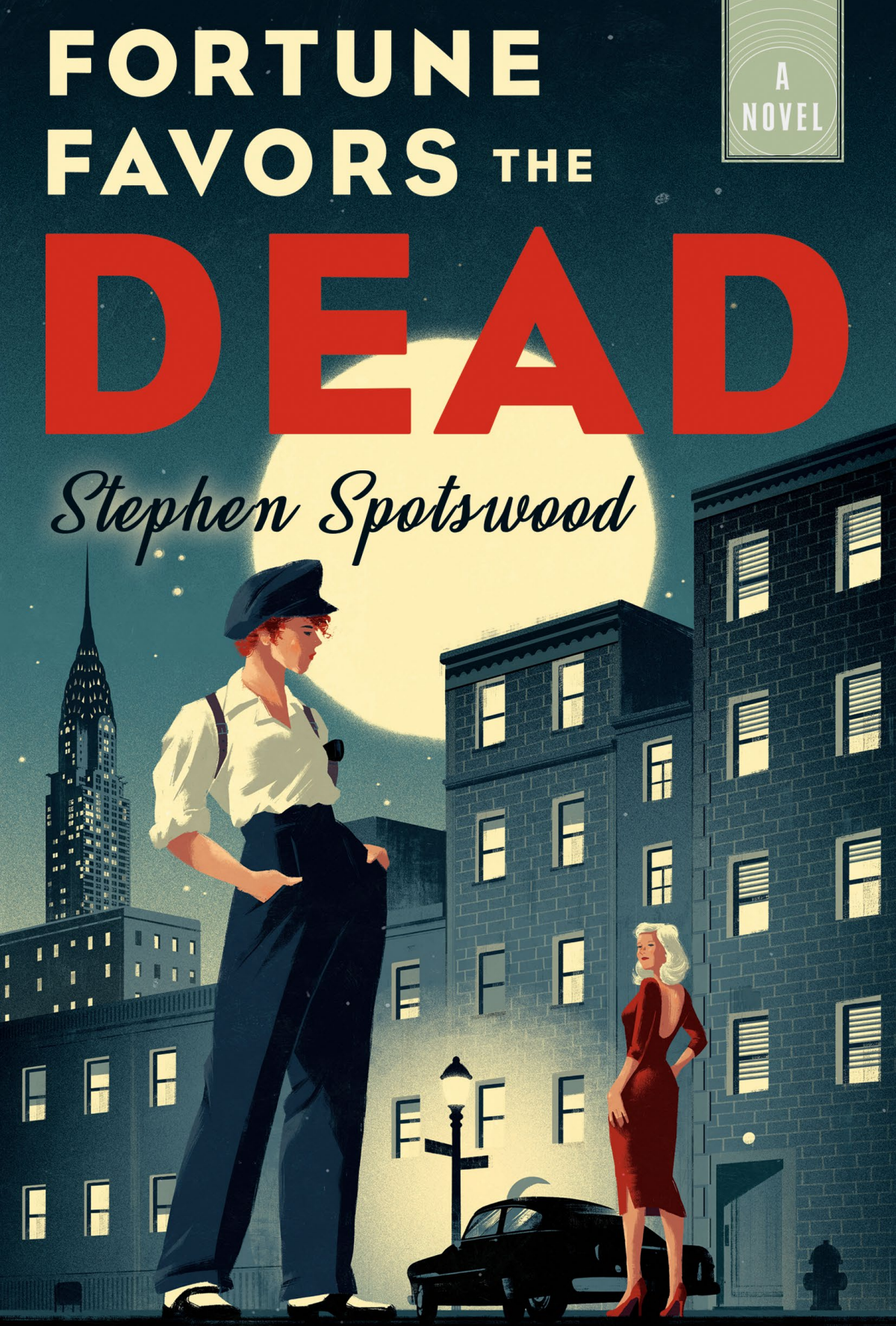


FORTUNE
FAVORS THE

A
NOVEL

DEAD

Stephen Spotswood



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CHAPTER 1

The first time I met Lillian Pentecost, I nearly caved her skull in with a piece of lead pipe.

I had scored a few shifts working guard duty at a building site on West Forty-second. A lot of the crew on Hart and Halloway's Traveling Circus and Sideshow picked up gigs like that whenever we rolled into a big city. Late-night and off-day gigs where we could clock in after a performance and get paid cash on the barrel.

There were more jobs like that available in those years. A lot of the men who'd usually have taken them were overseas hoping for a shot at Hitler. When you're desperate to fill a post, even a twenty-year-old cirky girl starts to look good.

Not that it required much of a résumé. It was a knuckle-head job. Walk the fenced-in perimeter from eleven until dawn and keep an eye out for anyone slipping through the fence. If anyone did, I was supposed to ring a bell and shout and make a ruckus to drive them away. If they refused, I ran and found a cop.

At least that was what I was *supposed* to do. McCloskey—the site foreman, who was paying me—had other thoughts.

“You catch anyone slipping in, you give them a good clobber with this,” he said, tugging at the ends of his greasy mous-

tache. *This* was a two-foot length of lead pipe. “You do that, you get an extra dollar bonus. Gotta set an example.”

Who I was setting an example for, I didn’t know. I also didn’t know what was around the site that would be worth stealing. Construction had just started, so it was basically a giant hole in the ground half the size of a city block. Some lumber, some pipe, a few tools, but nothing really worth pinching. This close to Times Square, I was more likely to get drunks looking for a place to sleep it off.

I expected to spend a handful of uneventful nights, collect a few bucks, and be done with my shift in time to run back to Brooklyn and help with the circus’s matinee. I was also hoping to find some quiet time to devour the detective novel I’d picked up at the newsstand down the street. Maybe catch a few hours’ sleep in some corner of the yard. On the road, solitary sleep—especially sleep without the rumble of trucks or the roar of the tigers prowling in their cage across the yard—was a rarity.

The first two nights, that was exactly how it went. It was actually kind of lonely. New York might be the city that never sleeps, but even those few blocks in the heart of Midtown took a catnap between two and five. Not much in the way of foot traffic, or at least little that could be heard through the seven-foot-high wooden fence surrounding the construction site. That half-block hole in the ground was eerily quiet.

So on the third night the creak of a board being pried away from the fence rang out like a bell.

Heart racing, I grabbed the piece of lead pipe and made my way around the edge of the pit. I was wearing dungarees and a denim shirt—soft fabrics that didn’t make a sound. My boots had worn-thin soles, which didn’t do any favors for my arches

but meant I was able to slip like a shadow. I crept up on the figure crouched on its haunches at the edge of the pit.

Whoever it was picked up a handful of dirt and let it sift through their fingers. I thought about yelling and trying to drive them off, but they were bigger than me. In their other hand they were brandishing what looked like a stick or cudgel—something heftier than my length of pipe at any rate. If I yelled and got rushed, I wasn't sure I'd be able to stay on my feet long enough to hit back.

I took one slow step after another. When I was only a short stride away I lifted the pipe above my head. I wondered what it would feel like when I brought it down. Could I finesse it so I just knocked them out? Detectives were always managing to do that in the dime novels. More likely, I'd crack their skull open like an egg. My stomach did the same kind of slow flip it performed when I watched the trapeze artists.

I still had the pipe raised above my head when the figure turned and looked at me.

"I'd prefer not to end my day with a concussion," she said with a voice even as a tightrope. The hefty guy I had been afraid would rush me was a woman. She was around the age my mother would have been with her hair done up tight in an intricate bun.

"You're not supposed to be here," I told her, managing to keep my vibrating heart out of my voice.

"That remains to be seen," she said. "Have you worked here long?"

"A few nights."

"Hmmm." There was disappointment in that murmur.

By all rights, I should have told her to scram. But for some reason, call it fate or boredom or an inborn pernicious streak,

I kept talking. “I think McCloskey—that’s the site manager—only just started hiring night guards. I think he used to spend the night here sleeping in his shack so he could double dip. That’s what some of the morning shift guys told me anyway.”

“Better,” she declared.

She stood slowly, using the cane in her left hand for leverage. She was tall and solidly built, wearing a tailored houndstooth suit that looked expensive and an ankle-length coat like the kind Blackheart Bart wore when he did his sharpshooter act.

“Is that his shack?” she asked, looking over at the small wooden structure a quarter turn around the pit.

I nodded.

“Show me, please.”

By that point, it was clear to both of us there would be no clobbering, so I figured why not. Maybe it was because the alternative would have been ringing up the police, and I have a cultivated dislike of anyone with a badge.

I headed over to the shack in the corner of the yard. She followed a little behind, using the cane as she went. She wasn’t limping so much as wobbling a little. I wasn’t sure what was up with her, but the cane obviously wasn’t for show.

McCloskey had called the shack his office, but I’d seen chicken coops built sturdier. We were never supposed to go inside, and besides, the door was locked. The mysterious woman took something from an inner pocket of her coat—a thin, bent piece of wire—and went to work on the padlock. After a minute of fumbling, I piped up, “You need to go at it from the bottom.”

“How do you mean?”

I took the wire out of her hand and had the job done in ten seconds flat. I’d picked harder locks blindfolded. Literally.

“You should get yourself some real picks if you’re going to do this kind of thing regular,” I told her.

In all the years after, I only ever saw her smile about three dozen times. She graced me with one then.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she said.

The inside of the shack matched the outside. Dirty and jerry-built. There was a desk fashioned out of a couple discarded boards and some sawhorses. Papers were scattered haphazardly across it. On it were also a lantern and an army-issue wind-up phone that someone had rigged so McCloskey could make calls without leaving to find a pay phone. The rest of the space was taken up by a narrow cot and a pile of dirty rags that on second glance were clothes.

My companion lit the lantern. The addition of light didn’t do the cramped room any favors. I’ve seen monkey cages less filthy.

“Describe Mr. McCloskey,” she said, fixing me with eyes the gray-blue of a winter sky.

“I don’t know. Forty or so. Average, I guess.”

She gave me a look I have come to refer to as her disappointed schoolmarm. “Average doesn’t exist. Not when it comes to human beings. And don’t guess unless circumstances force you to.”

I was starting to regret not using the lead pipe.

“Okay,” I said with a bit of a sneer. “About a foot taller than me, so figure six feet, give or take. About two hundred pounds—a lot of it fat, but there’s some muscle under there. Like a roustabout who’s taken to the bottle. From the patches on his trousers, I’d say he has two sets of clothes, neither of them more than three bucks combined. He’s cheap but wants people to think he has flash.”

“What made you determine that?” she asked.

“From how much he’s paying me. Also, he wouldn’t spend two bits for a shave but dropped at least five for a gaff watch.”

“A gaff?”

“A fake, a phony.”

“How do you know it’s fake?”

“No way is this guy buying gold.”

There was something in her eyes then. The same look Mysterio got right before he sawed his lovely assistant in half.

“Do you have his phone number in case of emergencies?” she asked.

“Yeah, sure. But he said not to use it unless something’s really gone sideways.”

“Something has indeed gone sideways, Miss . . .”

“No Miss. Just Parker,” I told her. “Willowjean Parker. Everyone calls me Will.”

“Please call Mr. McCloskey, Will. Tell him there’s an intruder and she won’t leave. Tell him she’s asking about a gold watch.”

It was an easy call to make, since it was the truth. After I hung up, the woman—who still hadn’t introduced herself, and don’t think I wasn’t a little annoyed at that lapse in basic manners—asked me how he’d sounded.

I told her he’d sounded normal at first—sleep drugged and annoyed. But when I mentioned the watch, a thread of something like panic had come into his voice. He said he’d be right over and not to let this woman go anywhere in the meantime.

She gave a small, satisfied nod, then sat down on the cot, back straight, gloved hands holding her cane across her lap. She closed her eyes, calm as my great-aunt Ida praying in church. She reminded me of pictures of Okie wives I’d seen in issues

of *Life*, a weatherworn face waiting patiently for the coming storm.

I thought about asking her what this was all about. Or at least her name. She had mine, after all. But I decided I didn't want to give her the satisfaction. So I stood there and waited with her.

After ten minutes of silence she suddenly opened her eyes and said, "I think it would be best, Will, if you were to leave out the Eighth Avenue exit. There is a station house about twelve blocks south."

"You want me to get the cops?"

"Ask them to call Lieutenant Nathan Lazenby. Tell them there's been a murder and that Lillian Pentecost says to come at once. Unless they wish to read about it in the *Times*."

I opened my mouth, but she flashed me a look that said it was no use arguing, so I dashed out and toward Eighth Avenue but stopped before I reached the gate.

Like I said, there's no love lost between me and authority figures, especially those who carry guns and billy clubs and aren't afraid to do some judicious clobbering of their own. Besides, what did this woman think would happen? I drop her name and a whole squad of dicks come running?

Lillian Pentecost. Who the hell did she think she was, anyway?

Instead, I quietly retraced my steps around the pit. Before I'd gotten back to the shack the shriek of old brakes on Forty-second Street announced McCloskey's arrival.

I hurried to the rear of the rickety structure and crouched down. The walls were thin and I could hear everything. I figured that worked in reverse, so I kept still and quiet.

There was the sound of footsteps double-timing it across hard dirt, then of the door creaking opening.

“Hey. Who are you? Where’s the little carnny?”

“I’ve sent Will away, Mr. McCloskey. I thought it best if we had this conversation in private.”

“What conversation? What’s the deal? Who are you?”

“I am Lillian Pentecost.” There was a little inhale there. Apparently he recognized the name and wasn’t too happy about it. “And the deal is that you are wearing a murdered man’s watch.”

“What are you talking about? That’s a lie. I bought this watch. From a guy at a bar. Twenty bucks, it cost.”

I shook my head. Apparently nobody’d taught him that adding too many details was the quickest way to foul a grift.

“The police will, of course, ask you which bar and the name of the man who supposedly sold you the watch and so forth and so on,” Ms. Pentecost said. “But I think we can dispense with that. If for no other reason than no one would sell a Patek Philippe for twenty dollars.”

“I don’t know a Patty Phillip from nothing. This guy said he was hard up. Needed the cash.” The whine that had crept into his voice advertised his guilt better than any Broadway marquee.

“Jonathan Markel was indeed in need of money, Mr. McCloskey. But not so badly as to barter with you.”

“Who’s Jonathan Markel?”

“The man you bludgeoned to death and from whose wrist you slipped that watch.”

“Lady, you’re crazy.”

“Debatable. I’ve been accused of rampant narcissism, hysteria, deviancy, and a variety of delusional psychoses. But the dirt covering the back of Mr. Markel’s suit coat was no delusion. Dirt that certainly did not come from the alley where his

body was found. Nor were the grooves in his skull a delusion. Grooves that I feel confident will match the kind of lead pipe you instructed Will to employ on trespassers.”

Even through the wall of the shack, I could hear McCloskey breathing. Heavy and panicked.

As Ms. Pentecost continued, she developed a hitch in her voice. Like her words were catching on something in her throat. I started to wonder just how calm this woman really was.

“I would have come upon you sooner, but . . . it was not until yesterday that I was able to examine the clothes Mr. Markel . . . was wearing that night. This construction site is one of only a . . . handful between his club and the alley where he was found. Perhaps there was no initial malevolence. Perhaps . . . after an evening of drinking, Mr. Markel sought a private spot to relieve himself and slipped through the gap in your fence. Mistaking him for a thief, you . . . hit him. A little . . . too hard, perhaps? An accident?”

“Yeah. . . . Yeah, an accident.” It came out in a croaked whisper, like McCloskey was being squeezed. And the squeezer wasn’t finished.

“But the second and . . . third strikes were certainly not accidents. Nor was it an accident that you stole his wallet and . . . watch. Or the subsequent covering up of the crime. These . . . were not accidents.”

One of my legs took that moment to cramp. I shifted my crouch, careful to avoid crunching on loose gravel. When I got situated again, there was only silence inside the building. Then the hard click of a gun being cocked.

“Don’t move, lady.” The thread of panic in McCloskey’s voice had swollen. I could practically hear the pistol shaking in his hand.

“Mr. McCloskey, this pit you . . . find yourself in cannot be escaped by . . . digging deeper. The police have been notified. They are on their way . . . even as we speak.”

This was delivered in a slightly chiding tenor, like she was informing a waitress that she’d ordered the tomato soup, not the minestrone.

Except she was wrong. The cavalry had definitely not been called.

I don’t know what was said next, because I was busy slipping around to the front of the shack, every muscle tense as I waited for the impending crack of a gunshot. The door to the shack was open. I peered inside.

McCloskey had his back to me. He had a gun—an ugly, snub-nosed thing—pointed right at her head. I caught him midsentence.

“—supposed to be here. I come in, find this strange woman snooping around. Maybe you leap at me holding that pipe there. The one you say killed that guy.”

Ms. Pentecost was sitting just as I’d left her, gloved hands still primly folded across the cane in her lap. I’d have been sweating buckets, but she didn’t betray an ounce of fear. In fact, her eyes were bright with something not too far from joy.

She gave a brisk shake of the head. “I don’t believe the police will accept that theory, Mr. McCloskey. They are frequently . . . obstinate, but rarely . . . stupid.”

The cane looked sturdy enough—smooth black wood topped with a heavy brass handle. I thought maybe she was thinking of lashing out and surprising him with it. Except I’d had a cousin who got that kind of hitch in her voice. Had a limp, too, though hers was a lot worse. I suspected that leaping up and clubbing a man wasn’t in Lillian Pentecost’s repertoire.

“Yeah, well—it’ll be your word against mine,” McCloskey sneered. “And you won’t be doing any talking.”

When I was questioned later—and boy did I get questioned—I said that I didn’t think. I just reacted.

Except I did think. The circus kept me on because I had quick hands and an even quicker head. So I had a split-second, lightning-flash inner debate.

The voice in my head arguing the side of running away and letting what happened happen sounded a lot like Darla Delight. Dee-Dee was a former showgirl who did the books for the circus. Very practical woman. When Big Bob Halloway, the owner, would have his semiweekly brilliant idea for a new act, Darla was the one who would calculate the cost and put the kibosh on nine out of every ten brainstorms.

“Have to think about the costs,” she’d say. “Especially the invisible ones. All those things that might not be on the bill but you end up paying in the long run. They’ll come back and bite your ass.”

The voice on the other side of my inner debate sounded a lot like my father. He never counted any cost. He just did what he wanted and damned who got hurt. That I listen to his voice more often than not is something I still wrestle with.

McCloskey muttered something I couldn’t catch. Whatever it was caused Ms. Pentecost to lean forward on the cot, like a dog testing its leash.

“Who?” she said. “Who told you?”

“Ah well,” he muttered, more to himself than her. “In for a penny and all that.” His arm straightened and his finger tightened on the trigger.

No more debate. I’d made my choice. I was already kneeling down, pulling up the leg of my trousers, and grabbing hold

of the hilt of the knife I kept fastened to my calf in a leather sheath.

Long hours spent with Kalishenko in a hundred dust-choked fields between Boise and Brooklyn made what happened next almost too easy. I stood, and in the same motion brought the knife up and over my head in a long arc.

I remembered Kalishenko's words, delivered in a perpetually slurred Russian accent. "You do not throw the blade. You do not throw your arm. You throw your entire body forward. The trick is learning to let go at the precise moment."

I threw myself forward and let go at the precise moment.

The weighted blade hit home with a sickening thud. But instead of a pockmarked wooden target, it buried itself a full three inches into McCloskey's back. I'd learn later that only the very tip of the blade pierced his heart. It wasn't much. But it was enough.

The gun fell from his hand. Ms. Pentecost reached out with her cane and knocked it out of reach. McCloskey stumbled, clawing at the hilt sticking out of his back. Then he collapsed forward, his head clipping the edge of the cot. He gave a last, ugly gurgle before going still and silent.

Ms. Pentecost knelt by his body. I expected her to check for a pulse. Instead, her hands went to the watch. A few quick twists and the watch face popped open, revealing a small, hidden compartment. Whatever was inside disappeared into her hand, then the inner pocket of her coat, before she clicked the watch face closed.

"How do you feel?" she asked, standing.

"I don't know," I said. My hands were shaking and my breath was coming quick and shallow. It was a coin flip as to whether I was going to pass out.

"Can you walk?" she asked.

I nodded.

“Good. I fear we will both . . . need to go to the station house.”

“Do we have to?” I asked. “It’s just I’m not too fond of cops.” She *almost* smiled again.

“They have their purposes. And they do . . . frown on the casual littering of bodies. But I will be with you.”

We began the twelve-block walk through dead-of-night New York City, me keeping my pace slow, both to accommodate my new companion and because I was still feeling a little shaky. The buildings seemed taller, the streets narrower. Everything felt higher and darker and more dangerous.

Ms. Pentecost laid a hand on my shoulder. She kept it there most of the way to the station house. For some inexplicable reason, it made me feel better. Like she was passing on a little of whatever had kept her even and calm while staring down the barrel of a gun.

She didn’t thank me for saving her life. Come to think of it, she never has. Though it could be argued she paid me back a hundredfold.

It wasn’t until years later when somebody suggested I start writing all this down that I was reminded about those invisible costs. They ended up being higher than I would ever have thought possible. I’ve never really tallied them up, though. I guess in writing this I’ll be forced to. I don’t rightly know how the balance sheet will come out. In the red? Or in the black?

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