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Debut Fiction Sampler

— SPRING 2019 —

What Will You Read Next?

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Spring 2019 Debut Fiction Sampler

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What Will You Read Next?

"Tightly paced and skillfully plotted, *The Lost Night* is a remarkable debut."
—Jessica Knoll, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Luckiest Girl Alive*

THE LOST NIGHT

A Novel

ANDREA BARTZ

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First Edition

Chapter 1

LINDSAY

Fat chickens packed into factory farms, maggots wriggling like a thick white carpet, buffalo fumbling toward the edge of a cliff: all spacious situations compared to the New York City subway at 6:00 p.m. The doors slid apart, but I was stuck; my fellow commuters barely moved, and I bleated out apologies as I smashed against bodies, squeezing onto the platform right as the doors thudded closed again. I took a few steps and peered through the windows at the people still inside, crammed like stuffed animals at the bottom of a claw vending machine.

I was so tired. A feeling I had a lot these days. A part of me wanted to go straight home, heat up something frozen, and maybe watch old, stupid reruns, but I'd been the one to suggest these plans. In a rare flare of nostalgia, I'd fired off the message, forgetting in the moment that I'd once sworn to myself that I'd never open up Pandora's box. It was almost as if boredom had made me reckless.

I pushed through the throng of commuters at the foot of the subway stairs. Outside, rain made its way through fabric and onto my ass, my knees, my feet. The feeling I'd been wrestling with all day grew, the panicky dread that swells before a first date. What if this reunion mucked up my last good memories from that single, singular year? When I reached the restaurant, an inoffensive bistro in boring Midtown West, a man snapped his umbrella closed in my face and for some reason I apologized to him, knee-jerk.

Inside, I was just pulling out a chair at our table when Sarah entered. She spotted me and waved, and I thought she looked exactly the same. She didn't, of course, and neither did I, a fact I

only realized much later that night when I was clicking through old photos, tears rolling down my cheeks. At twenty-three we had that alienoid bone structure, big eyes and sunken cheeks caving into dewy little chins. Now, ten years later, we're old-young and round-faced and just human again.

Then we hugged, and maybe there was some chemical trigger, a smell or invisible pheromone, but the hug felt exactly like it did a decade ago. We relaxed and smiled at each other and thought maybe this would be fun.

"Lindsay, it's so good to see you," she said, dropping into her chair. "You look great."

"So do you!" I chirped. "I can't believe it's been ten years."

"I know, it's crazy." Sarah nodded, eyebrows up. "How have you been?"

"Really good! You know, keeping on. I was so happy to hear you moved back to New York." Once, for an article, I'd read a linguistics study on conversation patterns: In any duo, the lower-power person imitates the speech style of the alpha. I wondered who was following whom here.

"Yeah, I'm glad you reached out. When we found out my husband was getting transferred here, I was like, 'Wow, I don't know that I know anyone in the city anymore.' "

"Your *husband,*" I said. "I can't wait to meet him." I'd looked him up on Facebook: He was annoyingly handsome. At least when friends paired up with unattractive people, I could blot at the jealousy with smugness.

"He's great." Sarah smiled and snapped open her menu, looking down. "Are you seeing anyone?"

"No, no one special!" I said brightly. "So how is it being back in New York?"

She scrunched up her features, preparing some middle-of-the-road answer, when the waiter appeared to rattle off the specials. Sarah ordered a vodka martini, and after a moment's hesitation, I asked for my usual seltzer with lime. I didn't often miss drinking, but I knew I'd feel a pulse of envy when her conical glass arrived.

"Oh my gosh, is it okay if I drink?" she asked after the waiter disappeared.

"Of course! I'm totally fine. Otherwise I would have suggested meeting for tea." She giggled and shrugged, and we both went back to reading our menus.

Christ, was this really Sarah? The same literary, witty, hard-partying friend I'd counted among my clique during that first wild year in New York? I'd messaged her the very day she announced on Facebook that she was moving back from St. Louis, forgetting in my sentimentality that things had ended pretty icily. And then I'd felt embarrassed, until a few weeks ago when she'd replied, apologetic, to set a date.

"It's good to be back here, but weird," she said finally. "So much has changed. It almost feels like coming to a new city. But what about you, you still love it?"

"I do," I replied. "I mean, I'm really lucky to still have a job in magazines, and I've been living in the same place in Fort Greene for . . . five years now?" I took a deep sip and bubbles flooded my tongue.

"That's great," Sarah said. "That's definitely a neighborhood I want to check out." She pushed her black hair behind her ears and a few silver streaks twinkled like tinsel.

"Well, if there's any way I can be helpful as you guys look around, just let me know," I said.

"Thanks, Lindsay. It's tough because I want to find a place ASAP, but I also don't want to end up somewhere terrible. Right now we're living with Nate's parents in Trenton." She gave me a knowing look.

"You're in Jersey?! Wow."

"Right? I'm one of those people we totally hated back in the day." We both chuckled.

"Do you keep in touch with anyone from back then?" I asked.

She shrugged. "I mean, just online, like with you. For a while, Alex and I would call or have a little email exchange around the anniversary. You know, raise a glass." She sipped her drink. "Kevin

doesn't really update anything, so I'm pretty out-of-date on him. I think he and Alex keep in touch, so I get reports every once in a while. Last I heard, he and his husband owned a little music store in Nashville and he was, like, giving drum lessons."

"Wait, Kevin's *married*?"

She laughed. "You didn't know that? Apparently he met this great guy, like, two seconds after he moved away. A pianist, I think."

Of course—like everyone who moves away from New York. I smoothed a napkin on my lap. A *husband:* Kevin was still twenty-four in my mind, jumpy and juvenile. "When did he move again?"

"As soon as he'd finished his community service. That winter after . . . afterward."

Her face darkened, but then the waiter reappeared and we politely placed our orders, Sarah nodding eagerly when he offered to bring another round. She asked me more about my work, and I learned a bit about the executive recruiting she'd been doing in St. Louis and how now the tables had turned and she had to get *herself* hired and the bar was set high when every headhunter is so good at the game, and my god, the irony. We giggled at the appropriate times. Twice she made a cute hand gesture, her little fists up near her chest like sock puppets, and she was Sarah Kwan again, Sarah Kwan with the cool raspberry lipstick and an impossible crop top and a yard of thick glossy hair.

She didn't mention Edie again until we were finishing dessert, picking at a shared flourless chocolate cake. "It's crazy to think about how much has happened in ten years," she announced. "I was so glad to hear you wanted to get together. I thought about reaching out a few times over the years, but I just wasn't sure after . . . I mean, after how everything went down after Edie."

"That's exactly how I felt, to be honest," I said. "I know I just sort of . . . went MIA afterward. I mean, I guess we were all just grieving in our own way. We were *so* young. None of us were equipped to deal with it." She nodded and looked away, and I realized she wanted me to go on. "I always thought you had it worse

than anyone, Sarah. Worse than *everyone*. I mean, you found her. God, I haven't thought about this in so long."

I'd done my crying and then I'd let Edie go, tucking the whole ordeal away so that it couldn't taint what came before. Now I recalled a nugget I'd learned from fact-checking a feature on an innocent man, condemned by poorly recalled witness testimony: When you pull up a memory, you're actually recalling the last time you remembered it—not the event itself. One day, one by one, we'd all stopped refreshing the memory. So I was surprised by how quickly the night came back to me now that I'd called it up. Now that Sarah was sitting across from me and talking about August 21, 2009, in dark, tenebrous terms.

It had been a Friday. A band had been rattling the windows in an apartment two floors up from Edie's place, and a bunch of us were standing around at the concert, drunk or pretending to be. The guitars and bass were so loud, I could feel the vibrations in my collarbone. I remember registering with a flapping concern that I was too drunk, then scurrying out to the street, where a random girl had helped me hail a taxi home. Edie hadn't been at the concert with us; Edie had been home alone, two floors down, crafting a brief suicide note and then pulling out the gun. Her time of death, we later learned, was while we were watching the band, their meandering chords cloaking the single gunshot. The rest I knew from my friends' accounts, repeated so many times that I could see it: midnight, pitch black, Sarah hobbles into the apartment and flicks on the overhead lights, trying not to make too much noise in case Edie's already asleep. Her screams had rattled the whole building, shrill and sharp and with that beelike whine hovering descant just above her cries.

"I know, it was *awful*." She listed forward and I suddenly realized Sarah was drunk.

"You moved back home, right?" I'd always wondered if her parents had checked her into some kind of psych ward. I'd pulled away after a few weeks but continued to watch the amputated friend group from the relative safety of social media; Sarah had

gone off the grid completely, deactivating her accounts and only reemerging a few years later with a new, smiling Facebook profile and friend requests all around.

"Yeah, my parents were pretty worried about me. I mean, I was acting like a lunatic, going all conspiracy theorist."

"What do you mean?"

A sheepish laugh. "You remember. I guess I just didn't want to believe my best friend could do that. She trusted me more than anyone, and I didn't like feeling like I'd failed her."

I sat up straighter. *Her* best friend? Who was she kidding?

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said.

"You don't remember?" she continued. "I was running around insisting that Edie hadn't actually killed herself, that it must have been an accident or foul play or something. I know, it's ridiculous."

"Oh, wow, I didn't realize that." Sarah's flair for melodrama resurfaced in my memory like something emerging from the mist.

"It was just strange how different she seemed right before . . . at the end," she went on. "I mean, I lived with her, and we barely said more than two sentences to each other those last few weeks."

"Even less for me—we weren't speaking," I cut in. "And we were always *super* close."

Sarah ignored the one-up. "I was really caught up in that . . . that narrative. It wasn't healthy."

"I'm sorry, that must have been really tough for you, and I . . ." I zipped my thumb out, the universal sign for having gotten out of Dodge.

"Yeah, I understand. I feel like it's all I was talking about back then, but maybe that's just 'cause it was, like, consuming my mind."

"What made you think it wasn't a suicide?" I asked, a little too derisively.

"Oh my god, it was all stupid little things, in retrospect. There was the fact that I found her in her underwear—she was always so perfectly put-together, so that seemed weird."

Right, but it was circumstantial. When we'd talked it out in those first shaken weeks, it had also seemed plausible that she

wouldn't have wanted to ruin any of the beautiful pieces in her closet; Edie had treated them like precious artifacts.

"And the gun stuff didn't make sense to me: She was left-handed, but the gun was in her right hand, and the wound was on the right side of her face. Until a forensic expert explained to me that if she used two hands, she could've wound up slightly off-center and just, like, crumpled to either side."

Jesus. She'd talked to a forensic expert? I watched as she slurped the last of her fourth martini.

"But I learned enough about criminology to figure out that there are a few loose ends in any investigation. Because that's how life is."

". . . Unraveling," I supplied.

She smiled. "But yeah, my parents found me an awesome therapist, and she helped me face the facts. I guess we all turned out okay."

"We did. And you shouldn't feel bad about dealing with it however you needed to deal with it. We were all so immature and maybe didn't know how to . . . ask for help."

"You mean like Edie."

I'd been thinking of myself, but sure, Edie, too. What with the debt and the depression and the suicide note on her laptop. The gun pressed against her temple.

"That was some heavy shit," I said.

She poked at her cocktail napkin. "It's still hard for me to believe sometimes. Like, we were at the top of our game. We were having the time of our lives."

"I know what you mean," I said. "Everyone glorifies their twenties, I guess, but for me that period was . . . It meant a lot." I swallowed hard. "And then it ended. It's nuts. Literally, we were dancing around to some stupid band just a few floors up while Edie was . . ."

Sarah narrowed her eyes. "Well, you weren't."

"What?"

"You weren't at the concert."

I cocked my head. "Wait, what? Of course I was."

"You weren't. You went home. I remember because I was mad that none of my girlfriends came with me. Can you believe that? I was mad at Edie while she was, like, committing suicide. Seriously, that took me a few thousand dollars of therapy to work through."

I scoffed. "Christ, Sarah, of course I was there. I pregamed with you guys on the roof, and we took a bunch of shots, and then we went to the show. I went home near the end of the set."

She was shaking her head as I spoke and her expression matched mine: that charged look when you just know, *know,* the other person's remembering it wrong.

"You didn't come to the show." She let out a bleat of laughter. "You didn't! We pregamed together and then you left."

"Sarah, come on," I snapped. "I remember that night perfectly. I was there with you guys." The band with the weird face paint. Music so loud we were part of it, gyrating through every crashing sound wave.

"I mean, I know what I know," she said finally, leaning back and tossing her napkin onto the table. Like she was wrapping up a fight, doing the adult thing.

"That's fine, but I do, too," I told her, sighing and shaking my head. "I know exactly where I was standing. We were off to the left side. The band, something with 'beach' or 'tan' or 'surf' in their name—they were covered in red and black face paint."

"They all lived in Calhoun. We saw them a bunch of times. You're thinking of another time. Anyway." She signaled to the waiter. "Could I get some more water, please?"

We sat there for a while, breathing. Everything was humming: my head, my chest, my hands. Finally she asked if I kept up with any good podcasts and I answered, awkwardly. After a few sentences we fell into a rhythm and Edie slid back into the past.

Outside, in the rain, Sarah and I frantically hugged goodbye and sped off between the raindrops toward different subways. Stand-

ing on a clammy C train, my umbrella dripping onto my boots, I let the outrage pour through me again. First there was Sarah's prickly proclamation that she and Edie had been the closest, which was preposterous—everyone knew Edie and I had been inseparable. And here she'd just cut me out of the narrative on the most significant night of our friendship, *snip.* It wouldn't be the first time Sarah had implied that I wasn't in Edie's inner circle but rather a hanger-on, like someone's annoying little sister. All because I hadn't lived with the four of them. Well, no. All because Edie and I had been the closest, and Sarah's jealousy would sometimes waft by like a scent.

Of course I'd been there. I felt a propulsive need to confirm it, to pull up the old photos and messages that would prove her wrong. As soon as I got home, I figured, I'd put this to rest.

I slumped over my laptop at the kitchen table, squinting at the screen to keep it from blurring as my contacts turned gummy. I opened Facebook and blinked at the torrent of my peers' baby photos ("Snuggles!!!"). For the first time in years, I searched for Alex: a profile picture of him and his shiny-haired wife on vacation. From 2016, which meant he didn't use Facebook much. I opened up a message to him, then froze. What the hell could I even say? *Quick question, on the night Edie died, I came with you to the concert, right? Hope all is well, thaaanks!* I closed the message and clicked instead on my photos tab to begin the slow scrolling process of unearthing photos from 2009, sliding backward in time. Eventually I slinked into the right era: me with Sarah, Edie, Kevin, and Alex. I was struck by how good-looking we all were, smooth-skinned and twinkly eyed. Sarah was pretty and serene with that swingy hair and small curvy mouth.

I had the same dirty-blond curls and wide mouth and thick eyebrows I'd since learned to accentuate, but they were easy and unassuming back when I was that age. I'd always felt awkward next to Sarah and Edie, the less pretty friend making an unfortunate laughing face in photos. Now I saw that we were all just lovely, eager and open-faced. Fogging ourselves up with a practiced ennui, sure, but so much younger than we thought we were.

Alex was generically handsome, the stereotypical dark-haired, blue-eyed, five-o'-clock-shadowed Adonis with sleeve tattoos and a self-satisfied smirk. He had That Look; for years I'd stare down a stranger in a store or at a show, trying to decide if it was Alex or one of his ten thousand doppelgängers. Back then, he was a guitarist who made money taking on freelance coding projects and completing them at all hours of the night, and it was sort of sad to look back and realize that the Alex in these pictures had no idea he'd abandon music slowly at first, then with grim finality. Last I heard, he lived in Westchester, in one of those river towns, with a car and a dog and everything he didn't know he wanted.

Aw, and Kevin, such a little goofball. I paused on a photo of him with his band: the guitarist with her pink hair, the fat, greasy lead singer whose confidence trumped his appearance, and little Kevin in the back, his arms and drumsticks a blur. I'd abruptly chopped them all out of my life, but I knew from Facebook that he'd been the second one to actually move away, after Sarah, relocating to Nashville late that year. The gun had been his, a vintage thing he kept in the living room (typically) unloaded, and the guilt surrounding it must have gotten the better of him.

Now he was a grown-up, too. I filed through his most recent photos, annoyed that there weren't any of his husband. *Kevin*. Who'd have thought?

Edie was the quiet star of every photo she appeared in, bony and freckled and so sure of her beauty. I stared at a picture of the two of us until tears gathered in my eyes; I'd both hated and adored her, and for months after she died, I'd felt in my chest a black hole of grief, a sudden gaping absence. She smirked at me from the screen: She had a little gap between her front teeth and long red curls that spilled over her back and shoulders. Edie was the ringleader, the princess whose every wish came true, not because it was also our command, exactly, but because she stated her wants and the very universe seemed to bow to them. When she giggled, when you were in her smile with her, it was magic. And when you weren't . . .

Well.

The problem, I realized, was that the date on the photos showed when they were posted, not when they were taken. I browsed around in the right era, the one after Edie's death, but couldn't find any of that night, anything that could prove my attendance. Which made sense—what a strange, gauche move it would have been, in the midst of our mourning, to toss up a photo of August 21's debauchery. I couldn't remember the band's name or think of how to find other pictures from the show. Frustrated, I kept scrolling, hoping they'd pop up in another image, tagged.

Our little clique was outside in so many photos, drinking out of massive Styrofoam cups in McCarren Park or smoking on fire escapes, stoops, roofs. I remembered that summer, the last one with Edie, how all the bands we saw blurred into a cacophony of synth and Sarah wore that crazy Day-Glo hat everywhere and I was on a vodka gimlet kick. Not pictured: the violent bouts of crying alone, the change in cabin pressure if Edie was unhappy.

I clicked on a photo of the five of us, goofing around in a sculpture park on a weekend trip to Philly. Alex had his arm around Edie, smiling calmly. Edie was looking at something outside of the frame, squinting to see. Sarah and I were posing dramatically, arms up toward the heavens, and Kevin had climbed onto the vaguely humanoid sculpture behind us and wrapped his arms around an appendage.

It won't last, I told them as tears again coated my eyes. Then, because it was late and my anger had simmered into a tired ache, I snapped my laptop closed and went to sleep.

The next morning, I forgot my headphones for the subway ride to work and listened instead to the din of tired people commuting. I heard a sniffle and looked down at a young woman seated in front of me, tears pouring freely down her cheeks. Poor thing. I dug in my bag, then handed her a tissue. She shot me a grateful look and pushed it against both eyes at once.

Wedged against a well-dressed man holding a Kindle millimeters from a woman's cheek, I debated. *I should throw myself into work.* Then an about-face: *Fuck work, all I want to do is think about Edie.* I was still undecided as I spun through the revolving doors into my building's lobby, a minimalist entry with wavy metal and burbling fountains, all silver and glass and Impressive Business Is Done Here. "I'm really lucky to still have a job in magazines," I'd told Sarah enthusiastically, fifteen hours before hurrying in to fact-check an inane six-page feature on CBD-infused cocktails.

I bumped into Damien, the magazine's video editor and my closest (no, only) work friend, as I headed toward my office. He launched into an elaborate tale of how he'd spent his evening with the police because an idiot UPS worker had left his package outside his brownstone, where it had promptly been stolen, and now he needed a police report to have his insurance cover it, but the cops were acting like he expected them to *find* the package, and the worst part was that it was a beautiful coffee-table book about circa sixties erotica, but everyone was acting like he'd just ordered porn, and now he had to submit a Freedom of Information Law request just to get his own damn police report from the bureau of criminal records verification or something. He sighed grandly. Damien is the queen of histrionic sighs.

"What'd you do last night?" he finished finally.

"I had dinner with a friend from when I first moved to New York," I said. "It was weird, she mentioned . . . Do you have work, am I distracting you?"

He waved his hand cheerfully and sauntered farther into my office.

"So, ten years ago this good friend of ours killed herself—and the friend from last night, Sarah, she found her."

"Christ, Lindsay, I'm sorry. Did she take a bunch of pills or what?"

"No, she used a gun. And left a suicide note on her computer."

He shook his head. "That's awful. Was she young?"

"We were all twenty-three."

"Damn." We stared at each other. Finally he said: "Ten years ago. You're old."

"Fuck you." I smiled. *Why am I telling you this?* Because he could bring me back to the present, take the gravity out of it. "Yeah, it was really sudden and . . . awful. Been on my mind."

"Why'd she do it?"

"There turned out to be so much weird stuff going on that we didn't really know about until we, like, compared notes in the week or two after," I recited. "Like, her family was struggling and going through some stuff, and she and her boyfriend had just broken up but they were still living together."

"Living with her ex," he said, whistling. "*I'd* kill myself."

"Right?" Why hadn't we seen it as uncomfortable at the time? Well, because bucking conventions had been our status quo. "So anyway, I saw the friend last night, and it turns out right after the suicide, she went totally conspiracy theorist and claimed it wasn't a suicide."

"Jesus," he breathed. "Wait, you're just learning this now?"

"I kinda split from the group after the funeral. They all lived together, and it was . . . We were kinda drifting apart by then, anyway." I sighed. "They were like this beautiful little hipster clique. When Edie died, it all fell apart."

"I need to see these people. Facebook." He gestured at my monitor and I pulled up some group photos.

"She's cute," he said when I pointed to Edie.

"And *there's* the final proof that you are zero-percent heterosexual. She's stunning."

"Did everyone want to fuck her?" He shrugged. "So skinny. You could snap her in half."

"Christ, Damien, she's dead," I said through inappropriate laughter.

He apologized, grinning, then headed for his desk.

I returned to Facebook, to the grid of photos. There were so many pictures of us hanging out in Sarah, Alex, Kevin, and Edie's apartment, which we'd jokingly called SAKE, pronounced like

the Japanese wine, unwilling to bear the inconvenience of mentioning all of the tenants' names. Always with drinks around, always with drunk, sparkly eyes. So few of these images stirred up memories; they were like loose leaves or a deck of cards: Young People Having Fun. I seemed to be always there, though I lived two stops away on the subway. Sarah was sort of right: While Edie and I had been best friends for a moment, I'd never quite been a full member of the clique. Once Edie and I had had our falling-out, I'd been just outside, watching them through a sheet of glass.

I scrolled. There were just as many photos of us in other apartments within Calhoun Lofts—beer bottles scattered around, someone flipping off the camera or finding a way to look blasé. It was such an odd building, a full block long and set up like a college dormitory, only instead of small dorm rooms, there were apartments, each tall and rectangular, like a giant shoebox. They came gapingly vacant except for a kitchen and a bathroom crouched in one corner. And into those giant shoeboxes, tenants brought plywood and drywall and constructed their lives: lofted bedrooms resting on stilts with a forest of four-by-four pillars underneath, or cubbylike rooms lining either side of the long walls, so that standing in the central corridor felt like being on dry sand with the Red Sea rising on either side.

Sarah had been the Virgil who'd led me through Calhoun's graffiti-splattered front doors and into its deepest circles. I'd first met Sarah in Manhattan a week or two earlier at a vodka-soaked rooftop party thrown by effervescent PR people for some product or campaign launch. It was August 2008 and I'd just started my first job as a fact-checker at a fitness magazine; Sarah was a junior designer at *The Village Voice,* and somehow both our names showed up in some media directory and garnered us invitations. It felt strange, gulping cocktails at this extravagant party while the stock market teetered and talking heads wrung their hands and both our companies implemented hiring freezes like an early winter frost. We chatted away and exchanged emails and then got lunch at a burrito place, and just like that, we were friends. I miss

that about my twenties, that vastness, that sweeping sense that there's room for everyone worthwhile, all the time and space in the world.

Sarah lived with Edie and some other girls at the time, in a different apartment within Calhoun Lofts. I'd heard the building referred to in reverential tones; it was hipster legend. Sarah had invited me to see a show there that Saturday. My outfit and hair carefully planned out and rethought, I'd taken two parting shots of whiskey, boarded the L train, and ridden deep into the bowels of Bushwick.

Sarah met me at the door with a hug and a compliment (I can still taste that tang of relief that I'd dressed acceptably) and brought me first to her apartment to pregame. Stepping into her place, I gasped at the soaring warehouse space with unfinished walls, twenty-foot ceilings, and, on the far end, a wall of dirty windows that looked straight out of a vintage elementary school.

Rap music poured from speakers and my eyes fell on Edie, standing on the couch and dancing with abandon, a red Solo cup held high in one hand. I saw her as if in slow motion: red waves skipping over a cropped gold blazer, a sliver of pale stomach above indigo shorts, all skinny limbs and outsize confidence. Sarah yelled up an introduction and Edie turned her emerald eyes to me and smiled, and suddenly nothing in life was as important as making this girl like me.

Sarah poured us drinks and we sat down with the other roommates. I remember less about them: a quiet girl named Jenna with long brown hair and a bumped nose (she worked in book publishing, maybe?) and an impressively skinny blonde named Kylie, who spoke with a California *raaaaahsp*. Strangers thrown together by Craigslist, but all nice girls, a group that danced and drank and lived well together. I focused my efforts on Edie, who was bright and hilarious and weirdly delighted by everything I said. I did *so well*. I hit that second-drink tingle of wit and found myself thinking that this Edie was everything I wanted my life in New York to be.

She didn't ask me what I did for work; instead we gushed about our close-at-hand *dreams,* her imminent enrollment at Parsons, my plans to write narrative nonfiction so finely crafted it'd make readers' chests ache. We talked about men and Bowie, how we'd both read an article revealing we're about 40 percent stardust and 60 percent hydrogen, or Big Bang dust, and isn't it wild our atoms are as old as life itself. We had such great energy. Even Sarah noticed it and politely faded into herself.

After a final round of shots, the girls led me to an apartment on another floor—another huge rectangular canvas, now decked out with a stage along the far windows, a bar/merch table off to its right, and an especially bizarre construction of living quarters: Over a thicket of four-by-fours, they'd built a cluster of elevated bedrooms, each claustrophobic and squat and opening into an elf-size catwalk, which lipped out into an overhang from which to watch the stage. (A resident I bumped into that night told me that during a brief run of *Romeo and Juliet,* they'd made literal use of it for the balcony scene.)

Our drunkenness swelled, not just from the shots but also from the frenzy: strobe lights, spilled drinks, gyrating masses, a pounding band sporting silver and gold jackets and sequins on their eyebrows. We allowed the surf to sweep us up, dancing along, a pleasant tornado. The night faded to black afterward, like so many after it, when the light of my consciousness would blink back on hours later in my own bed or on SAKE's couch or sometimes atop the small, sweaty mattress of a male Calhoun resident. Periods snipped from my timeline, blacked out, right in the middle of the best days of my life.

That's my lingering impression of our year as a gang: such potent, intoxicating *fun,* a billowing glee I hadn't experienced before and certainly haven't since. A montage of drunken nights spent wandering from floor to floor searching for the source of a pounding bassline, or setting off fireworks from the roof, or drifting around phoneless, unable to find one another in separate sets of staircases. We weren't yet glued to our devices: There was

no Instagram to document in flattering light that you'd been included, no location tagging to show you *were there*. For me, it was like a college do-over, reparations for those four years of agonizing over my GPA and pottering around in a medication-induced fog. Calhoun felt self-contained, its own little microcosm, with secrets and a kind of kiddie society and the feel of a grand immersive theater production. We were *so young* but thought we were the wisest bastards on the planet. We didn't run the world, and in fact outside the sky was falling, but we did run that building, eight floors high and a block long on an otherwise undeveloped street in Bushwick.

My pointer hovered over a photo of Edie dancing, and I smiled at the screen. She really did come alive on the dance floor—spinning and popping and shaking and convulsing in a way that somehow looked so fucking cool, so confident and brazenly joyful that others always turned to watch. There was a monthly dance-off, I remembered suddenly, in a sweat-smelling venue by the river, and three times Edie had taken home first prize.

And that smile on her face. I checked the date: June 3, a few months before she died. No one had seen her smile like this in the weeks leading up to her death. Not Alex, whom she would dump just a few weeks later, even as they vowed to be friends. Not Sarah, as the two picked little fights, half antagonizing, half avoiding each other—impossible, of course, in that strange *Alice in Wonderland*–style setting. Certainly not me, in the aftermath of the blowup of the century that left me looking around at the bomb site and wondering how I'd called her my best friend.

I finished fact-checking the cocktail feature and turned my attention to an absurd sex piece about what everyone can learn from polyamorous relationships. An idea unfurled as the day wore on: the state's Freedom of Information Law. A FOIL request, a polite and unignorable demand that the police department pony up whatever I please; I completed them all the time for work, digging up files that writers were too lazy to uncover firsthand. I knew the intricacies of the application form and could certainly make a

quiet request under the guise of my research job. If there had been an investigation around Edie's death, as Sarah had mentioned, then there must be a case file. I filled out an online form and got a pop-up indicating the requested files would be sent to me in one to five business days—a bullshit timeframe when the retrieval was almost certainly happening on a scale of nanoseconds, if-then algorithms instantaneously humming in a digital brain.

Near the end of the day, I checked my work email, and midway through responding to an editor, something clicked: I had to get into my old email. I'd blathered tons of juicy stuff in messages to and from Edie back in the day; we'd written constantly about weekend plans, her relationship dramas, the previous night's party recaps. Maybe inspecting them now, with my fact-checker's eye, would reveal something I'd missed, a cry for help or a pall of depression I'd been too young to grasp. Or perhaps I'd written something about the concert that night—maybe there was proof, documentation of my whereabouts. I'd abandoned the account years ago, and the service no longer existed, so there was no simple reset password button. But there must be some way to crack it back open, wriggle inside.

And I knew who could help. I texted my friend Tessa late in the afternoon; she was always surprising me with the digital lock-picking skills she'd picked up in her library sciences program. She invited me over later that week—Damien, too, if he was free.

I couldn't resist checking Facebook one last time before shutting down my computer. I scrolled a bit further and my heart jumped: Deep in one of Sarah's photo albums was a little thumbnail that looked familiar. Full-size, it was four men scuzzing around onstage, keyboards and guitars and synth. They all had black and red stripes painted across their faces. It was a perfect match with the concert I'd been picturing for August 21—a wild show that rattled a random Calhoun apartment. I looked at the date and my stomach sank. This night, the one pictured at least, had been a full month before Edie died.

THE LONG FLIGHT HOME

Alan Hlad

a novel

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Chapter 1

Epping, England — September 7, 1940

On the day of the atrocity, Susan Shepherd was working in a pigeon loft, sprinkling feed—a mixture of sorghum, wheat, and field peas—into a long metal tray. A few sleepy squabs lifted their heads from under their wings but made no effort to leave their nests. Most of the pigeons were outside, circling the rolling green sheep pasture or decorating the bending birches of Epping Forest.

"You're going to help us save Britain," she whispered.

The loft was a twelve-foot-by-twelve-foot wooden shed lined with cubbyholes like a primary-school classroom. But instead of holding rain boots, hats, or wet gloves, the tiny compartments were the homes for more than sixty pigeons. This was the original loft, constructed by her grandfather, Bertie, before she had been born. And over the past year, a dozen new lofts had been hastily built. Except for more pigeons, her grandfather's farm hadn't changed since she'd left to study zoology at the University of London. Same musty smell: a mixture of down feathers, droppings, and grain. She hadn't expected to return home so soon, but her volunteer work for the National Pigeon Service had postponed her studies in lieu of a more important endeavor—raising war pigeons.

As Susan brushed away specks of feed from her well-worn skirt—repaired with darn and patch—her eyes were drawn to the faded pencil marks on a wall Bertie had made to record her growth as a wee child. She had pressed her back against the wall and stretched her neck like a giraffe. Desperate to grow, she had even resorted to stuffing her shoes with tissue. And six months later, Bertie only laughed when his granddaughter, who failed to remember her tissue, had shrunk an inch. During her childhood, she had grown quite fond of the pencil gracing the top of her head, the sound of scratching lead, and turning in anticipation to check her height as an audience of pigeons cooed in amusement. Susan kneeled and touched her first marking as a toddler, a date shortly after she had come to live with Bertie.

I had a little bird, its name was Enza. I opened the window, and in flew Enza.

Susan shook the childhood jump-rope rhyme from her mind, then picked up a wooden spoon and rapped the side of a can, once used to hold the paint that now peeled from the siding of her grandfather's cottage.

Pigeons flocked through a hole cut near the ceiling. One by one, they entered the loft and fluttered to the ground. The pigeons scuttled along the floor, jutting their heads and flicking their feet, while their bodies remained eloquent and steady, as if they could balance acorns on their tails. The last bird entered, stood on the grain barrel, and tilted its head.

"Hello, Duchess," Susan said.

The bird—unique with its glowing, purplish-green neck plume, more appropriate for a peacock than a pigeon—fluttered to the floor and waddled to Susan's feet.

"I'm afraid I've spoiled you." Susan poured feed into her hand and kneeled.

Duchess pecked at the grains.

The touch of the beak tickled Susan's palm. She knew she shouldn't be hand-feeding a pigeon—it wasn't the Pigeon Ser-

vice's protocol, or her grandfather's—and would no doubt cause problems if Duchess were put into service. But this bird was different. All because a feral cat had managed to scratch its way under the door and take the lives of Bertie's prized racing pigeons, Skye and Islay.

Three years earlier, Susan and Bertie had found what was left of Skye behind the grain barrel. They had found Islay in her nest with a severely injured wing, sitting on an egg she had laid before her attack. They had tried to repair Islay's wing with tape and splinters of wood, but she was too weak to eat, and she sat feebly on her egg for five days before she passed. They had buried her in one of Bertie's tobacco boxes, next to Skye near the edge of Epping Forest.

When none of the other pigeons would sit on the egg, tainted from the feline tragedy, Susan insisted on incubating it, despite her grandfather's belief that the chances of the egg hatching were extraordinarily slim, especially without a calibrated incubator that they could not afford. Stubborn like her grandfather, Susan retrieved a blue ceramic bowl, once used by her grandmother to eat oatmeal. She warmed the bowl with water from the teakettle to establish a good base temperature, then delicately wrapped the egg in a lightly moistened towel and placed it inside. Setting the bowl under Bertie's desk lamp, she adjusted the distance to reach the ideal temperature by using a medical thermometer, which she had tested by sticking it under a nesting pigeon.

For two weeks and two days, Susan rotated the egg every eight hours and sprinkled drops of water onto the towel to keep the proper humidity. And despite the odds of having to bury the egg next to its parents, the egg quivered early on a Sunday morning. Susan and her grandfather skipped church, pulled up chairs, and watched for three hours as the egg slowly cracked open. As church bells rang over Epping to release their congregations, a shriveled hatchling poked its way into the world.

"Your parents and your granny would be proud of you," Bertie had said.

Susan, a heaviness in her chest, had smiled and gently caressed the hatchling.

It had been a miracle, but Susan knew that this hatchling still had a slim chance of survival without the aid of her parents' pigeon milk. Undeterred, she took to grinding seed into paste and feeding the hatchling by hand. Within a few days, the hatchling was able to stand, unfurl its wings, and peck. One week later, it was eating feed with the others in the loft. And Susan named her Duchess, despite her grandfather's fondness for naming his racing pigeons after remote Scottish land masses, none of which they had ever visited.

Duchess had grown into something extraordinary. And it wasn't just her looks, even though her neck plume shimmered like mother of pearl. It was the bird's intelligence—or odd behavior, as her grandfather believed—that made her stand out among the flock. While homing pigeons were trained by the reward of food, Duchess seemed to be driven by the need to understand the world around her, a strange sense of curiosity hidden behind her golden eyes. Instead of joining the group, Duchess was content to watch her companions eat as she stood on Susan's shoulder, cooing in response to Susan's words, as if the bird enjoyed the art of conversation. And even more impressive was Duchess's athletic ability; she was typically the first to arrive home after the pigeons were released at a distant training location. Bertie had commented that Duchess was the fastest to return only because of her desire to get a few minutes of Susan's undivided attention. Susan laughed but knew there was some truth to what he said.

As Susan stroked Duchess's back with a finger, a siren sounded. She stopped. The horn began as a low growl, then grew to an ear-piercing roar, tapering off, then repeating. Goose bumps cropped up on her arms. Pigeons fluttered. Walls vibrated. Seed in the feeding tray quivered.

The door flew open. Her grandfather, a bowlegged man wearing a tarnished tin helmet, shouted, "Luftwaffe!" He grabbed Susan's hand and pulled.

Susan saw the spring door closing behind her, Duchess standing calmly on the ground as the other pigeons scattered. "Duchess!" She broke her grandfather's grip, threw open the door, and scooped up the bird.

Susan, with Duchess tucked into the crook of her arm, ran with Bertie toward the bomb shelter, just like they had rehearsed, praying each time that this day would never come. But they knew it was merely a matter of time. As they ran across the field and past several other pigeon lofts, the siren wailed from nearby North Weald Airfield.

Bertie paused as he struggled to catch his breath. He pushed up his old military helmet that kept falling over his eyes. "Hurry!" he shouted.

Before they reached the shelter, the siren died, replaced by the buzz of mechanical bees. Susan looked up, swallowed, and pushed up the brim of Bertie's helmet. Hundreds of enemy bombers, and nearly twice as many fighters, darkened the late-afternoon sky like a swarm of black flies. Antiaircraft fire boomed. Black bursts exploded below the aerial armada.

The shelter was a broad earthen mound under the canopy of a large beech tree. Green grass now covered the embankment, blending the refuge into the rolling pasture. Except for the front door, which made it look like a home for a hobbit, the sanctuary was camouflaged. Susan had helped her grandfather build the shelter, piling up wheelbarrows of dirt and mixing concrete in buckets to line the inner walls reinforced with remnant bricks and scrap steel from a demolished cannery. And for the entrance, they used a door from an old outhouse.

As they reached the shelter, the bellies of the bombers cracked open. Instead of hunkering into the pit, they were compelled—despite their own safety—to watch scrambling Royal Air Force

Hurricane fighters soar over the trees and pitch sharply to the sky. The fighter squadron was sorely outnumbered as enemy escort fighters bearing the Iron Cross swooped down to surround them. The RAF put up a short but valiant effort. One Hurricane exploded after rounds of enemy gunfire pierced its fuel tank, sending shrapnel over Epping Forest. Another had its tail shot off, sending the Hurricane into a spinning dive and crashing into a field with no sign of the pilot bailing out. One by one, the RAF Hurricanes were shot down, and the few planes lucky enough to suffer only minor damages retreated with smoke pouring from their engines.

Susan and Bertie watched the invaders fly toward London, a mere twenty miles away, contested only by inaccurate antiaircraft fire. Seeds of destruction dropped from the bellies of the bombers and whistled to the ground.

"My God." Tears flowed down Susan's cheeks as the first bombs exploded.

As night set in, the horizon of London glowed with scores, perhaps hundreds, of great fires. And with the darkness came a second wave of bombers dropping their payloads throughout the night, using the burning fires to identify their targets. White-hot incendiary bombs flared. Echoes of explosions filled the air.

At 4:30 AM, the bombing stopped. Susan stepped to Bertie, sitting on the ground, and helped him to his feet. With weak legs, he shuffled into the shelter, then curled onto a cot with his tin helmet covering his face. Unable to rest, Susan stood outside with Duchess cradled in her arms and watched the glow on the horizon. The grinding continued as the German planes flew overhead, masking the stars and crescent moon. She closed her eyes and prayed that they would not return. But the following evening they came back. And again the night after that.

Chapter 2

Buxton, Maine — September 8, 1940

Ollie Evans, lured by a squeaky porch swing and the roasted-nut aroma of chicory coffee, opened the screen door. He found his parents gently rocking, sharing a wool blanket and a cup of coffee, as an orange sun rose above the dew-glistened potato fields.

The cup in his mother's hand, Ollie noticed, was a misshapen toad-green mug he had made in industrial arts class in the seventh grade. He chuckled. "Where did you find it?"

His mother shrugged, wisps of faded brown hair resting on her shoulders. She sipped. Steam swirled in the cool air.

Ollie was no longer a little boy. He was six feet tall, give or take an inch, with wavy brown hair and caramel eyes, a gift from his mother. The dimple on his chin mirrored the one on his father. As Ollie took a seat on the porch steps, an unsettling feeling that he should be somewhere else filled his belly. It wasn't unusual to be home in the fall. After all, most of the schools would soon be on potato recess. Unfortunately, his harvest break was more permanent.

"I'm proud of you," his father said.

"For what?" Ollie asked.

"For putting family first." He accepted the mug from his wife and drank. "I'm sorry you're still home." He nudged the cane hanging from the side of the swing. "It wasn't fair that you had to stay."

"That's okay. The farm's important. And so are you."

Three years ago, his father's muddy boot slipped off the tractor's clutch while attempting to pull out a stump. The machine flipped backward, pinning his father's right leg, shattering his hip, and snapping a femur in two places. Ollie, unable to lift the tractor, dug him out with a hand trowel from the garden shed. His mother had called for an ambulance and helped by scraping earth with her bare hands, ripping off three of her fingernails. It had been a painful recovery, including two surgeries and agonizing rounds of physical therapy. And now his father, held together with screws and wire, was able to perform some of the farm duties, except for plowing and crop-dusting. He was no longer able to work the pedals, the strain too much for his brittle leg. His father didn't seem to mind moving as slowly as a tortoise, the constant ache in his joints, or the pronounced limp in his walk. It was the inability to fly that had stolen his spirit, his once-dark hair turning gray with the passing of days spent grounded, as if the lower altitude accelerated the aging process.

His mother adjusted the blanket covering their laps, took the mug from her husband, and handed him the newspaper.

Ollie's father slid the rubber band from the paper, wrapped it around his forefinger, and shot it at Ollie.

Ollie ducked, even though it whizzed two feet over his head.

The smile fell from his father's face as he unfolded the paper. "Good God."

Mother's eyes widened.

"They've bombed London," Ollie's father said, showing her the paper.

"Those poor people," Mother said.

Ollie stepped to his parents and stared at the newspaper head-

line: *Nazis Strike! German Planes Raid London!* He took a deep breath and exhaled.

"The Nazis took France in just over a month," Ollie's father said. "Without our help, they'll take Britain in a year. And before we know it, we'll have a regatta of U-boats in Casco Bay."

Ollie crossed his arms as another debate about the war began to dominate their conversation. It usually started with the newspaper but always ended with his father's proclamation of their British heritage.

"FDR says we're going to stay neutral," Mother said.

"We'll be in this war eventually." Ollie's father tapped his thigh. "If I didn't have a bum leg, I'd have a mind to walk to Montreal and join the Merchant Navy. At least the Canadians have the guts to stand by Britain." He lowered the paper. "Our family may have lost our accent . . ."

"But our blood is, and always will be, British," Ollie said, cutting off his father. "We know."

The porch turned silent, except for the creek of the swing and the caw of a crow in the potato field.

"I suggest that you never forget it." Ollie's father dropped the paper, retrieved his cane, and stood.

"Dad, I didn't mean to . . ."

Father raised his hand. "Your mother and I have errands to run." He turned and went inside, the screen door banging against the frame.

Mother sighed and looked at Ollie. "Have you forgotten how your father lost his brother?"

"I'm sorry," Ollie said, recalling the uncle he had never met. Uncle Henry was killed in the Great War, two years before Ollie was born. Each year on Henry's birthday, Ollie's father honored his brother's memory by going salmon fishing, their favorite childhood sport in northern England. Ollie often joined his father for the day, fly-fishing in the solitude of the Saco River's rippling waters. Although his father spoke little of the details, Ollie

had managed to piece together that a cloud of chlorine gas had forced Henry to abandon his trench in exchange for machine-gun fire. Henry died, and so did a piece of his father, in a French field on the Western Front.

"You should be more respectful of your father's feelings about the war. And mine." Mother paused. "Want something to eat?"

Ollie shook his head, feeling as if his stomach was filled with clay.

"You and your father can continue this discussion when we get back from town." Mother stood. "And I expect you to apologize."

"I will."

She placed her hands on her hips.

"I promise." Ollie retrieved the rubber band and slid it onto his wrist. "I better get going. Lots of dusting to do."

"Be careful," his mother said, going inside.

Behind the barn, Ollie saw the weathered canary-yellow biplane, looking like a prehistoric bird warming its old bones in the morning sun. The plane was fully fueled and loaded with insecticide, or what his father aptly called pixie dust. He checked the tension wires strung between the upper and lower wings, stepped into the cockpit, and put on his leather cap. As he flipped the ignition, the engine coughed and the propeller turned over, sending a vibrating buzz through his body. He advanced the power, moving the plane down a bumpy earthen runway that split the potato field. The plane accelerated, and the tail began to rise. Sensing the proper speed, considering the instrument panel didn't work, he pulled back on the stick, and the plane lifted into the air. He circled their house, wondering how he would smooth things over with his father. Flying west to the farmlands, he replaced thoughts of war with his longing of someday going away to college.

The Maine potato harvest would soon be over, bringing an end to another crop-dusting season and his third year of staying

home to run the family potato farm. Assuming the fall crop had a good yield and the price for potatoes didn't plummet, perhaps they'd have enough money for him to leave for college next year. He'd already been accepted at Worcester Polytechnic Institute. But before he would allow himself to leave, his father's health would need to improve. If everything went perfectly, five or six years from now, he'd have his aeronautical engineering degree, his ticket out of Buxton.

There was nothing wrong with Buxton. In many respects, a farm was a great place to grow up, and he had no regrets about staying to help his father. But most of his friends had left home years ago; many were now cutting logs for a paper mill or hoisting crustaceans from the back of a lobster boat. And the lucky ones had gone off to college, including his girlfriend, Caroline, who went to Bowdoin, where her letters had dwindled and eventually stopped. Even his high school buddies, Stan and James, had gone to the University of Maine and seldom came home on breaks. They were reveling in their life of academia and social parties, while Ollie was still living with his parents. They had taken different paths, and Ollie couldn't blame them for falling out of touch.

Caroline had been Ollie's first girlfriend. They'd dated during their senior year of high school. Caroline had been cute and popular, and her family owned one of the largest lumber mills in York County; they were wealthy by Buxton standards. And she'd been charmed, Ollie believed, by his ability to fly a plane, an attractive trait when compared to boys who were driving their parents' car. Initially, he thought Caroline might be the girl he was going to spend his life with. But things changed when Ollie's dad was injured. Caroline, who claimed that she didn't do well with hospitals, had reluctantly joined Ollie and his mother to visit Ollie's dad in the recovery ward. And Caroline had turned reticent when Ollie brought up the subject of having to defer college to take care of the family farm. In the end, Ollie had stayed home, and Caroline had gone to college, where she distanced herself from

Ollie, even making excuses on holidays for why she was too busy to see him. He'd been dejected. *She doesn't want to risk being stuck with me on a farm.* But as time passed, Ollie realized that it was best that he and Caroline had gone their separate ways. More importantly, he now knew that he wanted what his parents had in a relationship. They would always be there for each other, regardless of life's unexpected circumstances. *Someday, I'll love a woman as much as Dad loves Mom.*

Despite spending his entire life in a town where he knew everyone by their first name, he now felt out of place. In Buxton, one either farmed or fished, not a good fit for someone who preferred the speed of a plane to the crawl of a tractor. And besides, he had always been allergic to shellfish, unable to have even a nibble of lobster without breaking into hives and running for the bathroom.

With a college degree, he would certainly have options to design or build planes, taking him to new parts of the country, perhaps as far as California. But what he really wanted to do was fly. Since the first time his father had taken him crop-dusting, he was hooked. Ollie's father had placed Ollie on his lap, slid a leather flight cap on him that was several sizes too big on his son's head, and took to the sky. Ollie, a grin carved into his face, loved the way the plane angled upward to the clouds as he pulled the stick to his chest. He felt his father laugh, his back bouncing against his father's tummy. Then his father eased his hands forward to keep from pulling a loop, a dangerous maneuver considering the biplane was missing safety harnesses. By the time he was fourteen, when he had grown big enough to reach the pedals, his father acted as a copilot, gradually weaning him from instructions. Within a year, he was flying on his own, much to the chagrin of his mother, who still worried about him getting hurt playing football. To help put his mother's mind at ease, his father installed new safety harnesses, but considering Ollie's fearless acrobatics, that was about as useful as giving a tightrope walker an umbrella.

As he approached a large farm, Ollie pushed the stick forward and felt his body rise, and the nose of the biplane tipped down. The engine roared. Wind pressed against his face. Approaching the ground, he adjusted the stick, feeling the pull of gravity sink him into his seat. The plane leveled off. Five feet above a potato field, he pulled the lever. A spray of dust streamed behind the tail and fell like snow. At the end of the field, he pulled back hard on the stick, shooting the plane over a row of towering pines. He arced to the left and came around for another pass.

Ollie spent the morning dusting fields. Finishing his last farm, he checked the fuel gauge—the only instrument that seemed to work—and tipped the wings to the north. The scattered fields disappeared, and in the distance, he saw his favorite spot, Sebago Lake. There were few farmers in this area, at least none that were clients of his father's business, making it unlikely that word about Ollie's stunts would get back to his mother. Otherwise, he'd be skinned alive.

Above the lake, he did a snap roll, as if the fuselage spun on a skewer. He pulled the nose straight to the sky, flying toward the clouds until the propeller lost its battle against the pull of gravity and tipped the plane over, just before the engine stalled, into a hammerhead dive. As he fell to the lake, he pulled up and glided over the still water, feeling the urge to dip the landing gear.

A young girl in pigtails ran out of a cottage—the only home on the north side of the lake—and stood on a dock. She waved and jumped. Ollie tipped the wings, buzzed the shoreline, and performed his usual show for an audience of one. The girl, who Ollie only knew from the air, was probably in grade school. Attracted by the roar of the plane's engine, she often came outside to watch. As the girl took a seat on the dock, Ollie swooped the plane high into the sky, pulling a barrel-roll maneuver, then leveled off. He performed a split-S, an inside loop, and a series of spins.

For the finale, he decided to perform a less practiced and more

challenging maneuver, the tailslide. He did a quarter loop that sent the plane straight vertical, with full power. Wind whistled. His adrenaline rushed. The aircraft continued to climb until it lost momentum, then hung for a second before falling backward. As the nose dropped through the horizon, he pushed the stick forward and sent the plane into a dive. He pulled hard on the stick and leveled off a few feet above the lake, much too close for comfort. His pulse pounded in his ears. He saw the girl standing on the shoreline clapping her hands.

As he swooped by the cottage, he reached into his jacket and pulled out a note that was tied to a small piece of wood. He released the package. It fell gently to a grass clearing several yards from the shoreline.

The girl ran to the package, untied the string, and read the note.

Thanks for being a great audience. Ollie.

The girl waved her arms. And he flew away.

Ollie eased back the throttle and zigzagged on his way home, maximizing his time in the air before he'd have to begin his farm chores. As he neared Buxton, the thick forest of pines turned to rolling plots of corn, potatoes, and hay. As the family farm came into view, he noticed his father's truck was gone, replaced with a shiny new-model car. He swooped over and saw a man in dark clothing standing on the porch. He banked around to the runway and landed. Ollie cut the engine, got out of the cockpit, and walked to the house. As he approached, he glanced at the '39 Plymouth with an unmistakable white top and green sides. The Portland police officer stepped from the porch and removed his cap, exposing a bald head with stubbly gray sideburns.

"Oliver Evans?" the officer asked.

A knot formed in Ollie's gut. "Yes."

"There's been an accident."

Ollie opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

"It's your parents."

"Are they okay?"

The officer wiped his face with a handkerchief from his pocket. "I'm sorry."

A shock jolted Ollie. He bent over like he'd been punched in the gut. "No," he whimpered in disbelief. A bombardment of thoughts and emotions made him feel as though the ground was spinning. Numb and having difficulty walking, he was helped into the police car by the officer. As they drove away, the smell of cigar smoke embedded into the interior made Ollie's stomach churn.

"The driver had been drinking," the officer said, gripping the steering wheel. "He ran a red light, veered onto a sidewalk, and struck your parents as they were leaving Casco Hardware."

"There must be some mistake." Ollie's head throbbed, and his heart was ravaged by a mixture of anger and despair.

The officer cleared his throat. "I wish there was, son."

Ollie slumped in his seat like a marionette with its strings severed. *This can't be happening!* He had an impulse to pull the door handle and jump out, anything to escape this nightmare. Ollie, his eyes welled with tears, buried his head into his hands. He bit his lip and tasted copper.

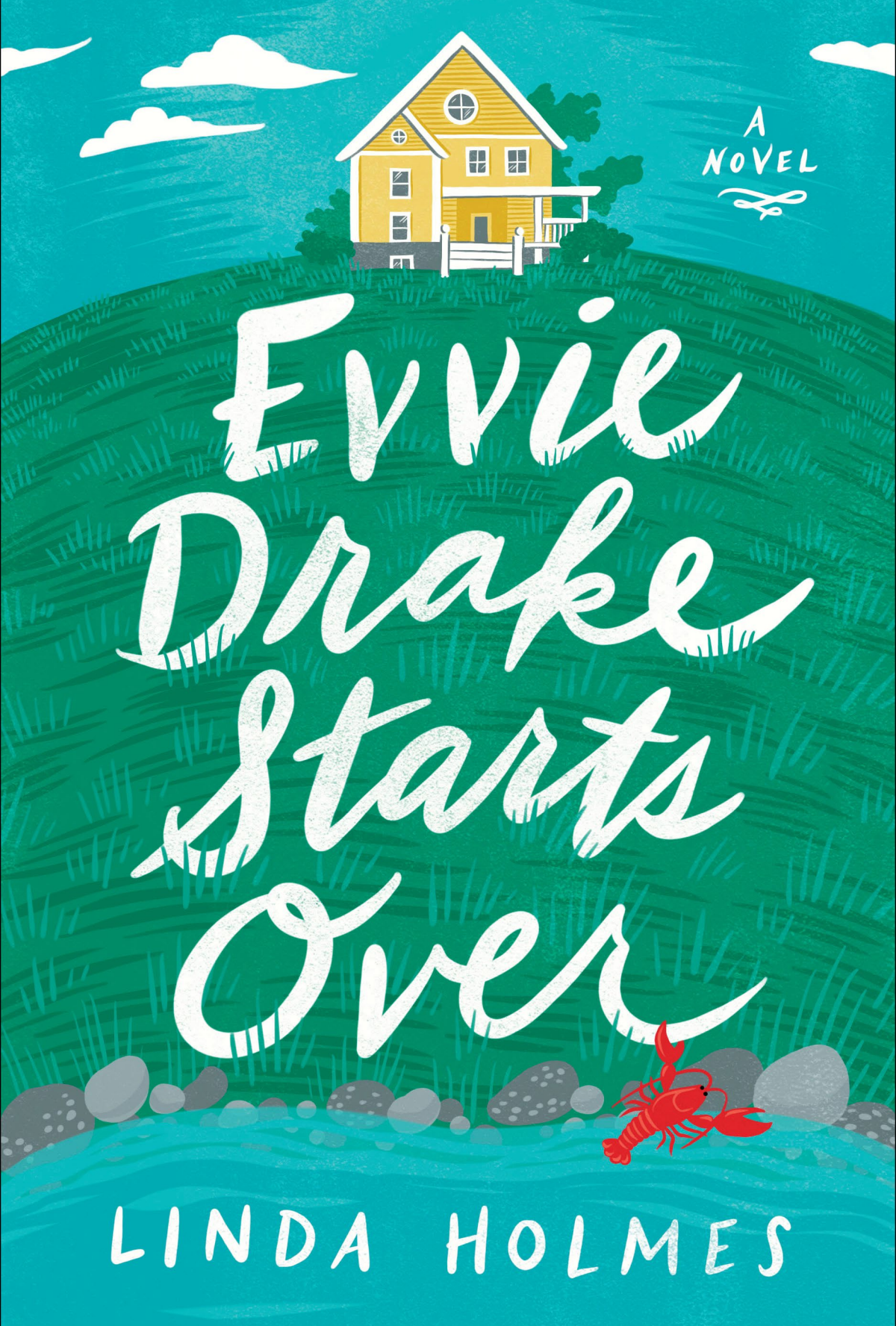
Twenty minutes later, Ollie arrived at the Cumberland County Morgue. A scent of rubbing alcohol hung in the air. The coroner, a thin, stoic man who was washing his hands over a sink, turned off the water and then led Ollie to a wall of nickel-plated cooler drawers. The coroner wiped his hands on his lab coat, pulled two latches, and slid the bodies out.

Ollie's heart sank. His eyes watered. A flash of his father picking oxeye daisies, his mother's favorite flower. An image of Mom placing a handwritten note into Dad's lunch box. Simple gifts were symbols of their affection for each other. But there would be no more flowers for Mom to place on the kitchen table. And no more sweet notes for Dad to add to the stack that he kept in a bedside drawer.

The officer, standing in the doorway, turned his head.

The coroner finished drying his hands, using the tail of his lab coat. “Are these your parents?”

Mother was missing a shoe, her toes a pasty blue. Father’s chest was sunken, and his left arm was badly broken. Unable to bring his eyes to look at their faces, Ollie touched their hands, cold and stiff. He began to weep, then nodded to the coroner. Steel casters rolled. And his parents disappeared into the chamber.


A NOVEL
Evvie Drake Starts Over
LINDA HOLMES

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Four

Calcasset was in the part of Maine well-suited to the name MidCoast because it resolutely doesn't mean anything, and a description that resolutely doesn't mean anything is a powerful indicator of communally owned modesty. Even the weather changed politely: every year, as fall began to take over from summer, there would be crisp mornings that would warn that one day soon, it would truly be cold.

As soon as Evvie woke up and put her feet on the cool wood floor, she knew this was one of the days when fall would poke its head out. She made tea, ate a bowl of oatmeal with raisins and maple syrup, and threw her favorite gray cardigan over her Calcasset High School Band T-shirt—still hanging in after fifteen years—and jeans. The sweater left a trail of fuzzy puffs everywhere, but she'd had it since college. When she wore it and drank something hot, she liked to imagine it gave her autumnal superpowers and a certain cozy appeal.

She could work. She should work. There was a little voice getting louder and louder, saying, *Do something, do something.* She had emails to answer, including one from Nona Powell Brown, a professor at Howard, with the subject line, "Your attentive ear."

Evvie sometimes called herself a professional eavesdropper, but she was a transcriber. She worked mostly with interview tapes from researchers and journalists, though she also had what she called "cha-ching clients" who wanted documentation of board meetings or presentations. She knew it sounded boring to people who figured she could be cheaply replaced by decent software. Tim had once cracked that she should get business cards that said, "For when technology barely won't do." And she did have automation breathing—or buzzing, or whatever—down her neck, not that everyone she worked with didn't, too.

But she'd always thought it was sort of fabulous. It meant slipping on headphones and listening for hours to people's stories, imitating their accents, being surprised by their voices cracking or tumbling into laughs. Often, she'd develop elaborate ideas of what they looked like or what they wore, and she'd image-search them at midnight, sitting in bed with her face lit up by her laptop screen to see if she was right. She was good; she could type almost as fast as she could listen, and a reporter for *The Boston Globe* called her "the only woman who can reliably translate mumble into English." He was the one who'd connected her with Nona, her favorite client, a labor economist who wrote what she called "occupational biographies." The last one had been about logging, and Evvie had transcribed almost two hundred hours of tape for it. She could tell you what a whistle punk was. She knew logging had the highest per capita death rate of any U.S. occupation. This did not come in handy at parties—or, it would not, if she went to parties.

Nona's email said that she was planning a book on Maine lobstermen, and she wouldn't be starting the work for at least a year, but she wondered if Evvie was interested in helping with the research. Not just transcription, but the interviewing, too, and helping Nona navigate. This would be a promotion of sorts. "I always try to team up with a local," she'd written, "and I naturally thought of you right away. I don't know what your schedule is like these days, and it's still a long way off, but let me know when you have time to talk."

Right now, though, Evvie's attentive ear was mostly on hiatus—and she hadn't yet answered Nona. She did little jobs here and there so she wouldn't be broke, but the very thought of going out into the towns up and down the coast, having her work interrupted by condolences that would make her circle back into her marriage was too much to even think about. Most things were too much to think about.

So instead of returning emails to clients, she devoured books that moved with her from table to table, chair to chair, as she read and stopped and read more, sticking a scrap of paper between the pages to mark her place. On this occasion, she was a third of the way through a fat Southern novel she'd been wanting to read ever since she heard the author on *Fresh Air,* talking about how he grew up living above a beauty parlor with his family and their illegal pet monkey.

She was stretched out on the sofa, trying to ignore the *Do something, do something* voice, when she heard a knock that had to be Andy and the potential tenant. She hopped up and started for the front door, but along the way, she stopped. Her eyes settled on the fireplace mantel, which held two marbled scented candles and a driftwood sculpture she didn't like from somewhere salty where she and Tim had once had a lobster roll. She yanked open the drawer of the writing desk in the corner and pulled out her silver-framed wedding portrait. She'd loved the gazebo; she'd hated her dress. But propped up between the candles, the photo would perhaps testify on her behalf that she was properly grieving and was not a *monster, monster*. She walked to the door.

When she opened it, Andy wasn't there. There was only a man, strikingly tall, with green eyes and dark hair flecked with gray. He had a sunburn on his left arm, likely from hanging it out a car window. "Oh," she said. "Hi there." Andy hadn't mentioned that the guy was particularly good-looking, but he probably didn't even know. Andy was such a decent guy, and he was such a dummy about this stuff.

"Evvie," he said.

"I bet you're Dean," she said, extending her hand.

He clasped it and said, "Good to meet you. I hope you don't mind. I was afraid if I brought Andy, you'd feel like you should say yes to shut him up, so I left him at home."

She looked at his eyes, his wrists, his high cheekbones, all the years of sun on his skin, and the way he didn't look as young as she'd thought he would. "Sure, come on in, it's fine." Remembering to let go of his hand, she stepped to the side, and he squeezed past her into the house. As she closed the door, she encountered his shoulder and got a whiff of detergent and maybe bacon, which she figured Andy had been putting in front of him all morning, next to the same frozen waffles the girls favored on the weekends. "When did you get to town?" she asked.

He looked around the living room a little. "I got here yesterday afternoon. I caught up with Andy and his kids. We haven't seen each other in a few years."

"That sounds like fun. Did the girls ask you about where you live? They're very into geography right now. Maps and globes, the shape of the coast."

"They did. I had to promise to take them on the subway someday. I think they're going to be disappointed that it doesn't feel as much like a roller coaster as it looks like on a map."

"Did Lilly ask you to play Doc McStuffins?"

"Yeah. She was very thorough. I'm supposed to go back in six months for a follow-up."

Evvie nodded. "Abundance of caution, sure."

"I've been in worse hands." He smiled, about a third of the way. It was a pretty good third of a smile.

"So you drove up from Manhattan? How long does that take?"

"Eight hours, give or take."

"Yikes."

"Yeah. The good news is that there's a lot of radio to listen to."

"What do you like? Sports talk and stuff?"

"Oh, no. Jerks who don't play sports fighting about sports is not my idea of a good time," he said. "I'm more of a public radio guy."

"Hey, me, too," she said. "Or podcasts."

"My brother's trying to get me into those. I'm always afraid it's going to be, like, three guys on Skype getting high and talking about jam bands. What kind do you listen to?"

"One about music, one about design, a couple about politics when I can stand it. A bunch that are just, you know, 'Today on our show, a man who learned everything and nothing at all.' That stuff. And one where a guy summarizes horror novels. I'm not sure how I got listening to that one; I'm not a horror person."

"It's not bad to know a little something about the things you don't care about," he said.

She laughed. "That's how I am about *Sports Illustrated,* no offense."

"Oh, none taken."

"So," she said, "anyway. This is the house. The apartment is in back. It doesn't have a separate entrance, so you'd come in this way, or there's a side door into the kitchen from the yard. But it's a straight shot"—she walked him through the house—"back to the kitchen, and then it's this door, right through here." She kept the apartment door closed, and she hadn't had the heat on in there, so it was a little chilly when she opened it up. "It stays nice and warm normally, promise."

He stepped in behind her and closed the door, and then they were standing in the middle of all that beige carpeting with the cloudy gray light coming in the big windows. She reached up and pulled the chain on the overhead light, but after he'd walked around a bit, he reached up and shut it off again. He went to the bathroom door and swung it open, then shut it again and came back to her. He seemed to be stretching out a sore shoulder as he opened and closed the refrigerator in the kitchenette. He walked back and stood with his hands on his hips. "I feel like I should ask you questions."

"Do you have questions?"

"I'm not sure."

"Well," she said, "let me think of answers. You can have whoever over that you want, of course, it won't bother me. I'm usually working upstairs, or in the living room where you came in. You've got the kitchenette in here, but if you need anything in the big kitchen, there's plenty of room."

"I'm only good at grilled cheese," he said. "And Pringles. I'm also good with Pringles."

"Just cans of Pringles, or, like, you cook with Pringles?"

"Just Pringles. I buy them, I open the package, and then I stuff them straight into my face."

"Ah. Got it. That's how I make Oreos," she said. He grinned, and she told him about the washer and dryer, the gas grill outside, and the spot beside the house where he could park.

He looked around the empty space. "It looks great, just right. I know you weren't sure about renting it out. Not knowing me and everything."

"I thought about it more after I talked to Andy. It makes a lot of sense. It can be open-ended, you don't have to get into a big"—she waved her hand—"a big thing that's not convenient for your situation. It's more space than I need."

He nodded slowly. "House rules? Other stuff?"

"No smoking. Do you have pets?"

"I don't have pets, and I also don't smoke. True story, by the way: a friend of mine had a Great Dane who used to try to eat his Marlboro Lights. Wound up in the dog hospital once."

"Well, at least they were lights."

"Yeah, he pulled through. You're not a dog person?"

"No, I am. Always meant to get one. I guess I didn't get around to it."

"Ah, that happens," Dean said. "Andy said you were asking $800?"

"To be honest, Andy was asking $800," she said. "He does all my negotiating."

"Seems reasonable." Dean smiled and looked out the window, where the biggest tree in the yard shook. "Getting windy out there."

It got quiet. She heard a car go by outside, and more wind. A swarm of leaves blew across the yard. "It seems like a cup-of-tea day," she said, finally. "I assume you like Gatorade or something. Do you drink tea?"

"I do drink tea, when it's cold," he said. "Hot Gatorade is not good."

Back in the kitchen, they sat across from each other at her wooden table. She wished she'd thrown out the wilting bunch of parsley she was storing in a jar of water. "So you grew up with Andy in Denver." He nodded. "What was after that?"

"I went to Cornell to play baseball. Graduated from there, then I got drafted, played in the minors in a couple different places, and then I went to the Marlins in 2008."

"Mi . . . ami Marlins?" she ventured.

"Exactly. But back then, the Florida Marlins, before they got the new stadium. So I lived down in Miami for a couple years, then I got traded to the Yankees, and I went to New York. And now I'm unemployed. You?"

"Nowhere near that interesting. I grew up right here, in Calcasset. My husband, Tim, and I went to USC, and then he went to medical school out there. Then Tim did his residency in Portland. I lived up here, so we were semi-long-distance. Then he moved to Calcasset, and we got married and got this house. That was four years ago."

When he immediately looked at the floor, it seemed likely that Andy had told him how the story ended, at least as much as Andy knew himself. His version did not include her in her car with her birth certificate and a wad of cash.

Dean looked back at her. "I'm sorry about all that, by the way," he said.

"Yeah, thank you." She nodded. Her mind was digging through options, seeking for anything else to ask. "How long were you thinking of staying?"

"I don't know. Six months? A year at the most. I'll have to get back to New York, that's where my real life is. But right now, I'm kind of clearing my head." He smiled. "That's about as far as I've gotten for now."

She nodded. "I can relate."

The amount of time people who have just met are supposed to look directly at each other, particularly without talking, is a unit that's both very short and very precise. When you exceed it, you get suspicious, or you get threatened, or you get this flicker of accidental intimacy, like you've peeked at the person naked through a shower door. They both smiled, and it ended. "Right," she said. "So, I think you should take it. The apartment. You should take it." She could see that he was carefully considering whether to say something. "What?" she asked.

"I'm wondering if I should promise you no funny stuff or something."

She raised an eyebrow. "Do you need me to promise *you* no funny stuff?"

Now he seemed a little more serious. "I do think we should have a deal." She looked at him expectantly. "You don't ask me about baseball," he said, "and I don't ask you about your husband."

She blinked. "I didn't ask you about baseball."

"I know. I didn't ask you about your husband."

"But you want to have an official arrangement."

He rubbed his eyes. "I don't know how much you know about it, Evvie, but I have had a shitty year. A shitty couple of years. And I have talked about it a lot. And I think maybe you're in the same position. If you're okay with this, you'd be doing me a favor, and you'd be doing me an even bigger favor if it can just be normal. I'll say hi, and you can say hi, and we won't do, you know, the whole thing with the mysterious sad lady and the exiled . . . fuckup."

She squinted at him a little. "So, like, as an example, I won't mention that 'exile' and 'fuckup' both strike me as a little unfair."

"Right. And I won't ask you why 'mysterious sad lady' doesn't."

Her hand stretched out across the table. Instead of taking it in his handshake hand, his business hand, he took it in the hand on the same side. "Do we have a deal?" he asked.

She nodded, noticing the freckles on the back of his wrist.

Oh, stop it.

Five

A few days later, Evvie was stuffing the second notice on her electric bill into her kitchen drawer when she heard a bang from the apartment. She went and knocked, and Dean opened the door wide. "Hey."

"Hey," Evvie said. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, yeah," he said, "sorry about the noise. Knocked a box off the counter. It's never the box with the sheets in it, you know? It's always whatever will make it sound the most like you tried to murder a robot by throwing it down a couple of flights of stairs."

Evvie laughed. "Are you settling in okay? I wasn't sure I'd told you how to open the windows."

"Oh, no, you did, they're open, I've got a breeze going. You want to come in? I'm unpacking. I got lucky at your thrift store. I got furniture, I got dishes, I got my grilled cheese pan."

Evvie peeked inside. "You didn't get a bed."

"It's on the way. Diane told me a used mattress might give me bedbugs."

"Smart lady. I'd be happy to put you in the guest room until it gets here."

"Nah," he said. "I've slept in airplane seats with guys who were spitting tobacco the whole time, I can make it a couple more days bunking with Andy. I'm pretty sure Lilly wants me back tonight anyway to look at some sketches of a superhero she invented. Her dad told her I like Batman."

She stepped into the apartment, which was so different with *anything* in it. Even boxes made it breathe differently, and he had set up a pair of big, comfortable-looking club chairs sort of facing each other. "Batman, huh? You're one of *those* guys."

"Yeah. I sneaked around at Comic-Con in San Diego in costume a few years ago. Full thing, big cowl over my face. Missed a couple of days of practice and got fined, but it was worth it."

"Because?"

He stopped unpacking. "I'd never been. I'd always wanted to go. I saw a guy in a picture who was decked out like Boba Fett—you know, from *Star Wars*?"

"I know who Boba Fett is."

"Anyway, I figured Comic-Con was the one place I could wear a mask and still blend in. Probably the most normal I got to be that year, walking around in a superhero costume."

She smiled. "Maybe that's why Bruce Wayne did it."

He laughed. "Yeah, maybe."

"Well, it looks like Esther's Attic treated you right," she said. "I haven't bought anything over there in forever, but she's amazing. Diane, not Esther. Esther's been dead since I was in high school. But Diane can tell you who gave her everything she has in that store. I was about to buy a sweater from her once when she told me that my dentist brought it over with a pile of his mother's stuff from when they moved her into a home. I couldn't do it. I figured it was bad enough I was drawn to an old-lady sweater without literally buying an old lady's sweater."

"She says nice things about you." He looked up from his unpacking. "She promised you would be a very nice landlady. She put her hand over her heart when she said your name and everything."

Evvie sighed. "Uch. I bet. A lot of people will tell you how nice I

am, which mostly means they feel very, very sorry for me and they're very worried about where they're going to find a new doctor."

"She said you were a trouper."

"Yes, that sounds like something she would say."

"I met her dog."

"Ah, Ziggy."

"Yeah. She said he's a . . . fluffernutter or something? Scared the hell out of me. I thought he was stuffed, and then he started walking toward me. I think I almost screamed."

"He's a miniature goldendoodle. At Christmas, he wears antlers. On St. Patrick's Day, he wears a hat with a buckle on it."

"Can't wait."

"Town treat you well otherwise?"

"Yeah. I like it. It's nice and quiet. It's, uh . . ."

"Quaint? Fishy?"

"White. It's very, very white."

"Oh," Evvie said. "You noticed that, huh? You know, Maine is the whitest state in the country. Oldest, too. Freezing cold in the winter, full of tourists in the summer. On the plus side: lobster."

"What do people do for fun?"

"Sometimes the kids from the high school throw bricks through the windows of our deserted shoe factory." She paused. "Is that not what you meant by 'fun'?"

He smiled and set a blender on the counter. "It seems like nobody gives a shit about baseball, which is helpful."

Evvie laughed as she dropped into one of the chairs and inspected the upholstery on the arm. "That is not true. They don't care about major league baseball. But they care intensely about baseball, I promise."

He frowned. "Really?"

"You are in the home territory of the Calcasset Claws," she said. He looked at her, puzzled, and she held up her fingers in a sideways V. He just stared. "You didn't see 'Go Claws'? Esther's has one in the window, I think."

"Oh," he said. "Right, that's what that was. Hey, you want a water?"

She nodded, and he tossed her a small plastic water bottle. "We had an Atlanta Braves farm team back in the '80s, and then we lost it, and a few years later we got the Claws, who play in the same park. They're part of the Northern Atlantic League. Unaffiliated minors."

He hopped up to sit on the kitchen counter. "Is this okay?" he asked, gesturing generally to his perch. She waved dismissively. "So," he said, "Claws are big."

"They're huge. Couple summers ago, there was a scandal, though." She raised then lowered her eyebrows.

"You don't say."

"Intrigue at the cereal-box races." She swiveled in the chair so she was sitting in it sideways with her legs slung over one of its wide, soft arms. "At every home game, between the third and fourth innings, three kids from town get into these foam cereal-box costumes. There's a Cheerios box, a Wheaties box, and a Chex box. And they run around the bases, and whoever comes in first gets an autographed ball and a gift certificate to the DQ."

"Wow, the DQ!" he said. "Giving away the good stuff."

"Exactly. As you can imagine, it's very serious. And everybody in the stands jumps up and knocks over their beers, you know, 'CHEEEERIOOOOS!' or 'WHEEEEEEATIEEEES!' So. Anyway. There's this kid Mike Parco, who at the time is eight years old and is a serious, total asshole. I know you're not supposed to say that about children, but I swear, it takes most men at least two divorces to be as mean as this twerp. His mom, Talley, ran the lobster-roll stand at the ballpark, and everybody knew that, at the time, she was sleeping with Doug Lexington, who was in charge of fan relations, like, ha ha."

Dean grinned at her. "Oh, Talley."

"So, probably because of favoritism, Mike got to race in the Cheerios costume for about ten games in a row. But, because fan relations can get you into the outfit but not around the bases, he never won. And Talley started to complain that it was the costume. She believed that the cereal-box races were *rigged*. So she writes a letter to

the *Calcasset Neighbor,* and she's demanding that somebody do something about this injustice and restore public confidence."

"Boy, that's a lady going a long way for a free Dilly Bar."

Evvie laughed. "Right? So she raises this *huge* stink, and finally, the word goes out—Mike Parco is going to wear the *Wheaties box* at the game against Concord. By the time the night arrives, this story has everything—sex, sports, official corruption—so everybody is there. *Everybody*. You could have walked into any house in the entire town and cleaned it out. Taken absolutely everything they owned. And they're not there for the game; they're there for the *cereal-box race*. Not for love of the community, not for the spirit of the town—they're there because they *care who wins the cereal-box race*. It is the least uplifting thing that has ever brought a town together. It is the opposite of the end of a Hallmark Channel movie."

He nodded. "I'm not going to lie; this would not happen in New York."

"Yes. Here's to MidCoast Maine, home of a surprising number of people whose Fridays are available." She smiled, raising her water bottle. "So Mike's in the Wheaties. Dutch Halloran's kid—we call him Double Dutch because his real name is Addison and it does not fit him—is wearing the Chex. And in the supposedly cursed Cheerios box is Bree Blythe Netherington, who is the shortest girl in the third grade. In fact, Bree is so short that we're all pretty sure she can't see out of the eyeholes."

Dean smacked his hand to his forehead. "Oh, no."

"Oh, yes. So they're all standing there, and finally Denny Paraday—who plays shortstop and is emceeing the thing—says, 'GO!' and they go. And they're sort of run-waddling toward first, and Bree is so short that the costume comes down to her ankles, but for reasons that defy the laws of physics, she's *motoring*. And she's the first one to get to first base, but the actual bases have been removed so the kids won't trip. And she can't see, so she keeps going, and she's clearly going to run straight into the Righteous Heating and Plumbing sign on the right-field fence. Somebody yells, 'Turn, Cheerios!' And she pivots,

and with some kind of internal GPS or magnets in her head or whatever, she heads straight for second. She's like a *bloodhound*. And when she gets there, they have to do it again—'Turn, Cheerios!' She turns.

"After they get her around the turn at third, it looks like she's going to win. Mike is ahead of Double Dutch, but he's about a step behind Bree. And then somebody thinks they see him trying to trip her. And you hear these voices going, 'Wheaties is cheating! Wheaties is cheating!' Bree is still on her feet. She's still going to beat him. But then—absolutely everybody sees it this time—out from Mike's Wheaties box comes this foot, he sticks it right out in front of her, and she trips and falls flat on what is, under about half a foot of foam, her face. So Mike crosses the plate while Bree is lying on the ground with her hands and feet sticking out, waggling. She's like a foam turtle. In the shape of a Cheerios box."

"I assume somebody helped her up. I mean, she's not still there."

Evvie cackled. "No, no. She's not. They got her up, and her mom put the video on YouTube and called it, 'The Video the Claws Lobster-Roll Stand Doesn't Want You to See.' Eventually they revoked Mike's gift certificate, and Bree got free DQ for a year. Fan Relations Doug dumped Talley out of shame, and she had to quit the lobster-roll stand, so now she's a manager at the CVS in Camden. Mike was banned from the cereal-box races for life, in part because he was told to give a public apology, got up to the microphone at a game, and made fart noises with his elbow." Evvie took a deep swallow from her water bottle. "That is all true. My hand to God."

"It's not surprising they don't give a damn about me."

She grinned. "Believe me, they know all about you. It's a different gossip economy. They're worrying about the Claws and the sorry state of the soccer field at the high school, and the fate of the Maine lobster, and whether the tourists are going to come. I'm sure that's why Andy thought it would be a good place to take a break. They're just . . ."

"Not petty?"

"Oh, no," she said as she peeled back the corner of the label on the bottle. "They are very petty. But they're petty about insiders more than outsiders. They only violate your privacy if they've known you since you were a child."

"They've known you since you were a child." He looked over at her.

"They have," she said slowly. She hadn't been listening to the refrigerator, but it clicked off, and suddenly she was very much listening to it not running. "Anyway. What are you going to do while you're here? I assume you're not looking to get into the lobster business."

"Your local signs certainly make it seem like an option, especially since apparently I'm not going to get in at the shoe factory like I was hoping."

"Oh, the lobster thing is real. It's what my dad did. He bought his own boat when I was little, and he had it until a couple years ago, when he retired."

"Is he still with your mom?"

"No. She's been in Florida since I was eight. She's remarried to a real estate guy, and she makes jewelry and sells it to tourists. Last I checked, she was doing something with sea glass and old dimes. Don't ask me what aesthetic that is."

"Maybe she's inspired by those guys at the beach with metal detectors. I saw a lot of that in Miami."

"I'll bet. Anyway, tell me your plans."

"Read Vonnegut," he said. "Write poetry. I play the ukulele a little. I make driftwood sculptures."

She suddenly realized her brows were knitted together and she popped them apart. "Oh. Oh."

"That's a joke."

Evvie rolled her eyes. "Mm-hmm, hilarious."

He laughed. "I'm not sure. Not baseball. Just . . . Maine, I guess. Probably hang out with Andy. I'm sort of on vacation from everything."

"Honestly, I would have thought New York would be a good place for that, for blending into the background."

"For most people," he said, then briefly tilted his head to indicate how much there was that they weren't talking about.

She stood up. "Right, fair enough. Okay, I should go and do work for a little bit."

"Oh, right. Andy said you work with journalists."

"I do," she said. "I'm transcribing an interview one of my clients did with an extremely famous musician whose name rhymes with . . . Baylor Biffed. And Baylor has got some tales to tell."

"Baylor's got nothing on you," he said as he went back to unpacking a couple of boxes. "You tell a good story."

She smiled. "If that's true, it's all the years of hearing other people do it."

"I appreciate all this," he said as she paused at the door.

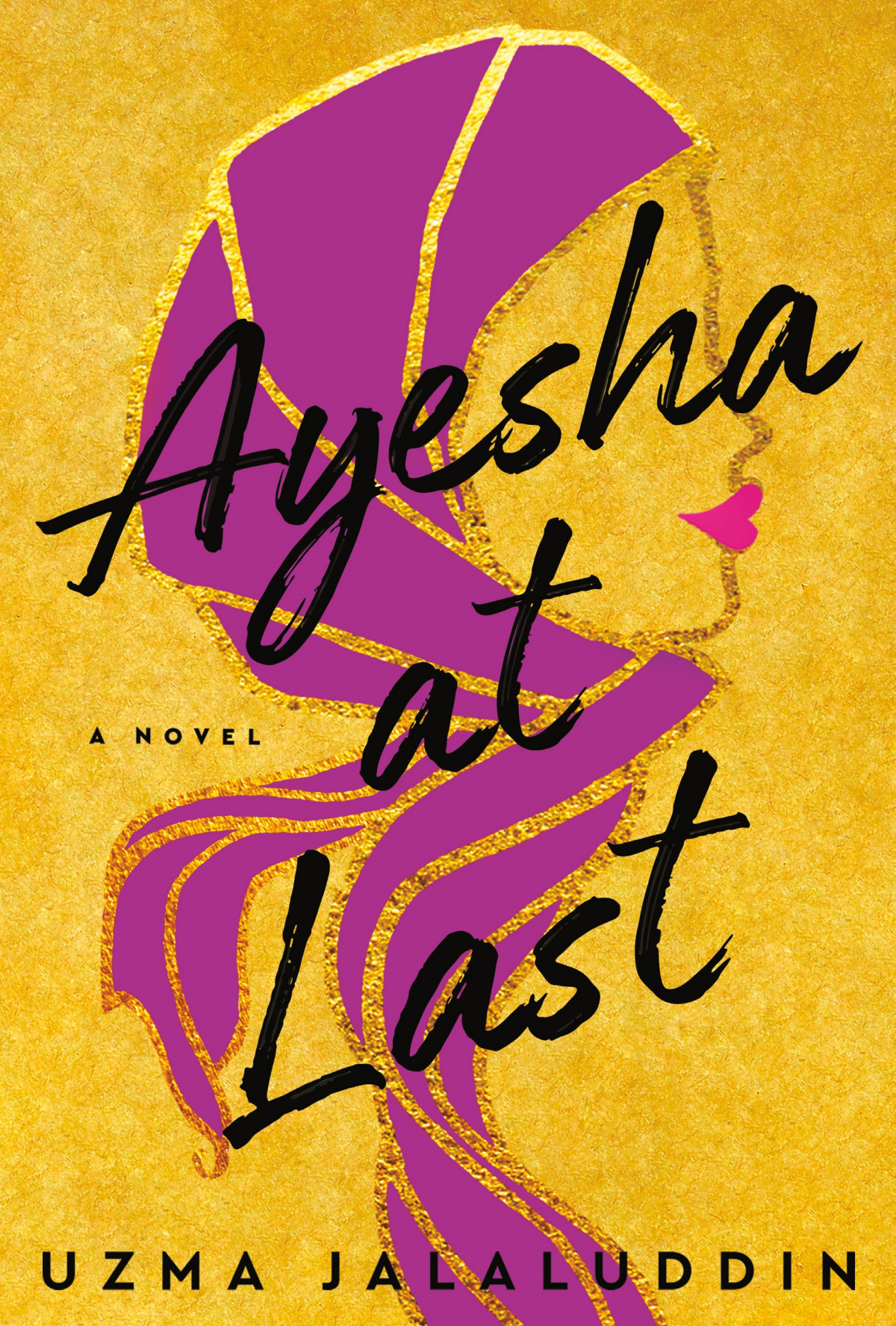
"Appreciate what?"

"Just, you know, place to stay. Cereal-box story."

"Ah. Well. You're very welcome. If you ever want to see the Claws play, let me know; they'll be starting up again in the spring if you're still here." She paused. "Is that weird? To take you to the game?"

"Because I'm a head case?"

She put her hand up. "Never mind. I'm asking about baseball." She paused, then nodded. "Okay. I'll see you around."


Ayesha at Last
A NOVEL
UZMA JALALUDDIN

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Chapter One

He wondered if he would see her today.

Khalid Mirza sat at the breakfast bar of his light-filled kitchen, long legs almost reaching the floor. It was seven in the morning, and his eyes were trained on the window, the one with the best view of the townhouse complex across the street.

His patience was rewarded.

A young woman wearing a purple hijab, blue button-down shirt, blazer and black pants ran down the steps of the middle townhouse, balancing a red ceramic travel mug and canvas satchel. She stumbled but caught herself, skidding to a stop in front of an aging sedan. She put the mug on the hood of the car and unlocked the door.

Khalid had seen her several times since he had moved into the neighborhood two months ago, always with her red ceramic mug, always in a hurry. She was a petite woman with a round face and dreamy smile, skin a golden burnished copper that glowed in the sullen March morning.

It is not appropriate to stare at women, no matter how interesting their purple hijabs, Khalid reminded himself.

Yet his eyes returned for a second, wistful look. She was so beautiful.

The sound of Bollywood music blaring from a car speaker made

the young woman freeze. She peered around her Toyota Corolla to see a red Mercedes SLK convertible zoom into her driveway. Khalid watched as the young woman dropped to a crouch behind her car. Who was she hiding from? He leaned forward for a better look.

"What are you looking at, Khalid?" asked his mother, Farzana.

"Nothing, Ammi," Khalid said, and took a bite of the clammy scrambled eggs Farzana had prepared for breakfast. When he looked up again, the young woman and her canvas satchel were inside the Toyota.

Her red travel mug was not.

It flew off the roof of her car as she sped away, smashing into a hundred pieces and narrowly missing the red Mercedes.

Khalid laughed out loud. When he looked up, he caught his mother's stern gaze.

"It's such a lovely day outside," Farzana said, giving her son a hard look. "I can see why your eyes are drawn to the view."

Khalid flushed at her words. Ammi had been dropping hints lately. She thought it was time for him to marry. He had a steady job, and twenty-six was a good age to settle down. Their family was wealthy and could easily pay for the large wedding his mother wanted.

"I was going to tell you after I'd made a few choices, but it appears you are ready to hear the news. I have begun the search for your wife," Farzana announced, and her tone brooked no oppo-sition. "Love comes after marriage, not before. These Western ideas of romantic love are utter nonsense. Just look at the American divorce rate."

Khalid paused mid-bite, but his mother didn't notice. Her announcement was surprising, but the news was not unexpected or even unwelcome. He resumed eating.

"I will find you the perfect wife—modest, not too educated. If we can't find someone local, we will search for a girl back home."

"Back home" for Farzana was Hyderabad, India, though she had lived in Canada for over thirty years. Khalid had been born in a

suburb west of Toronto and lived there for most of his life until his father's death six months ago, before Farzana and Khalid had moved to the east end of the city. Farzana had insisted on the move, and though Khalid had been sorry to leave his friends and the mosque he had frequented with his father, deep down he thought it might do them both some good.

Their new neighborhood had felt instantly comfortable. From the moment they'd arrived, Khalid felt as if he had finally come home. There were more cars parked three or four deep on extended driveways, more untamed backyards in need of the maintenance that only time, money and access to professional services could provide. Yet the people were kind, friendly even, and Khalid was at ease among the brown and black faces that reflected his own.

Farzana neatly flipped another paratha flatbread onto her son's plate, though he had not asked for more. "The wedding will be in July. Everyone will want an invitation, but I will limit the guest list to six hundred people. Any more is showing off."

Humming to herself, she placed a small pot on the stove, adding water, milk, cinnamon, cloves, cardamom and tea leaves for chai. Khalid's eyes lingered on the chipped forest-green mug on the counter. His father's mug. Ammi had used that mug for his Abba's chai for years. This was the first time he had seen it out of the cupboard since the move. Maybe his mother was finally beginning to make her way through the cloud of grief that had paralyzed her after Abba's death.

There was so much of the past they did not talk about. Khalid was relieved she was thinking about the future. Or rather, his future.

The idea of an arranged marriage had never bothered Khalid. A partner carefully chosen for him, just as his parents had been chosen for each other and their parents before them, seemed like a tidy practice. He liked the idea of being part of an unbroken chain that honored tradition and ensured family peace and stability. He knew that some people, even his own sister, thought the practice of arranged

marriage was restrictive, but he found it comforting. Romantic relationships and their accompanying perks were for marriage only.

At the thought of romantic perks, Khalid's attention drifted to the window once more—but he stopped himself. The girl with the (broken) red mug would never be more than a fantasy. Because while it is a truth universally acknowledged that a single Muslim man must be in want of a wife, there's an even greater truth: To his Indian mother, his own inclinations are of secondary importance.

Chapter Two

The Toyota lurched down the street, wheezing and anemic. Ayesha reached for her travel mug, but her hand closed on empty air. In the rear-view mirror she spotted the red shards on the asphalt. *Blast*.

She had been in such a hurry to get away from Hafsa. Now she would have to face her first day as a substitute high school teacher without the comforting armor of chai.

No matter, it was worth it. The moment she had spotted the red Mercedes convertible pulling onto the street, Ayesha had known why her cousin was visiting so early in the morning, and she didn't want to hear it.

Besides, there was one rule repeatedly drilled into her at teachers' college: A teacher can never, under any circumstances, be late.

Ayesha had graduated from teachers' college last June. It had taken nearly seven months of papering local schools with her resumé to secure a substitute teaching position. Now her stomach flipped over as she parked in the staff lot of Brookridge High School, a squat, two-story brown brick building constructed in the 1970s, ugly and functional.

The building was similar in layout and atmosphere to her old high

school. It had the same well-tended shabbiness of a public building, the same blue-tinted fluorescent lighting, and waxed and speckled linoleum floors. The same mostly white staff dressed in business-formal slacks and skirts, the same mostly brown and black students slouching in jeans, track pants and too-short dresses. Ayesha tugged self-consciously at her carefully chosen teacher clothes: blue button-down shirt and serviceable black pants. Her hands nervously smoothed the top of her purple hijab.

Part of both worlds, yet part of neither, she thought.

Such existential thoughts were really not helping to settle the butterflies in her stomach.

She entered the large, open foyer, its concrete walls painted a dull green and smelling faintly of industrial cleaning solvent. The familiar scent calmed her, and she smiled slightly at a female student in black leggings and a blue hoodie, carrying an overloaded backpack. The girl gave her a dubious look before shifting her bag and walking purposely down the hall, reminding Ayesha to hurry. A teacher must never be late.

The secretary, Mary, was waiting for her in the main office with forms to sign. The principal, Mr. Evorem, was absent today, Mary explained. "He'll want to meet you tomorrow to welcome you properly."

A white man in his early thirties with a short black beard walked into the office just as she was finishing the paperwork, and Mary asked him to take Ayesha to her class. He peered over her shoulder at her schedule.

"Grade ten science?" His eyes were wide. "You're covering for Rudy?"

"Who's Rudy?" Ayesha asked as they walked toward the stairs.

"He's the last teacher those little shits scared off. I think he chose early retirement over that class."

Ayesha looked at him, waiting for the punchline. There wasn't one. "Nobody told me that."

"I hope you're light on your feet. The bastards like to throw things."

Forty minutes later, Ayesha crouched on the toilet in the staff bathroom, bookended by feelings of self-pity and guilt. Instead of teaching, she was hiding from her class. Even worse, she was writing a poem in her purple spiral notebook.

I can't do this.
This thing that I should do.
I can do this.
This thing I don't want to do.
I want to be away, weaving words of truth.
Not here, trapped between desk and freedom and
family.

She should be teaching, not writing. She had vowed to leave this part of her behind when she'd left for work that morning. Instead, she hadn't been able to resist placing the purple spiral notebook in her bag, like a child's security blanket. She gripped her pen tightly and tried not to stare at her cell phone.

"Come on, Clara," she said out loud. Then she held her breath, hoping no one had heard. But of course they hadn't. This was the staff bathroom, and it was the middle of the school day. The other teachers were teaching, not hiding and writing poetry.

She squinted at the page, rereading her words. Correction: writing *bad* poetry.

Her phone beeped: a text message from her best friend, Clara.

What do you mean you can't do this? You just got there.

Ayesha texted back.

My class hates me. They were throwing things at each other, and they didn't listen to a word I said. Can you call the school and tell them there's an emergency at home?

Her phone rang.

"You picked the wrong profession." Clara's voice was low.

"I'll come back to teach tomorrow, when I'm ready," Ayesha said.

"Babe, you are never going to be ready to teach. You know what you're ready for? Writing poems. Exploring the world. Falling in love. Remember?" Ayesha pictured Clara in front of her—blue eyes wide with concern, fingers fiddling with strawberry blond hair. "I bet you're writing a poem about this right now. Aren't you?" Her friend's voice was accusing and impatient. They had had variations of this same conversation so many times, Ayesha couldn't blame Clara for being sick of it. She was sick of it herself.

Her eyes flicked to the notebook, and she shut it firmly. No more. "Poetry is for paupers. I'm not Hafsa. I don't have a rich father to pay my bills, and I promised Sulaiman Mamu I would pay him back for tuition."

She remained silent about the other two items—exploring the world, falling in love—the first as impossible as the second. She had no money, and falling in love would be difficult when she had never even held someone's hand before. "Hafsa is getting married this summer," Ayesha said instead. "She came over this morning to tell me, but I already knew. Nani and Samira Aunty have been talking about her *rishtas* for weeks."

Clara, an only child, loved hearing about Ayesha's large extended family. She was particularly intrigued by the traditional rishta

proposal process, which Ayesha had explained in hilarious detail. Prospective partners were introduced to each other after being carefully vetted by parents and family. Ayesha had received a few rishta proposals herself, years ago, though they had never led to a wedding. She hadn't really connected with any of the potential suitors, and they must have felt likewise because she'd never heard from them after the initial meetings.

"Hafsa can't get married! She's a baby!" Clara exclaimed.

Ayesha started laughing. "She's got the entire wedding planned already. All she needs is the groom."

"Your cousin is crazy. You're the one who should be getting married. Or me. Rob still flinches whenever I mention weddings, after ten years together."

Ayesha was starting to regret this topic of conversation. "If Hafsa wants to get married, I'm happy for her," she said. She imagined twenty-year-old Hafsa reclining on an ornate chaise as she surveyed a parade of handsome, wealthy men. She pictured her cousin languidly pointing to one man at random, and just like that, the marriage would be arranged.

So easy, so simple, to find the one person who would cherish and protect your heart forever. Everything came easy for Hafsa.

Clara pressed her point. "When do you get to be happy? When was the last time you went on a date, or finished and performed a poem?" Clara thought Ayesha was afraid of love because of what had happened to her father and afraid to dream because of her family's expectations.

Ayesha disagreed. "My family is counting on me to set a good example for Hafsa. I'm the eldest kid in the family. I want to set the bar high for everyone else. I can't let Mom, Sulaiman Mamu or Nana down, not after everything they've done for me. All that other stuff can wait."

Clara sighed. "Why don't you come to Bella's tonight?"

A long time ago, a different Ayesha had performed poetry at

Bella's lounge. Another reminder of the road not taken. She smothered a laugh that sounded like a sob.

"Ash, you got this," Clara said, her voice softening. "Do all that teacher stuff. Send the troublemakers to the office. Make a seating chart. Stop hiding in the bathroom."

There was a discreet knock on the stall door, and Ayesha ended the call with Clara.

"Miss Shamsi?" Mary said, sounding awkward. "Your class said you might be in here."

They're not my class, Ayesha thought. *They need a circus trainer, not a teacher.* She flushed, wiped sweaty palms on her pants and tucked the purple notebook back inside her bag. Mary stood outside, a look of pity on her face.

"There was an emergency, but I'm better now," Ayesha said with dignity. "When does the class end?"

"You still have another forty minutes, honey." Mary patted her on the shoulder. "I'll send an assistant to help with your first class. She'll keep an eye on them when your back is turned. Oh, and I forgot to give this to you earlier."

Mary handed Ayesha an ID badge with STAFF written in bold letters at the top.

Ayesha stared at the official-looking badge. This was why she had attended teachers' college, why she had worked so hard at her in-school placements. Her mother and grandparents had left behind so much when they immigrated to Canada. She wanted their sacrifice to mean something.

There was no turning back, not now.

Her thoughts drifted to the purple notebook in her bag. Maybe if she worked on the poem tonight, she could perform it at Bella's sometime . . .

But no. All of that lay behind her. It was time to focus on the road in front.

"Everyone starts out right here. You'll get the hang of it," Mary said.

Mary meant to be kind, but Ayesha knew that not everyone started from the same place. Some people were always a little ahead. Or in her case, constantly playing catch-up.

The rest of the day was not as dramatic as the morning, yet Ayesha felt deflated when she drove home after school. Teaching was not what she'd expected and nothing like her training, where she'd had the comforting guidance of a mentor teacher. The entire experience had been nerve-racking, and she had felt perpetually caught in the bored tractor-beam stares of twenty-eight teenagers.

All she wanted now was to go home, drink a cup of very strong chai and reconsider her life choices.

She turned onto her street and spied a red Mercedes parked in the driveway.

Hafsa was back, and this time there was no escape.

Chapter Three

Khalid kept his head down as he walked through the narrow back hallway of Livetech Solutions, his employer for the past five years. He was dressed in his usual work attire—full-sleeved white robe that skimmed his ankles, black dress pants, white skullcap jammed over dark brown hair that curled over his ears. His beard was long and luxuriously thick, contrasting sharply with his pale olive complexion.

He was a large man, tall and broad, and the corridor was narrow. He looked up to see his co-worker Clara standing in the middle of the hallway, whispering into her cell phone. Khalid did not wish to disturb what appeared to be an intense conversation; he also did not wish to brush past her in the hallway. He had been raised to believe that non-related men and women should never get too close—socially, emotionally and especially physically.

"When an unmarried man and woman are alone together, a third person is present: Satan," Ammi often told him. Khalid found this reminder helpful, especially when paired with cold showers. There wasn't much more that a twenty-six-year-old virgin-by-choice could do, really.

He didn't mean to eavesdrop, but Clara had raised her voice. "When do you get to be happy?" she said sharply into her phone.

Khalid blinked at the question, which so neatly mirrored his own thoughts.

His cell phone dinged with a new e-mail, and he opened it, grateful for the distraction. His heart sank when he read the subject line and recognized the sender: his sister, Zareena. He hadn't told her about their move. He hadn't been sure how she would react to the sale of their childhood home. It looked like some other busybody had thoughtfully informed her instead. He began to read.

Re: the last to know?

Khalid,

I can't believe I had to hear the news from my father-in-law. You sold the house and moved? I loved that house. It was so easy to sneak out of my bedroom. But I guess it was too hard after Abba died.

Guess what? I got bored and started volunteering my time for a Cause. You would be so proud of me. I'm teaching English to a class of little girls at the local school. My students are super sweet. Their parents can barely afford to send them to class. Half the time they show up with no lunches, but their clothes are so tidy, their hair in neat braids, and they want to learn so badly. Not like when I was in school! They always bring me a flower or a fruit they stole from someone's garden. I sneak them rice and dal sometimes.

—Zareena

P. S. Maple donuts and Tim Hortons hot chocolate.

P. P. S. Thanks for the gift. Can you use Western Union next time plz? It's closer and you know how I hate to walk.

Zareena's e-mails and texts arrived every few days and reported on her daily life. Sometimes she complained about the dullness of her days, or which of her dozens of in-laws were irritating her. Sometimes she asked him about work, or if he had talked to a girl yet … or even made eye contact with one.

The one thing she never asked about was their mother. The second thing she never discussed was her husband.

The postscript was always something Zareena missed about Canada. Her words brought the taste of maple dip donuts and too-sweet hot chocolate to his lips. Their father, Faheem, used to treat them on the way back from Sunday morning Islamic school when they were kids. Before Zareena went away.

After she left, whenever Khalid mentioned her name, his father would freeze and Ammi would become upset. Soon her name became an unspoken word in their home.

Clara's call had ended, and he noticed her examining him as he read his e-mail. They knew each other, but had never spoken. He wondered if she was uncomfortable with the way he dressed. Some people found his robes and skullcap difficult to reconcile with an office environment. But Khalid had long ago decided to be honest about who he was: an observant Muslim man who walked with faith both outwardly and inwardly, just as some of his Muslim sisters did by wearing the hijab.

Still, sometimes it made people nervous. Though Clara did not seem wary. She appeared almost … appraising.

Which made him nervous.

Khalid motioned in front of him. "After you," he said politely.

Clara didn't move. "My friend is having a crisis. Her first day at a new job."

"That can be difficult," Khalid said, looking directly at her.

Now she looked curious. About him? Women were never curious about him.

"It's sort of my first day too," Clara said, leaning close. "I was promoted to regional manager of Human Resources."

"Congratulations." Khalid inclined his head in acknowledgment. "I know you will fulfill your duties with integrity."

"My boyfriend, Rob, is happy about the pay raise," Clara said with a smile. "I'm reporting to Sheila Watts. Do you know her?"

Khalid shook his head. Sheila had replaced his old director a few weeks ago, but he had yet to meet his first female boss.

The door behind Clara opened and a petite woman with black hair and blue eyes stepped out. She was shorter than Clara, dressed in a sleeveless top and tight black pencil skirt. Above her right breast was pinned a large crystal brooch in the shape of a spider, its winking red eyes matching her lipstick.

Clara stepped forward with a friendly smile.

"Sheila, I wanted to introduce myself—I'm Clara Taylor. John promoted me just before he left the company."

Sheila looked at the outstretched hand and beaming face before her. A faint expression of distaste lurked at her lips and she briefly shook Clara's hand, using only the very tips of her fingers.

Khalid knew what was coming next, and he felt powerless to stop it. Usually when he was introduced to female clients and co-workers, he had time to prepare beforehand with a carefully worded e-mail about his no-touch rule.

As the women talked, he subtly edged away from their conversation, taking tiny steps down the hall. But it was no use; Clara's friendliness foiled his escape.

"Sheila, this is our e-commerce project manager, Khalid Mirza," she said, and both women turned to him.

A hard glance from Sheila took in Khalid's white robe and skullcap. Her eyes lingered on his long beard.

Her gaze was the opposite of appraising, Khalid thought. She looked annoyed.

Then everything went from bad to worse. Sheila leaned forward and stuck out her hand for him to shake.

They stared at each other.

"I'm sorry, I don't shake hands with women. It's against my religion," he blurted.

Sheila left her hand outstretched for another moment, cold eyes locked on his face. Then she slowly pulled back and raised an eyebrow. "I should have assumed as much from your clothing. Tell me, Khalid: Where are you from?"

"Toronto," Khalid answered. His face flamed beneath his thick beard; he didn't know where to look.

"No," Sheila laughed lightly. "I mean where are you from *originally*?"

"Toronto," Khalid responded again, and this time his voice was resigned.

Clara shifted, looking tense and uncomfortable. "I'm originally from Newfoundland," she said brightly.

"I lived in the Middle East for a while," Sheila said to Khalid, her voice low and pleasant. "Saudi Arabia. I found it so interesting that the women wore black while the men wore white. There's something symbolic about that, isn't there? Half the population in shadow while the rest live in light. You must be so grateful to live in a country that welcomes everybody." Sheila's laughter sounded high and artificial. "Of course, when I was in Saudi Arabia, I wasn't afforded the same courtesy."

Khalid's eyes were lowered to the ground, his head bowed. "I apologize, Ms. Watts. I meant no disrespect," he said finally. "Please forgive me." He turned around and walked back the way he had come, hands trembling.

He took the long way around the floor and caught the service elevator down to his small office in the basement. It was sparsely furnished with two gray metal desks squeezed together, a black bookcase

wedged behind the door and a sagging blue couch against the back wall. Rumor had it this office used to be a maintenance closet, but he was grateful for the privacy, especially when he prayed in the afternoon.

It was nine thirty in the morning, earlier than usual for Amir to already be at his desk. Though judging by the rumpled suit, his co-worker had spent last night at the office. Again.

"*Assalamu Alaikum*, Amir. I thought we talked about this." Khalid hid his shaking hands by folding his arms.

"My date wasn't exactly interested in a sleepover, if you know what I mean. Bitches, am I right?" Amir reached for a water bottle on his desk, opened it and began chugging rapidly.

Khalid winced at his description. "I can't keep covering for you."

Amir had been hired the previous year as part of Livetech's "Welcome Wagon" program for immigrants. Technically, Khalid was his manager. Most days he felt like a babysitter.

"Last time, I swear. This would never happen if you came out with me and stopped me from committing my many sins. I promise I'll introduce you to some pretty girls."

Khalid was tempted to confess Ammi's plans to find him a wife, but instead he stuck to his usual line. "Out of respect for my future wife, I don't believe in sleeping around before marriage."

Amir only laughed. "Classic Khalid. I tell my friends about you all the time. They don't believe half my stories. All the other Muslim guys I know scrub up for Friday prayers just like you, but they know how to have fun."

Khalid ignored him and settled down to check e-mails; the most recent was from Sheila, sent only moments ago.

Khalid, I'm glad we met today. I'd like to begin our working relationship with a performance review. I look forward to a frank discussion of your strengths and many areas of improvement. The meeting

is scheduled for Monday at 3 p.m. I trust this appointment will not interfere with any religious obligations.

Amir, noticing Khalid's concerned expression, got up to read over his shoulder. He whistled. "What did you do?"

Khalid shrugged. "I declined to shake her hand."

"K-Man, you need to edit. Figure out what works for you, throw out what doesn't. It's not like we're still riding around on camels, right?"

"I'm not sure what you mean."

Amir punched Khalid lightly on his arm. "You're too old to be this naive. Watch your back, brother."

Khalid kept silent. He knew how Amir saw him—as an anachronistic throwback, a walking target for ridicule.

Sometimes he wished he were different. But even if Khalid "edited" everything about himself—his clothes, his beard, his words—it wouldn't erase the loneliness he felt every day. The loneliness he had felt ever since his sister left home almost twelve years ago.

His white robes and beard were a comfortable security blanket, his way of communicating without saying a word. Even though he knew there were other, easier ways to be, Khalid had chosen the one that felt the most authentic to him, and he had no plans to waver.

Besides, the robes provided great air circulation.

And everything happened by the will of Allah.

The Most Fun We Ever Had

A Novel

Claire Lombardo

"A gripping and poignant ode to a messy, loving family in all its glory."
—Madeline Miller, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Circe*

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THE OFFSPRING

April 15, 2000
Sixteen years earlier

Other people overwhelmed her. Strange, perhaps, for a woman who'd added four beings to the universe of her own reluctant volition, but a fact nonetheless: Marilyn rued the inconvenient presence of bodies, bodies beyond her control, her understanding; bodies beyond her favor. She rued them now, from her shielded spot beneath the ginkgo tree, where she was hiding from her guests. She'd always had that knack for entertaining, but it drained her, fully, time and time again, decades of her father's wealthy clients and her husband's humorless colleagues; of her children's temperamental friends; of her transitory neighbors and ever-shifting roster of customers. And yet, today: a hundred-odd near strangers in her backyard, humans in motion, staying in motion, formally clad; tipsy celebrants of the union of her eldest daughter, Wendy, people who were her responsibility for this evening, when she already had so much on her plate—not literally, for she'd neglected to take advantage of the farm-fresh menu spread over three extra-long card tables, but elementally—four girls for whose presences she was biologically and socially responsible, polka-dotting the lawn in their summer pastels. The fruits of her womb, implanted repeatedly by the sweetness of her husband, who was currently nowhere to be found. She'd fallen into motherhood without intent, producing a series of daughters with varying shades of hair and varying degrees of unease. She, Marilyn Sorenson, née Connolly—a resilient product of money and tragedy, from dubious socioemotional Irish-Catholic lineage but now, for all intents and purposes, as functional as they come: an admi-

rably natural head of dirty-blond hair, marginally conversant in both literary criticism and the lives of her children, wearing a fitted forest green sheath that exposed the athletic curve of her calves and the freckled landscape of her shoulders. People kept referring to her with great drama as the *mother of the bride*, and she was trying to act the part, trying to pretend that she wasn't focused almost exclusively on the well-being of her children, none of whom, that particular evening, seemed to be thriving.

Maybe normalcy skipped a generation, like baldness. Violet, her second-born, a striking brunette in silk chiffon, had uncharacteristically reeked of booze since breakfast. Wendy was always cause for concern, despite seeming less beleaguered today, owing either to the fact that she'd just married a man who had bank accounts in the Caymans or to the fact that this man was, as she vocally professed, "the love of her life." And Grace and Liza, nine years apart but both maladjusted, the former a shy, stunted soon-to-be second-grader and the latter about to friendlessly finish her sophomore year of high school. How could you grow people inside your own body, sprout them from your own extant materials, and suddenly be unable to recognize them?

Normalcy: it bore a second look, sociologically speaking.

Gracie had found her beneath the ginkgo. Her youngest was almost seven, an insufferable age, aeons from leaving the household, still childish enough that she'd tried to slip into their bed in the middle of the previous night, which wouldn't have been *that* big of a deal had her parents been clothed at the time. Anxiety did something to Marilyn, always had, drew her magnetically to the animal comfort of her husband.

"Sweetheart, why don't you go find—" She hesitated. The only other children at the wedding were toddlers and she didn't specifically want to encourage Grace's already-burgeoning antisocial love of dogs by suggesting that she go play with Goethe, but she wanted a moment to herself, just a few seconds to breathe in the cooling air of early evening. "Go find Daddy, love."

"I *can't* find him," Grace said, the hint of a baby voice blunting her vowels.

"Well, look harder." She bent to kiss her daughter's hair. "I need a minute, Goose."

. . .

Grace moved off. She'd already checked on Wendy. Already swung on the porch swing with Liza until her sister had been distracted by a boy wearing sneakers with his wedding suit; already convinced Violet to share four sips of champagne from her fancy glass flute. She was out of people to check on.

It was strange to have to share her parents with others this weekend, to have her sisters back around the house on Fair Oaks. Her father sometimes called her the "only only-child in the world who has three sisters." She resented, slightly, her sisters homing in on her territory. She soothed herself as she always did, with the company of Goethe, curling up with him beneath the purple flower bushes and running her hand through his bristly fur, the part of his butt that looked like it had been permed.

Liza felt a little bad, seeing her younger sister finding solace in the dog while she herself was finding solace inside a stranger's mouth, but the groomsman emanated a smoky vapor of whiskey and arugula and he was doing something with his fingers to the inside of her thigh that made her turn her head away, deciding that Grace could fend for herself, that it wasn't possible to learn that skill too early.

"Tell me about you," the groomsman said, his knuckles grazing the lacy insignificance of the thong she'd worn in the hopes of exactly such an occasion.

"What do you want to know?" she asked. It came out sounding kind of hostile. She'd never quite mastered being flirtatious.

"There's four of you?" he asked. "What's that like?"

"It's a vast hormonal hellscape. A marathon of instability and hair products."

He smiled, confused, and she leaned forward boldly and kissed him.

Violet had never been quite so drunk, sitting slumped, alone, at one of the tables, from which she supposed she'd driven the other guests.

The previous night came to her in fizzy episodic sunbursts: the bar that used to be a bowling alley; her blue-eyed companion with his double-jointed elbows, the athletic clasp of his thighs, the back of his mother's station wagon; how she'd made sounds she did not recognize at first as coming from her own throat, porn star sounds, primal groans. How he came first—she'd later felt him dripping out of her, when they climbed back into the front seat—and then made her, with a deft attention to detail, come as well, for the first time in her life. And how she'd made him drop her a block away from her parents' house lest Wendy be still awake.

She watched Wendy, wearing sweetheart-neck Gucci at her backyard wedding to an old-money academic, being spun in circles by her new husband to "You Can't Hurry Love." Her sister had, for the first time, surpassed her, success-wise. She was blithe and beautiful and twirling in circles while Violet was drunk past the point of physical comfort, gnawing at a full loaf of catered focaccia, rubbing the oil on the underside of her skirt. But she felt herself smiling a little at Wendy, at oblivious Wendy getting grass stains on her satin train. Imagined going over to her sister and whispering in her ear, *You'd die if you knew where I was last night.*

Wendy watched as Miles, throwing an apologetic smile at her over his shoulder, was pulled away from her by his toddler cousin, their ringbearer, who had solicited his accompaniment to the cake table.

"There's some good daddy training happening over there," someone said, taking her by the elbow. It was a guest from Miles's side, possibly someone's real estate broker, a silicone goblin of a woman. The people on the lawn at present were probably collectively worth more than the GDP of a midsize country. "It's good you're so young. Plenty of time to flesh out the family tree."

It seemed a crass thing to say for a variety of reasons, so Wendy responded in kind: "Who says I want to split up my share among a bunch of kids?"

The woman looked horrified, but Wendy and Miles lived for these jokes, were allowed to *make* these jokes because neither of them gave a fuck if people thought Wendy was a gold digger; all that mat-

tered was what they knew to be true, which was that she'd never loved another person as fiercely as she did Miles Eisenberg, and he, by some grand cosmic miracle, loved her back. She was an *Eisenberg* now. In the top thirty, at least, of the wealthiest families in Chicago. She could fuck with whomever she wanted.

"It's my plan to outlive everyone and spend my days reveling in a disgusting level of opulence," she said. And she rose from her seat and went to straighten her new husband's tie.

The trees, David noted, were at burgeoning that day, big prodigious leaves making dancing shadows across the grass, which they'd tried to keep the dog off of for the sake of aesthetic preservation, David and Marilyn rising early in the mornings and pulling on raincoats over their pajamas to walk him instead of just opening the back door like they normally did. David watched as the rented tables and chairs wore their grooves into the pristine lawn, legs melon-balling the expensively fertilized sod in a way that made his gut churn. Goethe was now roaming around the yard like a recently released convict, traversing the verdant grounds with the proprietary confidence of a horticulturist. David took a breath of damp air—was rain coming? It might make the guests leave sooner—and marveled over the sheer number of people that could accumulate in a lifetime, the number of faces in his yard that he didn't recognize. He thought of Wendy as a toddler, when they lived in Iowa, creeping onto the porch where he and Marilyn rocked together in the rickety cedar swing, fitting herself neatly between them and murmuring, already drifting back to sleep, *You're my friends.* He was nearly overcome, standing there, feeling as out-of-place as he had a quarter of a century ago, before they'd married, a chilly December night when Marilyn had lain against his chest beneath the ginkgo. He did a visual sweep, eyes blurring the sea of pale spring colors until he found his wife, a tiny ballast of forest green: hiding beneath that very same ginkgo. He slipped along the fence until he came to her, and reached out an imploring hand to the small of her back. She leaned instinctively into it.

"Come with me," he said, and led her around the trunk, into the shade, where he pulled her to him and buried his face in her hair.

"Sweetheart," she said, worried. "What is it?"

He pressed his face into the crook of her neck, breathing in the faint dry warmth of her scent, lilacs and Irish Spring. "I missed you," he said into her clavicle.

"Oh, love." She tightened her embrace, tilted his chin until he met her eyes. He kissed her mouth, and then her cheekbone and her forehead and the inlet of her jaw where he could feel her pulse, and then her mouth again. She was smiling, lips a flushed feverish plum, and then she was kissing him back, the periphery blurring away. The thing that would always mean more than everything else: the goldish warmth of his wife, the heat of their mutual desperation; two bodies finding solace in the only way they knew how, through the language of lips, his hands along her spine, her spine against the tree trunk, the resultant quiet that occurred when they came together, until she pulled away, smiled up at him and said, "Just don't let the girls catch us," before she buried herself once again against him.

But of course they saw. All four of the girls watched their parents from disparate vantage points across the lawn, each alerted initially to their absence from the reception by that pull, a vestigial holdover from childhood, seeking the cognitive comfort that came from the knowing, the geolocation, the proximity of those who'd created you, those who would always feel beholden to you, no matter what; each of their four daughters paused what she was doing in order to watch them, the shining unfathomable orb of their parents, two people who emanated more love than it seemed like the universe would sanction.

CHAPTER ONE

Violet made a habit of avoiding Wendy. Though they'd been inseparable for a time, unbidden contact was now unheard of, and she assumed her sister's most recent lunch invitation pertained either to a favor or to some newly harvested existential crisis that Wendy would want to discuss, at length, regardless of the fact that some people had busy lives that prevented them from taking frivolous weekday meals in the West Loop.

The restaurant was trendy and inconveniently located, and she'd had to valet even though it was 2:00 p.m. on a Wednesday. Wyatt had to be picked up from preschool at 3:30. That was her out, and she planned to present it smoothly to her sister: *There are two children whose lives and pre-K commutes depend on me.* Of course this was ungenerous; of course Wendy found comfort in drama, in midday alcohol, because of all that she didn't have, because she'd never finished college, because of Miles, because she would always win, trauma-wise.

Violet pinched the bridge of her nose, fending off a headache. She was considering a glass of wine. Wendy would have undoubtedly already ordered a bottle, and her sister—despite other shortcomings—had excellent taste in wine, a refined palate for tannins and acidity. Her flats were digging into the backs of her heels. She always felt the impetus to present herself lavishly to Wendy; though most days she was content to ferry the kids around in pricey athletic garb, today she'd opted for a graceful silk butterfly-sleeve blouse and skinny jeans that had fit her better before Eli was born.

She tried to remember the last time she'd seen her sister, and decided that it must have been on Second Thanksgiving, the annual and infuriatingly quirky powwow at her parents' house, over four

months ago, and this struck her as absolutely ludicrous, because she and Wendy lived twenty minutes from each other; because they'd shared a bedroom for almost a decade; because Violet, during the darkest time in her life, had moved in with Wendy and Miles; because they were practically *twins*, after all, separated by less than a year.

"Ma'am? Is there something I can help you find?" It was the valet.

"Just getting my bearings," she said, and he smiled.

"If you need a lifeline, just wave and I'll come in and say someone's stolen your car." Was he flirting with her? He was her savior.

"I'll keep that in mind." She fished another ten from her wallet and pressed it toward him. Somehow she'd become one of those people who punctuated everything with a monetary transaction. He took it without missing a beat. "Wish me luck," she breathed, and he winked—*winked!* At *her*!—and she imagined, perhaps, that he checked out her ass as she walked into the restaurant. She hoped he wouldn't judge too harshly. The hostess ushered her onto the patio in the back and she wished at once she'd brought a sweater then banished the thought as tragically maternal. Wendy was at a table in the far corner, presumably so she could smoke without bothering the other patrons, though there *were* no other patrons, because it was early spring in Chicago and barely sixty degrees.

At first all she saw was the back of a head. Presumably a man—and a young one—unless Wendy was going through an exploratory phase and had taken up with some gender-bending yogi from her chakra class. She felt strangely hurt. Of course Wendy couldn't just ask her out to lunch, the two of them: this would, as she should've known, be some sort of look-what-I'm-up-to-now demonstration that would serve to reinforce what a snoozefest Violet's life was, how mired she was in the status quo while Wendy was off doing tantric vinyasa with an androgynous gal Friday.

But then: no.

She would remember, in her car on the way home, after having tipped the valet for a third time, the swelling she'd felt in her chest, a crystallization of *something*. It wasn't that she recognized him. That was the wrong word. And it wasn't anything poetic, no lightning bolts through her temples, no ice in her veins. She barely caught a glimpse of him, really, because he'd only turned halfway in his seat,

so her field of vision included little beyond his left ear and the outline of his nose. But it was enough, apparently, on some molecular level, not like the biological recognition she felt when Wyatt and Eli were born, but significant in its own right, a sharp uterine tug that almost made her double over. She didn't recognize the boy so much as absorb him. And in her head, in the car, after she'd fled the restaurant and her sister and the person she'd given birth to fifteen years earlier—a boy who now had dark hair that flopped in front of his eyes—she would imagine all of the things she could have said to Wendy. Big things, cinematic things, *how dare you do this to me; you're dead to me, you fucking psycho; how dare you, how dare you, how dare you.* All the reasons it was okay that she left before she really saw his face.

Before Wendy left for the Lurie fund-raiser she went onto the deck to have a cigarette with Miles. She let herself out the back door, Grey Goose in hand, dress hiked up to her knees because she'd settled on an ill-advised black mermaid cut, one Parliament in her mouth and another on the table.

"Today went as expected. Violet booked it before I could introduce them." She lit her cigarette and sighed. "I need your absolution. I didn't know what I was doing when I did it. But he's actually a sweet kid. You'd like him."

Miles didn't reply.

"I'm wearing the dumbest outfit. Your mom would've liked it." She leaned her head back. "I saw my dad yesterday. Retirement seems like kind of a disaster. He told me he was thinking about *bird-watching*. Can you imagine? I can't picture him sitting still for that long."

She'd been doing it since he died. She would talk to him—to some ethereal indication of him that sometimes she felt but most times she didn't. Today was one of the most times, so she just leaned into the side of her chair and smoked.

"Tonight will be a total shitshow," she said after a minute. "The vultures are probably hammered already. Hopefully they won't grope anyone. I, personally, make no promises." She looked upward for some cosmic sign that he was listening to her. There was nothing to see; the sky was overcast and grayish and the stars weren't out yet. Instead

she held her cigarette upward, toward where she thought he might be, and exhaled a deliberate jet of smoke. "I hope you're proud of me, dude," she said after a minute. "Because I am really trying to keep on around here, okay?" Somehow she had been without him for nearly two years. She lit her backup cigarette. "I wish I could kiss the inside of your elbow right now," she whispered, almost inaudibly because the people next door sometimes kept their windows open. "But instead I might have to find a Greek shipping heir tonight and let him ravish me a little bit. Not too much. I swear. Fucking fuck, my darling. Man, do I miss you."

She took a few more drags, speaking to him in her head about all of the things she'd done that day, and then when she had one drag left she performed her ritual, which was to inhale as deeply as she could and exhale *I love you* over and over again until she ran out of breath.

A few hours later a man in a tuxedo had his hand on her left breast. She fitted her knee between his thighs and he staggered back, bumping into a table, upsetting a calla lily arrangement.

"Careful," she said.

"My bad," he replied. He was, upon inspection, perhaps more boy than man. He'd told her his name was Carson and she'd actually laughed but when he looked hurt she passed it off as nerves and yanked him down the hall by the lilies.

The man-boy's sweaty hand had adhered itself to her nipple in a way that wasn't specifically pleasant. He kissed her neck. She rubbed her leg a little harder against his groin. Maybe early to mid-twenties. He seemed pretty sure of himself.

"I didn't get your name," he said. Wendy stiffened a little, thought of Jonah across the table from her at lunch that afternoon, the blank innocence of his face, his bald confusion when they both realized Violet had fled. What if this guy wasn't even *legal*?

"How old are you?" she asked, and he pulled away and grinned at her.

"Twenty-two."

She nodded and slipped a hand down the waist of his pants. Just cocky, then, pun acknowledged. An heir, perhaps, of someone who'd

invented something that seemed like it had already been invented by someone else. Or maybe the son of a record executive or a spray-tanned Fox correspondent. A boy who would live a life of inconsequence, who would, one hoped, not kill anybody with his car and get away with it. He wasn't a terrible kisser.

"How old are *you*?" he asked.

"Seventy-eight," she said, unfazed.

"You're funny," he said.

She was suddenly irked. "What does your father do?" she asked him, removing her hand from his boxers.

"Huh?"

"Your dad. What's his job? Why are you here tonight?"

"What makes you assume that I'm here with—" He stopped, rolling his eyes. "He's an engineer. Medical software development. Robotics."

"Ah." She'd check the guest list tomorrow, ensure they'd made a sizable contribution. Sometimes the more low-profile guys tried to get away with just buying tickets.

"What's your *name*?" he asked, a little more hostile this time.

She sighed. "Wendy."

"Like Peter Pan," Carlton noted astutely, and it was her turn to eye-roll.

"Its origins have never been explained to me."

Her mom and dad used to call her Wednesday as a nickname, and when she'd confronted her mother about it—just a few years ago—the response had been underwhelming.

"That was mean," she'd said. "Like Wednesday Addams? I was skeletal, Mom; did that really seem like a good joke?"

"Honey, you were born on a Wednesday. Just a few minutes after midnight. I had no idea what day it was and your father— It was because of that."

That was the story of her name, then. *You shattered my conception of the space-time continuum, First Contraceptive Accident.*

She tugged at Carlton's sleeve. "Come on. Let's go outside," she said.

"Wendy," he said. "Hang on. As in—*that* Wendy?"

She turned to see what she'd already known was there: a poster

for the fund-raiser, complete with a photo of the cancerous spokesbaby, dotted at the bottom with HOSTED BY WENDY EISENBERG OF THE CHICAGO PHILANTHROPIC WOMEN'S SOCIETY. A robotics engineer would be exponentially less likely to donate if he discovered that the middle-aged organizer was making out with his pretentiously named twenty-two-year-old son. It was the sight of the *Eisenberg* that really got her, though, the prodigious loop of the *g*. It still bothered her to see her name on its own. She backed away from her tailored little charge and tried to smile.

"Do I seem like the hostess of this event?" she asked.

"What's your last name, then?"

"Sorenson," she said without skipping a beat.

"Well, could I—can I text you?" he asked, and she smiled.

"I'd like that," she said ominously. "But I'd better go."

"I thought we were going outside."

"Alas, no time. I'm ancient. I've gotta go. Coaches. Pumpkins. Life Alert."

"Well—okay. This was—um—this was nice."

Ah, he was a sweet one: her prize for taking the high road.

"Do yourself a favor," she said, still flustered, tugging at the heel of her left shoe. "Next time you think a woman's funny? Don't tell her she's funny."

"What do I do instead?" Something about the way his perfect face crumpled in confusion tugged at a place deep in her belly and she couldn't help but smile at him.

"You laugh," she said, and before she realized what she was doing she was reaching to press a shock of hair away from his forehead. "The next time you meet a funny woman, you laugh at her jokes, okay, Conrad?"

"Carson."

"Carson. Good luck, kid."

The room spun again. *Kid* made her think of her parents, suddenly, of her father bowing theatrically to her mother at Wendy's wedding, hearing Otis Redding—"win a little; lose a little"—and declaring, "It's our song, kid." Every song belonged to her parents, it seemed; everything recorded in the last six decades had something to do with David and Marilyn, those two inexplicable people from

whom she hailed. She'd thought, when she met Miles, that she'd finally found someone in the way that her mom had.

There were suddenly tears in her eyes, a familiar tightness in her chest. She wasn't supposed to leave this early but she knew that if she stayed things would continue to go south. She left her coat in the checkroom and spun out onto the street.

Some people told you it took a year for everything to get back to normal; other people said things only got worse after a year. She was a member of this latter camp, she supposed, because Miles had been dead since 2014 but she still hadn't cleaned out his nightstand; she still bought things at the grocery that he liked and she didn't; she still operated exactly as she had before, as a member of a unit, as a person who was contingent on the active participation of another person. You couldn't untrain yourself from that. She'd tried. She'd moved to the condo in River North, but she set it up a lot like their house in Hyde Park, and she'd taped up the drawers of all his furniture—his desk, his dresser, his nightstand—so that the movers could transport them intact, full of his possessions.

Some people took a year; it was probable that some other people besides Wendy were still complete trainwrecks after two.

It swept in with the spring like a melting. Quietude, a kind of solace Marilyn hadn't known since—well, ever, honestly; in utero, maybe, but probably not even then, given her mother's penchant for Tanqueray, given the laxity of the 1950s, whichever you wanted to blame. Life was good. *Her* life was good. The hardware store was doing well, and she was sleeping better than she ever had, and her legs had nearly regained the limber give of her girlhood because she rode her bike to work, and her pansies were flourishing, a bright vermilion burst in the built-in box on the front porch.

She, for once, would have been flying high, were it not for the tethers of her family. Marilyn Connolly—who'd've thought? A business owner, a certified nonsmoker for nearly fifteen years, an occasional churchgoer, proprietess of the most beautiful rosebushes on Fair Oaks. She was wondering if perhaps she was in her *prime*, although she wasn't entirely convinced that one was allowed to *have*

a prime when one was the mother of four. She was, instead of flying high, like one of those giant kite people they flew outside of the gas station on Ridgeland Avenue, a big vinyl body swaying in the breeze, trussed to the ground by thick umbilical ropes. A few minutes of bliss and suddenly it was the irritating jangle of her phone and an *Oh my God, Mom*, or a knock at the kitchen window with a mouthed *Where's the rake, honey?*

She put her bike on the porch and stopped to pull some dead leaves from her potted plants. Loomis was waiting for her inside.

"Hello, my darling," she said, rubbing deep behind his ears. They'd become those clichéd empty nesters who turned desperately to the Labrador the second the last kid shipped off to college.

"Hey, sweet," David called from down the hall. She followed Loomis to the study, and she paused before she entered, watching her husband's back, the vulnerable fuzz on his neck, the hint of a bald spot spreading from the crown of his head like a galaxy.

She didn't need him: it bobbed around in her head, a tiny infidelity. It occurred to her at that moment, melancholically, as she watched him sitting at his desk before a few books of rare quarters and a pile of pistachio shells. He'd become messy, suddenly, after years of passive-aggressively swiping at the crumbs on the counter with a damp sponge, sighing heavily as he cleared long blond-brown strands of hair from the shower drain. He'd become messy and stagnant and extremely libidinous, and when he rose to kiss her, shaking paper-thin flecks of pistachio skin from his shirt, the thought materialized: *I don't need you.* She moved for a peck on the forehead but he went full-on, running a hand through her hair, looping an arm around her waist, teasing her lips apart with his own.

"Mm," she said, pulling away. "I think I'm getting a cold, love."

It was clearly a lie; they had never cared about colds. They passed germs back and forth with abandon, sharing mugs of coffee, pieces of toast, occasionally toothbrushes when they were too tired to turn on the light and distinguish green from blue. David had an immune system like an alligator and Marilyn, way back when, was always low-level sick anyway, from the girls, their sticky hands and their dirty Kleenexes and their leftover macaroni she'd eat from their bowls after

dinner. They weren't afraid of germs. Standing before her, David looked wounded.

Of course she *needed* him, on a molecular level, the deepest kind of human need. But she didn't need his *help*. And she didn't want his body, not really, in a way that reminded her of the times after each of the children were born, the times when the three eldest girls were small all at once, the times when the three eldest girls were *teens* all at once, and she'd been too tired to desire anything that required even a fragment of conscious bodily attention.

It felt like that, except she wasn't tired.

"How was your day?" she asked him, leading the way to the kitchen.

"Oh, you know," he said. "I cut the grass. I walked the dog. Twice." He was quiet for a minute. "How was *your* day?" he asked finally, and she hesitated.

It had started to feel sort of uncomely, countering his Eeyore monologue with a chirpy account of the hardware store's thriving profit margin, her funny teenage employees, the delightful moments of existential introspection she'd been having lately during lulls between customers. You couldn't respond to *I'm depressed and inventing home improvement projects to combat my despair* with *I've never been happier!*

"Just fine," she said. "You going to help me with dinner?"

When they were first married, living in that haphazard green house in Iowa City when David was in medical school, they'd relished the opportunity to make dinner together, trailing each other around the kitchen, making out against the counter while they waited for water to boil, sometimes forgetting the meal entirely and having to fan the smoke alarm with their discarded clothing. Something in his expression now tugged at a sinewy part of her heart; something about the defenseless flop of his graying hair made her go to him and twine her arms around his middle and kiss him. Needing and wanting were different animals entirely.

"I thought you had a cold," he said, pulling away for a second.

"False alarm," she said, slipping her hands into his back pockets, impelling his tongue to engage with hers.

"I can cook," David said, coming up for air. She kissed him harder and felt a flicker of something southward, a gentle reminder of the fact that she loved this man more than solitude. She pushed her hips into his, trying to draw out the feeling, keep it going, but it was gone as quickly as it had come, replaced by stillness, a little ache in her jaw.

DISAPPEARING EARTH

A NOVEL

JULIA PHILLIPS

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FEBRUARY

Revmira woke up knowing it was February 27. The date bore down on her. She dressed slowly, sadly, under its weight, and came out to the kitchen to find her husband boiling their coffee. "Good morning," she said.

"Morning," Artyom said, and she knew from the line of his shoulders over the stove that he knew what day it was, too.

She got out cheese and ham for breakfast. While she prepared two plates at the counter, he poured their cups. The teaspoon clinked as he mixed sugar into hers. They had been together twenty-six years, nearly half Revmira's life, and still she was surprised by Artyom's kindness. He was the easiest man she had ever known. But then she had only known two.

"How'd you sleep?" he asked.

She shrugged, put their breakfast sandwiches down, and took her seat. "Are you on call today?"

"Twelve to twelve." Soon he would meet with the rest of his rescue team, stack their gear, get ready for any urgent flight to the mountains or the ice caves or the open water, but for now he was rumpled in his T-shirt. He had not yet shaved. Behind him, their kitchen window showed a clear sky.

She had slept heavy and dark the night before. She had not dreamed of Gleb. For years after the accident, she did—that Gleb visited her in her childhood home; treated her on her birthday; drove her down the bumpy road beyond the city limits to the ocean's black

sandy shore. "This is impossible," she said in that one. "I know," he said and shifted gears. She wanted in the dream to touch his hand but was afraid to distract him at the wheel.

"It's going to be warm," Artyom said.

She looked up from her plate. "Is that right?"

"Almost zero."

"I'm not surprised," she said. "You only give yourself the best shifts. You'll probably spend all day picnicking."

"Having ice cream in the snow. Sure. More like we'll be called at noon on the dot for some novice getting sunburned off-piste."

"Just be careful," she said. He kept watching her.

"With weather like this, it could be a short winter," he said. "Lieutenant Ryakhovsky texted this morning. They want our boats to search for the sisters in the bay once it thaws."

The bread was dry in Revmira's mouth. "He never got back to me."

"I asked again about that. He didn't respond."

"He's a jackass," she said.

Artyom smiled at her from across the table. That look deepened the lines on his face.

"You told him about Alla's daughter?"

"I told him everything," Artyom said. "He's all business: the major general wants approval from the ministry for another round of water searches."

Revmira put her bread down. For months, Petropavlovsk's rescue team had been helping the police organize search efforts for the Golosovskaya sisters. Artyom's rescue work usually came in bursts—hikers unable to descend from volcanoes, snowmobilers cracking through thin lake ice, fishermen getting turned around at sea—but this case would not end. In the fall, Artyom had led civilians through the city to search for the missing girls; once the weather turned, he brought home occasional updates from officers.

How tidy of the police to throw all their efforts into looking for two small white bodies. That served as a good excuse to ignore the city's other corruptions, its injustice, its drunk drivers or petty arson-

ists. Why should Ryakhovsky answer Artyom's text messages about some northern teen? Preparing boats to drag a bay that was frozen must occupy all the lieutenant's valuable time.

Over the winter holidays, Revmira's second cousin, Alla, visiting from Esso, had said that her younger daughter was still missing. Alla had brought the subject up at the cross-country ski base's café after what was supposed to be a pleasant morning together spent gliding over snow. Listening, Revmira cut a cottage-cheese pastry into three portions, while Alla rubbed her temple and talked, and Alla's grown son watched those entering the base stomp their boots clean.

Revmira had never met this missing daughter. Alla came to the city only once a year, to see her grandchildren, and contacted Revmira with the same sadness each time. Their meetings came out of mutual obligation. After Revmira's parents passed, Revmira had stopped visiting the village. There was nothing for her there. Her cousin's gloomy annual updates were enough to confirm that choice.

"The authorities still have nothing to say about your girl?" Revmira had asked. Her cousin only shook her head. "Here the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Emergency Situations have been looking for these Russian sisters tirelessly."

"It wasn't that way with us."

"I imagine not."

"Natasha told me in the fall that the sisters were taken by someone," Alla said. "When Lilia disappeared, I begged authorities to look for the person responsible. All Esso's officers did then was spread rumors about Lilia's boyfriends. She wasn't . . . she had admirers, but that was exactly why . . ." Behind her glasses, Alla's eyelids lowered. Her nostrils flared.

Revmira sat in quiet with her for a few moments. Meanwhile Alla's son picked up his portion of their divided pastry. "Artyom could speak to the city police for you," Revmira said eventually. "He knows people. They might open a case for her, at least. Keep a description on file." Her cousin did not look hopeful.

Still, Revmira had collected a few details to pass forward. Lilia was small, too, and young, though not as young as the Golosovskaya

sisters. Artyom had given Revmira the lieutenant's number, then himself messaged the lieutenant with a graduation photo of the teen, but they heard nothing back. No great surprise. Lilia was three years missing, Even, the child of a nobody.

Revmira should never have suggested a city investigation to Alla. This was how it went: no end to grief. Her cousin's cheeks had been hollowed out by absence. Revmira knew that expression too well.

"No shock Ryakhovsky didn't respond," Revmira said at the breakfast table. "Given the chance to assist an old native woman, our police would rather—" She stopped, turned her face from Artyom.

Rather die, she'd almost said. She had almost let herself forget what day it was.

"Well, he ought to try," Artyom said. She shook her head. He went on: "He's touchy these days about taking tips from civilians. He was reprimanded for it by the major general in the fall. But that's their job. These officers are too young to understand what duty is."

Revmira sipped the coffee. It tasted good. Sweet. She did not deserve it. Distracting herself, talking casually . . . even after all this time, it made no sense that she got to wake up and chatter and drink fresh coffee while Gleb could not.

She stood from the table. "Late, isn't it?" she said. Artyom glanced at the clock on the stove.

She went to brush her teeth. In the mirror, she saw herself dressed for work.

Had she ever been as young as she was when she met Gleb? All her days back then felt bright. When, at seventeen, she moved to Petropavlovsk, the city was filled with scaffolding, soldiers, polished monuments. She came to her first day of university and saw Gleb. She was thinner then, tanner, an emissary from Esso's Young Communist League, and he was as fair and glorious as a figure on a propaganda poster. His eyebrows furrowed under the classroom lights as he looked back.

What a lucky, stupid girl she had been in those years. Even the most difficult times she remembered from that age were nothing now. A month into her first semester, she received a package at her

dormitory. The box was so light she thought at first it must be empty. She opened it to find dozens of dried pinecones; her father had gathered them to mail three hundred kilometers south to her. The box smelled like home. The forest, dirt, her parents' scratchy clothes. She shook out the seeds, chewed them, and cried. At seventeen years old, that was her most desolate moment: missing the people who sent her packages.

And that same afternoon she was able to bring a pinecone to class and pass it across the aisle into Gleb's hand. They were married before graduation. She had the whole world then, but she was only a child.

She applied her eyeliner. Revmira always took this date to repeat to herself Gleb's qualities: his patience, his charm. He waited by her desk after class and she prolonged collecting her books to keep him there above her. Once, in the park with friends, he knelt down to tie her shoes. He was that indulgent. That surprising. His fingers a little longer and thinner than hers. The weekend she, finally his wife, moved in with him and his mother, he brought home a two-liter tub of red caviar to celebrate. They ate out of the tub with spoons. The saline pop of those eggs on their teeth. She would never forget.

In the other room, Artyom was clearing the dishes. They rang against the sink. Each year, Revmira's recollections stayed the same—the tied shoe, the tub of caviar—while everything else, against her will, deepened, strengthened, grew. Gleb's letters and records were in a suitcase on the floor of her closet. She wore a white uniform, and kept a tidy house he would not see, and had been married again for so long that people said to her, "Your husband," without bothering to specify who.

She came back into the kitchen to give Artyom a kiss. "I'm off."

Wiping his hands, he followed her to the hall. He stood in slippered feet while she pulled on her heels. When she was ready, he held out her coat, wool and thickly lined. "Lunch this afternoon?"

"If you're not too busy," she said. "You'll let me know if you get called in?"

"Of course," he said. He always did. She kissed him again. His

mouth under hers was soft and warm and living. It was not fair that he should be so good to her today, when she attended least to him. None of this was fair.

As she drew away, she saw his eyes had stayed open. He saw, somewhere in there, the woman she was when they first met—that destroyed version of her.

Revmira pulled her purse up on her shoulder. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Of course," she said. She had to be.

All the same, she walked as though lost the four short blocks to the bus stop. The sky was washed blue. Melting ice broke under her shoes. Banks of snow propped up the buildings around her. The morning of the accident, Gleb's mother, still in her nightgown, came into their room. Sunlight was filtering through the curtains. Gleb had left for work almost an hour before. Revmira sat up, then, so the futon swayed underneath her. The frame was hard as bones below the mattress. "What is it, Mama?" Revmira said. She always thought of that question afterward—another recollection played and replayed. She should not have asked. Vera Vasilievna's expression already told her.

When Revmira found out, she screamed. Gleb's side of the sheets still smelled like him, but that would only fade. His clothes hung in the closet. On the top of their dresser, there were his childish prizes, his medals from the All-Union Pioneers and his school certificates.

At the funeral, there were photographs of him. A shut box that tormented her with what it did or did not hold. Revmira was ten when her grandfather died; his body had stayed for three days on display in her childhood home, and she could touch his skin, stiff as cardboard, which scared her and soothed her at once to feel. But Gleb, who had not been wearing his seatbelt, had to stay in the state morgue until the service. Pieces of him could be missing. She did not know. She never would. Picturing him that way made her think she might go mad.

Vera Vasilievna covered all the mirrors in the apartment, like Revmira's family had in Esso—but Gleb was not an old man, he

was twenty-two, he was immaculate. "You're my child now," Vera Vasilievna told her. "You're all I have left." Though when Gleb had first brought Revmira home his mother wept over his seeing a native girl. They threw fistfuls of dirt into his grave. It was impossible. His mother was shaking, and Revmira knew she should put an arm around the woman's shoulders, and she could not. Instead Revmira stood with her dirty hands folded. Everything around her was just an imitation of what he had been.

Revmira moved to a room in a friend's apartment. To keep herself sane, she had to keep going, so she gave away their wedding presents, the dishes they ate off, the clothes he saw her wear, until the only scraps left of their life together fit in one buckled bag. She finished her degree, found a job, paid her bills, made her dinners. She watched Gorbachev speak about openness and change on her television. And all the while she was screaming. She never stopped. In her mind, she was still twenty-one and ten months and two days, and it was just after seven in the morning, and Gleb had been lying next to her an hour before.

The bus delivered her to the hospital's triage desk by eight. The nurse getting off shift briefed her: this many beds open, this many appointments to expect, this or that piece of gossip that had surfaced overnight. Revmira draped her coat over the back of the desk chair and nodded along. There were only two men sitting along the wall of the admission department, which was no more than a corridor, really, a narrow green-painted hall. Any sick people who could afford it bought themselves seats in the waiting room of a private clinic. After the other nurse left, Revmira called one man over to the triage desk so he could state his symptoms. He opened his mouth and the sickly smell of booze washed over her. "Sit down," she said. She waved the other man up, reviewed his paperwork, and had him follow her upstairs for an exam.

Through the morning, patients came in clusters: brusque Valentina Nikolaevna for radiation therapy, a teenager whose appendix was near bursting, a snowboarder who broke his leg and was wheeled to the elevator with lines of snow on his jacket sleeves. Revmira

assessed them all. She directed people for X-rays, for ultrasounds, and to the surgical floor. Doctors called down to manage prescriptions. Revmira called up about the patient flow. One man entered the admission department with a crossbow bolt through the meat of his right shoulder, and she had him fill out his papers with his left hand before she sent him forward.

As the hall thinned out to one or two again, she had time to tidy the top of the desk, lining up a stapler with the long edge of her notepad. She let her brain go neat and blank. Artyom texted her to say that he was being called in for a mountain rescue. She texted back good luck. Out the door, the street was sunny. The air was practically vernal. Eventually a trainee came down to cover her for lunch.

In the break room, Revmira picked up a magazine to read. Rather than attending to its pages, though, she held the magazine over her soup and recalled the summer day, before their last year of university began, that she and Gleb got married. He in his suit and she in her plain little heels. Her hair braided over her shoulder. The way he held her after they said their vows—she had wanted to have his children that instant.

Good, probably, that they didn't end up pregnant. If she had stood at his funeral with a baby in her arms—where would she have gone afterward? What would she have done?

When Artyom, years after, found out he couldn't have children, Revmira had already lived too long for the news to surprise. That loss piled up with the rest. In any case, Kamchatka was no longer a place to raise a family. Just look at the hole in her cousin's life where a daughter belonged. The communities Revmira grew up in had splintered, making them easy places to be forgotten, easy places to disappear. Revmira's parents had raised her in a strong home, an idyllic village, a principled people, a living Even culture, a socialist nation of great achievement. That nation collapsed. Nothing was left in the place it had occupied.

Revmira stirred her cooling soup. Modern life had buried the lovers she and Gleb had been. She ended up back at the wedding regis-

try office ten years later; though she and Artyom were married in the same building, they stood in a different room, before a different officiant, under the laws of a different state. All the spots she and Gleb went to as newlyweds—kissing each other before the Bering monument, at the city center, or on top of St. Nicholas Hill—were now covered in graffiti and trash. Even the university changed. Revmira had to stop by every fall to pick up student medical records. The first time, she went to the classroom where she met Gleb and found the space filled by strangers.

He died and the whole Soviet Union followed. Revmira's country, her young face, the entire course of her life had changed. Since she started at the hospital, she had sat next to more than a hundred patients to help them go, so she now knew death well: the release of breath, the rattle, the calm. Her parents went the same way, one after the other. And she missed them. She had resigned herself a long time ago to missing all the people who left her. There were many, many. Vera Vasilievna, too. But Gleb was the only one who had been perfect. He was the one whose death shocked her, who kept shocking her year after year.

It would have been easier if she had died with him. Not better, necessarily, just . . . easier. If she was in the car, too. She had imagined it so many times.

Back at the triage desk, she thought of that. His car, the road, the icy dark before dawn that day. Their wedding, his arms around her, the little boy they could have had, the little girl. February 27. Even when Revmira was awake, she was dreaming.

Her cell phone vibrated. The screen showed the name of the wife of another man in Artyom's crew. Revmira ducked her head to take the call. "Yes, Inna?"

There was a second of silence on the other end of the line. Inna said, "Something's happened."

Around Revmira, the people in the waiting room muttered and sighed and moaned. Under her forehead, the desk was smooth. Cold. Revmira kept her face down. She waited.

"They radioed in. They've been trying to reach us. Reach you. Artyom was hurt," Inna said. "I'm sorry, Reva. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." Her voice continued.

Inna said a rock. She said his head. She said knocked out. She said no pain. The team medic tried to revive him. He was already gone. It happened too fast, Inna said.

Folded in her chair, Revmira looked down at her scrubs. Her cotton-covered knees. "I don't understand," she said.

Inna said a rock. There had been a rescue, a lost skier. She said they found the skier. And then a rock fell. She said his head. No pain. An accident. His skull. The curve of his neck, his jaw, his face looking at her this morning with the window soft and white behind.

"I see. I see," said Revmira.

She hung up. Someone came up to the desk and she waved him away. She had forgotten to ask where Artyom was now. Should she call back? She unlocked the phone and looked at Inna's name in her call list. This was crazy. She opened up a text to her husband. Her fingers moved slowly over the letters. She had to tell Artyom what this woman had said.

Artyom was hurt. Inna told her that. But Revmira would take him as an invalid. She would take him weak. Diminished. As long as he was living.

She looked up and Inna was in front of the desk. Revmira looked at the clock on her computer. Time had passed.

"I came to take you home," Inna said. Her eyes were red. "They're still in the mountains."

"Okay," said Revmira. "I understand."

Inna went away. Someone touched Revmira's shoulder. It was the trainee, saying she would take over. Inna was there again. Revmira made sure not to forget her coat. They went outside. Artyom was dead.

Revmira concentrated on buckling herself into Inna's car. It was hard to do. Her hands were strange. She focused on her fingers, her bending knuckles. The parchment color of her nails against the seatbelt.

Since Gleb's accident, Revmira had hated cars. Now she had to hate rocks, too. Rocks. Snow. The sound of her cell phone ringing. Sugar stirred into her coffee. The smell of breakfast filling their kitchen. She had thought she was strong, but she was not. She was not. Not anymore, not without him.

In the driver's seat, Inna started the engine and wiped her cheeks. She looked up through the windshield. Her jacket whispered as she moved. "It's this weather," Inna said. "Loose ice. Avalanche weather."

Revmira folded her hands in her lap. She could not get control of them. Cold air blew on her from the vents. It was February 27.

"This is fate," she said out loud.

Inna sniffed back tears at the steering wheel. "What?"

Revmira looked out the window at the heaps of blackened snow bordering the parking lot. Water trickled out onto the asphalt. The sun was high above them. She thought of the rock. His head. No pain. Last weekend napping on the couch in the afternoon, her legs pinned between his, their faces close together. His breath on her cheek. Once he woke up, he asked her if she was comfortable. They had talked about headlines, currency devaluations, parliamentary decisions, the Golosovskaya sisters. "If I were their kidnapper," she told him, "I'd bring them north. No one watches the villages. You could bury bodies right on your property in daylight hours without anyone noticing."

Artyom had kissed the creased skin below her eye. "My morbid, brilliant woman."

She carried death into their marriage, brought death with her up to this day. Quietly, into the glass of the window, she said, "Our suffering is fated." She should have expected this from the very beginning. She had met Artyom, that excellent man, and condemned him.

The parking lot rolled away, other cars gathered around them, city buses pulled over, traffic lights turned green. Inna took the long way home, past the cinema, and Revmira did not correct her. Snow piles rose and fell beside them like ocean waves. In front of her and Artyom's building, Revmira took her keys out. Inna plucked them away to unlock the doors. *I can do that*, Revmira wanted to say. *I know*

how to do all of this. I've done it before. Instead she followed Inna into her own apartment.

The younger woman went straight to put on the kettle. Inna had decided to be capable. It was easy for Inna; the man she loved was alive.

"Excuse me," Revmira said. Her voice sounded so polite. She took her phone into the bathroom and called Artyom's sister.

"Oh," his sister said and started to weep. The sound of it, rhythmic, desperate, hurt. Revmira pressed the phone harder to her ear. She had not cried yet. She had to listen. "Have you seen him?" his sister asked.

"No," Revmira said. She knew how searches worked. "No, they're coming back from the mountains. It's quite— It's difficult. They bring the one they rescued first. It'll be a few hours."

"Maybe it's not true."

The bathroom sink was flecked with Artyom's hair. He had shaved this morning after Revmira left. This world was built for people to suffer. "It's true," Revmira said, and the sister wept harder.

Inna waited in the kitchen, so Revmira, after getting off the phone, went into the bedroom and shut the door. At the top of their tugged-up blanket was Artyom's pillow. Revmira touched it. Soft. On the bedside table, there was his book. His glass of water—she picked that up and drank it.

She put the empty glass on his side of the blanket, and the book there, too. They made little dents in the wool. Then she opened up the bedside drawer to find a pocketknife, his spare sunglasses, a bottle of vitamin D supplements. She put those on the bed. It was nice to see his things laid out. She could do that. She had nothing else to do. She went to their dresser and pulled out his sweaters, his pants, the white undershirts, the worn briefs. Artyom was in his house clothes when she last saw him. Navy athletic pants and an old T-shirt. She fetched those from the laundry basket. She did not know what he wore to work today, but she would find out soon enough.

She wanted to see his body.

The pile on the bed looked small. She went to the closet for more.

She should gather his things. She should stockpile memories. She met Artyom when she was twenty-nine, when her former classmates had already made themselves mothers and she, still young, had nothing but her job and her buried history. She frightened people. But Artyom was not disturbed. He was a friend of a friend; they were introduced at a party. He had trained as a biathlete outside Moscow and returned to Kamchatka after too many years of fruitless competition left him thin, fair-minded, strong.

They slept together sooner than a month after they met. In the blackness of Artyom's bedroom, his parents out and his sister a wall away, Revmira peeled off his clothes. His knees and shoulders were bound up in muscles. She ran her fingers over their cords. When she explored his chest, she felt his heart, that athlete's measured muscle, pounding. His breath was quick. His body betrayed him.

With her fingers tight on the closet rod, she began to cry. They last had sex on Tuesday. Today was Sunday.

How did Artyom want her, even then? How did he manage to survive for so long? For months after they were married, she appreciated him, his long legs, his service, and then all at once she fell in love. They were on the bus together. It was snowing the way it used to and never seemed to anymore, those flakes so dense that the driver followed the road not from sight but from habit. Three blocks from their stop, Artyom turned to Revmira, flipped up her collar, and pulled her jacket zipper to her chin. He tugged her hat down on her forehead and ran his fingers around her wrists to check the seal of her gloves. Then he took her hand and faced forward. Swaddled up, she felt herself—alive. Finally alive. The blood in her body was a rolling boil.

She had sat there warm and thrilled and terrified. She had believed new wonders waited. Her only bare skin was the strip around her eyes, and the world outside looked so fresh, so clean. So promising. After Gleb died, she was alone, alone, always alone, and suddenly, on a plastic seat in a crowded bus, she found that someone else was with her. She'd exhaled with joy into her jacket collar. Artyom.

Her husband. Her rescuer. He had done his duty. Now Revmira

was supposed to keep going without him. She wiped her face and went into the kitchen. When she entered, Inna stood up, phone in her hand, and said, "They're on their way."

"All right," Revmira said. She took his mug and plate from the drying rack.

In the bathroom, she grabbed his toothbrush, razor, cologne. The face lotion he used—she added it all to the pile.

For nearly all of the past twenty-six years, she had busied herself with Artyom's kindness, their careers, the mealtime conversations, the assistance they offered others. She looked at the rest of the country falling apart but believed that she and Artyom could last. She was wrong. Artyom's twelve-hour shifts, Revmira's work at the hospital, their appeals to authorities—those were the acts of an earlier age. Those things were useless. In the end, they did not protect anyone.

She went back to the closet, pulled out Gleb's suitcase, and heaved the case onto the blanket. Its bulk pressed on Artyom's belongings. She opened the case, snaps biting into her fingers, and saw some objects she had forgotten, some others she could not forget. She needed to be with these things of her husband's. All of it together was everything she had left. The letters he wrote her. Faded record sleeves. His winter hat, his civil passport. She emptied the old case out, then she put it down on the blanket and crawled onto the bed.

Boots, buckles, papers, and scarves. After Gleb's accident, she thought she would die. She thought she had. This date took him and pulled her down after, grief determined as gravity. But now she would live. She had to. It was what she did: live while others could not. There was no pleasure in it.

THE FARM

A NOVEL

JOANNE RAMOS

The Farm 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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JANE

WHEN ATE FIRST TOLD JANE ABOUT GOLDEN OAKS, JANE HAD BEEN without steady work for almost three months. Her position at the retirement home had been filled while she was at the Carters', and her old supervisor could only get her sporadic shifts. Jane was getting desperate.

"Mrs. Rubio is using Golden Oaks for her fourth baby. She had too many troubles with the other pregnancies. Preeclampsia and hemorrhoids and bed rest!" Ate explained.

Golden Oaks hired women to be surrogates. If you were chosen to be a Host you lived in a luxury house in the middle of the countryside where your only job was to rest and keep the baby inside you healthy. According to Mrs. Rubio, Golden Oaks' clients were the richest, most important people from all over the world, and for carrying their babies Hosts were paid a great deal of money.

"I would take this job if I could. The work is easy and the money is big! But I am too old." Ate sighed.

"How much money do you mean?" Jane asked, resting one hand on Amalia's belly so she would not roll off Ate's bed.

"More money than you made with Mrs. Carter," Ate answered, without judgment. "And Mrs. Rubio says if the Client likes you, you can make much more."

Ate pressed a pale-gray business card into Jane's hand. On it, there was a name, MAE YU, and a phone number. "Maybe, Jane, it is a new beginning."

APPLYING TO GOLDEN OAKS WAS TIME-CONSUMING BUT NOT COMPLIcated. There were forms to sign. Jane had to agree to a background and credit check and send copies of her citizenship papers. There were rounds of medical examinations at a doctor's office near the East River and a battery of other tests, odd ones, at a smaller office on York.

Jane surprised herself by enjoying the latter tests, in part because the silver-haired woman who conducted them assured her there were no wrong answers. Jane was first shown a series of splotchy shapes and asked to describe them. The silver-haired woman then asked her questions—about what it was like being raised by Nanay, and what made her angry. Afterward, Jane took a computer test where she only needed to mark whether she agreed or disagreed with a list of statements.

Any trouble you have is your own fault.

Jane thought of Billy, of Mrs. Carter, and clicked: *Strongly Agree.*

I do many things better than almost everyone I know.

At this, Jane laughed aloud. She did not even finish high school!

Strongly Disagree.

I don't mind being told what to do.

Agree.

Several weeks later, Jane received an email from Mae Yu, Managing Director, Golden Oaks Farm, informing her that she had passed the first two stages of the "highly competitive" Host Selection Process. She was invited to Golden Oaks for a final interview in early January.

Jane was overwhelmed. She was busy looking for apartments so that she and Amalia and Ate could move out of the dorm if she got

the job—how would she have time to study? Ate, as always, took charge. She bought a stack of pregnancy books and showed Jane how to make study cards. She searched the newspaper classifieds for no-fee apartments and brought Amalia with her when she visited them, so that Jane could prepare for the interview undisturbed. Every night, she quizzed Jane.

"What are the correct foods to eat when pregnant? What is the best music for the fetus to be smart? What exercises make labor easier?" Ate asked, sitting at the dorm's kitchen table, a candy cane sticking out of her mouth.

"Food high in omega-3; complex classical music like Mozart and . . ." Jane faltered, feeling not only stupid—she was never good at tests, even the easy spelling tests in school—but guilty, because she did not know these things when she was carrying Amalia.

"Kegels," Ate said. She peered at Jane over her reading glasses. "Relax, Jane."

"I am not good at remembering things," Jane said, near tears.

"You will be fine, Jane. They will be lucky to have you."

ON THE METRO-NORTH TRAIN THE MORNING OF THE INTERVIEW, JANE finds a coil of rosary beads in her pocket. Ate probably slipped them into her coat at the subway stop when Jane was distracted by Amalia. After Nanay died—and before Jane knew her mother would send for her—Jane must have said a thousand rosaries straight using the beads she had taken from her grandmother's nightstand. They were smooth from use, like Ate's.

Jane is so nervous she feels ill.

The train does not seem to be moving fast, but it is. Outside, tall buildings turn into shorter ones, blur into houses with small yards, then houses with bigger yards, then fields, wider fields, forests. Jane fingers Ate's beads and tries to pray, but the familiar words only make her sleepy. She forces herself up and sways toward the café car, thinking of the priest in Bulacan, the one with the hunched back who taught catechism to the village children. The priest used to describe how Jesus was so anguished by the sins he shouldered for

mankind that, one time standing in a green garden, he sweated blood. Jesus with blood oozing from his pores! Because of our sins!

The priest's normally timorous voice thundered as he described Jesus's agony. For a long time afterward, whenever Jane was naughty—when she broke a plate and hid the pieces in the trash bin, when she lied to Nanay about whether she came straight home after school—Jane was sure her badness would turn her sweat red, too. On those days, she took care not to exert herself and to play in the shade. When she finally confessed her fears to Nanay, she was spanked for blaspheming.

In the café car, Jane orders an extra-large coffee and drinks it quickly. Outside the window farms flash past and, in the pastures, cows, horses, sheep. The animals of baby books. Would Amalia recognize them? Jane reads to Amalia every day now, as Mrs. Carter instructed her to do with Henry. Their brains, asserted Mrs. Carter, are like sponges.

Jane's stop comes while she is in the bathroom. She almost twists her ankle rushing off the train. In the parking lot, a line of cars idles at the curb. Jane does not know how she will find which one is waiting for her. She walks the length of the line, trying to ignore how her shoes pinch—she has not worn them since her wedding—peering into each window with a mixture of shyness and apology.

At the end of the line someone honks. Jane notices a black Mercedes with a sign in the passenger window spelling REYES. It is the same car that the Carters owned, down to the slightly tinted windows. Jane pulls her coat tighter around herself and hurries toward it. The front door swings open, and a driver hops out and greets her. She means to smile at him but cannot. She slips inside, not knowing exactly where she is going, and tries to pray.

"ALMOST THERE!" ANNOUNCES THE DRIVER SOME TIME LATER. JANE wakes, dazed. She meant to study her cards during the ride.

"Nice, eh?" asks the driver. He meets Jane's eyes in the rearview mirror. They are driving up a hill lined with trees that Jane will later recognize as oaks. Behind them she glimpses a big, white mansion

capped by a roof of dark green shingles, thick white columns holding up a wide porch, and windows, so many, all lit. A wooden sign with swirling, green letters reads: GOLDEN OAKS FARM.

Jane thanks the driver, her heart flapping in her chest. She stands for a moment at the mansion's front door, on which a Christmas wreath still hangs, gathering her courage. Before Jane can knock, the door swings open.

"You must be Jane." A pretty lady with blond hair pulled back in a braid smiles at her. She takes Jane's coat, asks her if she would like a drink, and leads her to a large room with butter-colored walls covered in paintings. Jane sits near the fireplace. She stares above her at the wood beams stretching across the ceiling like ribs and thinks of Jonah, the man in the Bible who was swallowed by a whale. But this whale is a five-star one, filled with five-star furniture.

Jane recognizes the actress on the cover of a magazine on the table in front of her. *How to Spend It,* the magazine is called. She pretends to read as she surreptitiously observes everything around her—the chandelier dripping crystal at the far end of the room; the pretty lady behind the shiny desk murmuring into a phone that *Jane Reyes has arrived*.

"Your tea." A different woman appears out of nowhere. Jane springs to her feet, the magazine in her lap sliding to the floor. The woman places a cup and matching saucer on the table and retreats with a smile. "Ms. Yu will be with you soon."

The magazine has splayed open to the centerfold—three panels long, picturing a watch like none Jane has ever seen. In the middle of the watch's face is the earth, the continents deep green and gold against a circle of blue water. Gold clock hands at ten-ten stretch across North America and what Jane thinks is the beginning of Asia. Ringing the earth in tiny, perfect increments are numbers 1 to 24 and, circling these, at the edge of the watch face, are the names of twenty-four cities: New York, London, Hong Kong, Paris, yes, but also cities Jane has never heard of: Dhaka, Midway, Azores, Karachi.

Jane picks up the magazine from the floor. The watch, she reads, costs over three million dollars! It is one of a kind, antique, handmade—and, still, Jane does not comprehend how something

so small can be worth so much money, nor how anyone would ever feel comfortable wearing it.

Jane used to have a watch, too—not a three-million-dollar watch, but so beautiful. It had a heart-shaped face and a wristband made of woven silver strands. Ate received it as a parting gift from one of her former clients, and she gave it to Jane when Jane agreed to be her substitute at the Carters'.

"This is to thank you," said Ate, helping Jane with the clasp. "Also, so you will know when the baby must eat."

Jane returned the watch to Ate when she was fired, her head hanging low so Ate would not see her tears. Ate did not berate her, only said in a quiet voice that was worse than shouting, "I will keep it for Mali. Perhaps for her Confirmation."

"HI, JANE. THANKS FOR COMING UP. I'M MAE YU." MS. YU STANDS BEhind Jane's chair with her hand already extended.

Jane jumps to her feet. "I am Jane. Jane Reyes."

Ms. Yu stares at Jane with friendly interest but does not speak. Jane blurts, "My grandmother's name is also Yu."

"My father's Chinese, and my mother's American." Ms. Yu motions for Jane to follow her. "So I'm a halvsie. Like you."

Jane watches Ms. Yu—tall and slim in her navy dress, the thin pleats in the skirt swishing as she lopes across the room. Her hair, the color of burnt honey, is pulled back in a loose bun, and when she turns to smile at Jane, Jane notices she is as fair as a white person and wears no makeup.

She is nothing like Jane.

Jane is suddenly conscious of her skirt—too tight and too short. Why did she not listen to Ate, who counseled her to wear slacks? Why did she allow Angel to apply her makeup?

She stops in front of a mirror hanging on a nearby wall and starts to rub at the rouge on her cheeks with her fingers.

"Jane?" Ms. Yu calls from the doorway. "Are you coming?"

Jane drops her arm, blushing, and takes mincing steps toward Ms. Yu on her too-high shoes in her too-short skirt.

They walk down a hallway lined, on one side, with ceiling-high windows and on the other with framed paintings of birds. "The floors here are original to the house, from 1857. And those are original Audubons," says Ms. Yu. She points out the window. "We have over 260 acres of land. Our property line extends to that grove of beech trees back there. And those hills beyond, those are the Catskills."

They enter Ms. Yu's office, which is like Ms. Yu herself—simple and expensive looking. Jane takes a seat, feeling her skirt inch higher up her thighs. She tugs the hem lower.

"Tea?" Ms. Yu asks, reaching for a pot that sits on the low table in front of them.

Jane shakes her head. She is so nervous she fears she will spill on the white carpet.

"Just for me then." Ms. Yu pours with her left hand. A huge diamond, her only adornment, flares on her ring finger. She smiles at Jane. "How were your holidays? Did you do anything exciting?"

"I was home," Jane flounders. She and Amalia and Ate attended Christmas Mass; Angel cooked *pancit* and *bistek* and *leche flan,* and Amalia received gifts from almost everyone in the dorm. Not very exciting for someone like Ms. Yu.

"Home is where the heart is," Ms. Yu remarks. "So, Jane. Your physical and psychiatric exam results were terrific. Passing Phases One and Two isn't easy. Congratulations."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"This interview is meant to let us get to know you a bit. And to show off our facilities here at Golden Oaks!"

"Yes, ma'am."

Ms. Yu studies Jane's face. "Why do you want to be a Host?"

Jane thinks of Amalia and mumbles to her folded hands. "I—I want to help people."

"I'm sorry, can you speak a little louder?"

Jane looks up. "I want to help people. People who cannot have babies."

Ms. Yu scribbles something on the tablet in her lap with a stylus.

"And—I need a job," Jane blurts. Ate warned her not to say this. It sounds like desperation.

"Well, there's no shame in that. We all need to work to support those we love, right?"

Jane stares again at the diamond on Ms. Yu's finger, bright against her dark dress. Billy did not buy Jane a ring. She was pregnant, and they married quickly, and he said there was no point.

"Your references were also outstanding. Latoya Washington . . ."

"She was my supervisor at my old work."

"Ms. Washington was very complimentary. She said you are a hard worker and honest. She wrote that you were wonderful with the residents. She was sorry to see you go."

"Miss Latoya was very good to me," says Jane in a rush. "When I first came to New York, it was my first job. She was understanding, even when I got pregnant—ah!" Jane claps her hand over her mouth.

"That was my next question, actually. About your child."

Ate told Jane not to bring up Amalia, because why would they want to hire someone who is always worrying about her own baby?

"We have no rule barring Hosts from having children of their own. As long as you wait the medically appropriate amount of time before implantation, there's no issue. And it's good to know you've carried successfully to term before." Ms. Yu smiles. "How old is your child?"

"Six months," Jane whispers.

"What a lovely age! I have a goddaughter who's just a few months older than that," Ms. Yu says brightly. The goddaughter lives in Manhattan. She takes a music class where the songs are in Chinese. The father is French, and he and Ms. Yu's girlfriend plan on raising their daughter to be trilingual. "What's your baby's name?"

"Amalia."

"That's beautiful. Is that the Philippine version of Amelia?"

"It is the name of my grandmother."

Ms. Yu writes on her tablet. "Jane, there is one thing we *do* worry about with Hosts who have their own children: stress. Countless studies show that babies in utero who are exposed to excessive cortisol—which is a chemical released by the body when stressed—end up more prone to anxiety later in life."

"I am not stressed, ma'am," Jane says quickly.

"We'd need to be sure Amalia is well cared for, that you wouldn't need to worry about her while with us at Golden Oaks. Should we select you as a Host, what are your plans for her?"

Jane tells Ms. Yu about the one-bedroom she located in Rego Park in a no-fee apartment building. She will share it with Ate, who she will pay to take care of Amalia.

"Excellent. Another thing we ask is that you prepay your rent for the time you're with us. Again, this is to reduce stress during the pregnancy. If selected, you'd come to Golden Oaks at three weeks' gestation, which means prepayment of around ten months of rent," states Ms. Yu. "Many of our Hosts take an advance out of their paychecks to cover rent and child- or elder-care in their absence . . ."

"I have savings," Jane announces, trying not to sound boastful.

"And your husband, how does he feel about all this?"

Jane feels Ms. Yu's gaze on her, and her cheeks grow hot. "Billy? He is . . . we are no longer together . . ."

"I apologize for how personal these questions are. I'm simply trying to pinpoint any sources of stress with which we can help you."

"He is not a source of stress. He is not a source of anything."

"Boyfriend?"

"No!" Jane blurts, flustered. "I have no time for . . . I have Amalia . . ."

"And how do you feel about leaving Amalia during your stay here?" Ms. Yu's eyes bore into Jane's. "You wouldn't see her for a long time unless the Client allowed it, which I can't guarantee."

There is a pain in Jane's chest, so sharp it is as if she is being cut, but she forces herself to meet Ms. Yu's gaze. She is doing this for Amalia, Ate has reminded her time and again, and this is what Jane tells herself now.

She answers: "My cousin is a baby nurse."

Ms. Yu jots something on her device. "She's in good hands, then. You're lucky. Some of our Hosts have left children in their home countries and never get to see them."

Ms. Yu stands and holds open her office door. "Now for the fun part. The tour!"

"Tour," Jane repeats, thinking worriedly about her shoes.

"Yes! This will be your home for almost a year. You should know what you're getting in to. As we say: the best Host is a happy Host," says Ms. Yu. "Shall we?"

They turn down a different hallway which connects the old building to a new one, half-hidden by tall shrubs, Ms. Yu moving soundlessly on flat shoes, Jane's heels clattering on the tiles. "We call this the Dorm. It's where you'll spend most of your time," explains Ms. Yu. She holds a badge up to a square card reader to get through another set of doors. They pass through an airy room with skylights cut into high, blond-wood ceilings where a receptionist greets Ms. Yu and turn on to a carpeted hallway lined with doors. On each door hangs a wooden sign. They pass Beech, Maple, and enter Pines.

It is a large bedroom with two sleek four-post beds covered in thick white comforters, a big square window with views of the hills, framed pictures of pine trees dusted with snow arranged on the walls and a large attached bathroom. "I hope you don't mind sharing a room," says Ms. Yu.

"It's beautiful," Jane breathes. In the dorm in Queens, a dozen people would sleep in a room this big.

Ms. Yu shows Jane the lab, where blood is taken and tested, examination rooms, for the weekly ultrasounds and checkups, the classroom where Hosts learn about best-practices in pregnancy, and the library, where one very pregnant Host reclines on a leather chair, her swollen feet resting on top of an ottoman. Jane stares at her, knowing she is being rude but unable to avert her eyes. The Host glances up at Jane, and Jane, heart banging, turns away.

"The exercise room," says Ms. Yu once they have reached the bottom of a shallow set of stairs. She holds open the door for Jane. "Daily exercise is mandatory for the health of our Hosts and the babies they carry. You'll be extraordinarily fit when you return to Amalia!"

The room is mirrored on three sides, with exercise machines angled toward a fourth wall of windows. Rainbow-colored yoga mats are bunched in a large basket next to a shelf of free weights. A long glass table near the door holds stacks of folded towels, a porcelain bowl piled high with fruit and a pitcher of water filled with slivers of

lemon and cucumber. Two Hosts walk briskly on treadmills and curl small red weights.

"Maria, Tanika, this is Jane."

The Hosts greet her and resume watching the flat-screen televisions mounted on the wall. Jane peeks at them as Ms. Yu describes the daily exercise regime. Ms. Yu then leads Jane to the dining hall, a cheerful room filled with white tables of varying shapes and matching chairs piled with woven pillows in bright colors. In the center of the room, a gigantic chandelier of curving, rainbow-colored glass hangs from the ceiling. Through a wall of windows at the back of the room, Jane notices a group of furry creatures grazing on the grass.

"What are they?" Jane asks, rummaging through her backpack for her phone. "Amalia will like them."

"Alpaca," answers Ms. Yu cheerily, placing her hand on Jane's arm. "Sorry, no pictures. In fact, we disable cellphone signals and Wi-Fi, so you couldn't send the photo anyway."

Jane watches the animals for a moment, feeling inexplicably hopeful.

"Do you know anyone with cancer?" asks Mae abruptly, leading Jane back toward the entrance of the room.

"I do," says Jane, thinking of Vera. She rents a bed on the second floor of the dorm in Queens. Her daughter Princesa, only thirty-two, discovered a lump the size of a grape in her left breast that within four months had ballooned to the size of a child's fist. Vera secured Princesa a tourist visa through a brother in the American consulate in Manila, and now Princesa sleeps in the bunk below her mother's. She Skypes nightly to her boyfriend back home, complaining about the long waits at Elmhurst Hospital, where she is treated for free, her Tagalog riddled with the American names of cancer medicines and television shows.

Ms. Yu gestures toward a Host with glossy black skin who is sitting alone at a table and drinking a green shake through a straw. "That Host there. She's carrying the baby of the CEO of a biotech company that discovered a way to detect cancer cells using nanoparticles." Ms. Yu looks at Jane. "These are the types of people you will be helping at Golden Oaks. People who are changing the world."

Jane is awed but does not know exactly what nanoparticles are and worries Ms. Yu will ask her. She imagines an injection of glowing specks piercing Princesa's arm, the radiance rushing through her arteries like cars on a dark highway, her veins luminescent against her skin.

"And the Host you'll meet at lunch is carrying the baby of one of the biggest philanthropists in Texas." Ms. Yu leads Jane up a short flight of stairs to a private dining room.

"A Host?" asks Jane, suddenly nervous. Is this another test? To see if she can get along with the other women?

"Yes! As I said earlier—we want you to understand fully what you're committing to. Because once you're impregnated—once there's another *human* living inside you—it's no longer just about *you*. There's no going back." Ms. Yu signals for Jane to sit.

Three green salads sprinkled with pomegranate seeds and toasted walnuts are laid out on the table. Ms. Yu spreads a napkin over her lap. "We have our own chef and dietician—so the food's not only delicious, but really healthy. It's one of the perks of working here."

The door swings open. "I am late. I am sorry," a young woman apologizes. She is short and brown. Her dark hair is tied back in a ponytail, and she wears a T-shirt that hugs her stomach so tightly the wormlike outline of her protruding belly button is visible.

"Jane, this is Alma. Alma, Jane. Alma is twenty-four weeks pregnant . . ."

"Twenty-five, Ms. Yu," says Alma, grinning at Jane and taking the seat next to her.

"Twenty-five weeks pregnant for one of our best clients. They signed up for a three-and-three—three children in three years. Alma carried the first and is now carrying the third."

Jane does not like spinach but forces herself to eat it, chewing the gritty leaves for what seems like forever. No one speaks. The silence is a rebuke, a sign that Jane is failing. She blurts: "The alpaca are nice—"

"How are you feeling these days, Alma?" asks Ms. Yu at the same time. "Sorry to interrupt, Jane. You were saying something?"

Jane shakes her head, reddening.

"Good, Ms. Yu. I feel good. The baby, he is kicking," Alma answers.

"We're really proud that we not only have repeat Clients but repeat Hosts. It says something about the quality of this job that Alma chose to carry another child with us," Ms. Yu says. "Alma, do you want to tell Jane about a typical day at Golden Oaks?"

Jane relaxes as Alma describes her routine—meals, meditation, exercise, doctor visits, pregnancy classes, concluding, "It is good here. It is beautiful. The doctors is good. The people is nice."

"And tell Jane, Alma, what you do with the money you make here."

"With the money, I send it to my father in Mexico. He is a little sick. His heart is no good. And some I keep here with my husband and my son. Carlos."

"Can you tell Jane about Carlos?" Ms. Yu prods gently.

"Carlos, he is eight and he has . . . *cómo se dice* . . . *dislexia*?"

"It's the same. Dyslexia."

"*Dislexia, sí*. Now, with the money, we have a teacher especially to help Carlos," concludes Alma. She takes a forkful of salad. "Carlos, he is doing good!"

Ms. Yu addresses Jane. "Of course we make the salary more attractive than the alternatives—nannying, eldercare, even baby-nursing jobs. Our Clients *want* their Hosts to be treated well. But I don't know that money alone is sufficient motivation for this job. You need to have the temperament. And the calling."

"I do," says Jane, thinking of Amalia and all the things she would be able to do for her and protect her from, if only she could get this job. "I do have the calling."

"RIGHT WRIST, PLEASE. SLEEVES UP," SAYS THE COORDINATOR.

It is Jane's first day. Her interview at Golden Oaks was only six weeks ago, but in that time everything has changed. An unknown baby lies in her stomach, and she is a hundred miles away from Amalia, surrounded by strangers. The smiling woman who greeted

her in the Dorm's lobby this morning took not only her suitcase and wallet but her cellphone, so Jane has no sense of the time, whether she has been at Golden Oaks one hour or seven.

Jane rolls up her sleeve and extends her arm, wondering if she is getting another shot, and why, since she is already pregnant.

The Coordinator straps a bracelet onto Jane's wrist, rubber or rubbery looking, and pushes a button that makes its thin, rectangular screen light up. "This is a WellBand. Custom-made for us. I gave you red 'cause it was just Valentine's Day!"

Jane stares at it. Mrs. Carter used to wear something similar, a circle of blue plastic like a child's toy that looked strange next to her diamond tennis bracelet, the gleaming ovals of her nails.

"It tracks your activity levels. Try jumping."

Jane begins to jump.

"See?" The Coordinator angles the bracelet face toward Jane. The green zeroes that had once filled the screen have been replaced by orange numbers that climb steadily as Jane hops, growing short of breath.

"You can stop," says the Coordinator, but in a friendly way. She holds Jane's wrist and guides the bracelet over a reader attached to a laptop until the reader bleeps. "There. Now you're synched up with our Data Management Team. Let's say your heart rate spikes—this happens, it's usually no biggie, but it can also signal some underlying irregularity in your heart, pregnancy being a strain on your ticktocker." The Coordinator—Carla?—pauses, waiting for the severity of this possibility to set in. "We'll know immediately, can whisk you in to see a nurse. Or if you're not getting enough exercise, we'll have Hanna all over it." Carla grins. "All over *you*." Her freckled cheeks fold into dimples. Jane has never seen so many freckles in her life—freckles on top of freckles receding into freckles.

"Hanna . . . ?"

"She's our Wellness Coordinator. You'll get to know her *real well*." Carla winks at Jane. She runs through a tutorial of the WellBand—its various monitors, timers, the alarm and snooze and panic buttons, the GPS locator, calendar, alerts, how to receive announcements.

"How do you like the clothes?" Carla's eyes rake over Jane, head to toe and back up again. Jane feels her face grow hot. In truth, she

has never worn clothes so thin and so soft. Just this morning in her winter coat, she was freezing. Ate and Amalia waited with her on the street outside their apartment building for the car to arrive, Amalia buried under so many layers of wool and fleece that Jane could barely see her face. But here, in clothes light as air, Jane is warm. Jane says so to Carla.

"Cashmere," Carla answers matter-of-factly. "Golden Oaks doesn't skimp, that's for sure."

There is a knock on the open door. "Hi, Jane," sings Ms. Yu, giving Jane a stiff hug.

"Hello, Ms. Yu." Jane jumps to her feet.

"Please. Sit. I just wanted to make sure you're settling in." Ms. Yu takes a seat on the bench next to Jane. "How's the morning sickness? Is your room okay? Did you meet Reagan?"

"I feel okay, only a little tired," Jane answers. "The room is beautiful. So are the clothes." Jane rubs the cashmere on her thigh with her palm. "I have not yet met my roommate."

Ms. Yu frowns slightly.

"But," Jane says quickly, not meaning to get her roommate into trouble, "I had the check-in with the nurse and the orientation. I have been busy."

Ms. Yu's face relaxes. She places a hand on Jane's hand. "I'm guessing Reagan was tied up with an appointment. She'll be around soon, I'd think. This is your new home; we want to help you *feel* at home."

At the word "home," Jane's throat tightens. She wonders what Amalia is doing, whether she notices her mother is gone.

As if sensing Jane's thoughts, Ms. Yu asks, "How's Amalia? Was the goodbye hard?"

Jane is pierced by gratitude that Ms. Yu, who is so busy, remembers Amalia's name. She shifts her gaze to the wall so that Ms. Yu cannot see her eyes, which are teary. "It was fine. Amalia is almost seven months now; she is a big girl. And she has my cousin."

"She's in good hands, then." Ms. Yu's voice is kind.

Jane still does not trust herself to face Ms. Yu. She can hear Carla's fingers tapping on a keyboard.

"I know you know our policy, Jane, which is that we don't allow

visitors, and we don't allow Hosts off-site unless at the request of a Client." Ms. Yu leans closer to whisper, "But I think we can convince your Client to let Amalia come see you."

"Really?" Jane blurts.

Ms. Yu puts a finger to her lips and smiles. She asks Jane if she is ready for lunch and, when Jane confesses she was too nervous this morning to eat, leads her to the dining hall. Jane trails several steps behind, wiggling her toes in her new fur-lined moccasins, a tentative sense of well-being creeping over her. Ms. Yu keeps up a constant stream of chatter, pointing out her favorite views of the mountains, giving Jane bits of trivia about the surrounding towns. As they walk, Jane imagines Amalia here—hiding beneath the soft blankets draped on the sofas, mesmerized by the fires crackling in the stone fireplaces.

"Do you think you'll feel at home here?" Ms. Yu asks. She pushes the dining room door open with her shoulder.

"Oh yes," says Jane, and she means it.

There is a short line of Hosts next to the serving table. Ms. Yu introduces Jane to two white women—Tasia, tall and skinny with bad posture, and a shorter, full-figured one named Anya—before dashing away to prepare for a meeting. In her absence, Jane feels nervous all over again. The line moves quickly, but when it is Jane's turn to choose her lunch she cannot decide between the sirloin and the salmon, nor between water and a pomegranate drink, and she has to wait several minutes for the multivitamins to be refilled from the dispenser. By the time she is ready, Tasia is already eating with Anya at a table across the room. Jane grips her tray and walks toward them, the rubber soles of her moccasins seeming to stick to the floor. The room is packed. There is a table of black Hosts to her left and a table of four brown-skinned women on her right. Near the fire exit she notices a group of women who look Filipina.

"Jane. Come eat," Tasia calls, motioning.

"Do you know which baby you carry?" Anya asks even before Jane is seated. Her words are accented. She has the same deep-set blue eyes as Tasia, but her face is leaner, perhaps because she is not as pregnant.

Anya stuffs a large forkful of salmon into her mouth, and the sight of the fish, pink and wet, nauseates Jane.

"You feeling sick?" Tasia asks.

"I'm fine. Just—" Jane tastes bile in her mouth and grips her stomach, praying she does not get sick in front of all these people.

"Ah, I have it bad, too," Anya complains, her mouth still full of fish. "Every day, throwing up, and never in the morning. But all the rest of the day!"

Tasia whips a paper bag out of a polished-steel dispenser at the end of the table and hands it to Jane. "Throw-up bag." She adds reassuringly, "Do not worry, Jane. The first trimester is the hard one."

Jane pushes her tray away and presses her head to the table's cool surface. She had morning sickness with Amalia, too, but it was different then, less frightening. Maybe because the baby she is now carrying is a stranger's, the child of someone who invents cures for cancer, or someone who gives more money away than Jane will ever see in her lifetime.

Anya and Tasia are silent except for the sound of their knives scraping against plates. The surrounding conversations mingle into a wordless buzz.

"Lisa, she is getting fat." Anya's voice cuts through the room's chatter. She and Tasia are staring several tables away at two American girls. One of them, the more pregnant one, is arrestingly pretty, like the actresses on magazine covers.

"It is because she skips the exercise class," says Tasia in a cold voice. "She has not come in two weeks. Ms. Hanna does not report her because Lisa is her favorite."

"You should inform Ms. Yu, I tell you," insists Anya, shaking her head. She turns to Jane. "So then, you have not met your Clients?"

"No," Jane answers, still hunched over the table. She sees Tasia shoot Anya a look. "Is that bad?"

"No, no. Sometimes the Client is busy, that is all. Or sometimes they wish to wait until second trimester, when there is little danger of miscarriage."

At the mention of miscarriage, Jane's stomach drops. She tries to stay positive, because the Golden Oaks materials she studied say it is

better for the baby. But she cannot help worrying. The prepayment for Amalia's daycare is nonrefundable. She is not sure about the rent on her apartment.

"What happens if you have a miscarriage?" she asks. "I know you leave Golden Oaks . . . But what exactly happens with the money?"

"You did not read the papers? Only sign?" Anya scoffs.

In the month and a half since Jane was hired by Golden Oaks, she has been busy moving into a new apartment, and finding the right daycare for Amalia, and getting pregnant. Ate offered to read the documents Golden Oaks sent in a big FedEx box marked CONFIDENTIAL, and Jane gratefully agreed. She simply signed where Ate told her to sign.

"You get paid a little every month," Tasia explains. "But the bonus, the big money Ms. Yu promised you? That is only at the end. You understand?"

Jane remembers that Ate mentioned this. They were seated at the counter in Jane's new kitchen. The room smelled like fresh paint, and they had the windows cracked open even though it was cold outside. Ate told Jane about Golden Oaks' rules on cellphones and email, the privacy agreements, the payment schedules, and direct deposits to her bank. Jane was so overwhelmed by the flood of information that she did not even begin to consider the questions now jostling for space in her head:

What if a miscarriage is not her fault?

Does she get another chance with another baby?

What if the baby is born but dies soon after? Does she keep her money?

Jane opens her mouth, but the words lodge in her throat.

"Here is Reagan coming," Anya mutters.

One of the American girls, the thinner one, is walking toward them. She has large eyes, gray like a rainy day, and long hair pulled in a loose braid.

"Hi, Jane, I'm Reagan. Your roommate. I completely forgot you were coming today. Pregnancy brain!"

Tasia stands abruptly. "You take my chair. I am finished. And I must see Ms. Yu." Anya also excuses herself. The two wish Jane luck and carry away their empty trays, Tasia towering over her friend by half a foot. Several yards away they burst into shrill laughter.

"How're you holding up?" Reagan asks, settling into Tasia's chair and tucking up her legs.

Jane is overcome. She has been imagining her roommate since receiving the roommate-introduction note in the mail three days ago. She has read it so many times she knows it by heart:

Your roommate, Reagan, graduated cum laude from Duke University, double-majoring in Comparative Literature and Art History. She grew up in Highland Park, Illinois, and lives in New York City. She is a first-time Host.

Even before Jane searched *Highland Park* and *Duke University* and *Comparative Literature* on the Internet, she knew she and her roommate had nothing in common. Looking at her now, Jane is certain she was right.

"I am fine," Jane mumbles after an awkward pause, wondering for the hundredth time what her own three-sentence description said, what thoughts ran through her roommate's mind when she read it.

She picks at a glob of hardened mustard on the table's surface with her fingernail. Ate counseled Jane to be polite with the other Hosts but to keep a distance, because no one at Golden Oaks is her friend. They are her colleagues, and carrying the baby is a job. Jane is trying to think of a question to ask her new roommate when she notices, out of the corner of her eye, the slender gold chain encircling Reagan's wrist.

Jane is stricken. What does she have to say that would interest Reagan, who has gone to college and did a double-major and can wear a bracelet like this with such ease?

"It can be weird at first," Reagan says, seemingly unperturbed that Jane is mute. She begins to give Jane tips about Golden Oaks "from my whopping two weeks of experience!" How it is best to visit the media room during dinnertime, when it is not so crowded; how she should take the long way to the fitness rooms to avoid Ms. Hanna's office, otherwise she might waylay you and grill you about your diet; how there is a snack table set out in between meals and in the evenings—fruit and energy bars, vegetable slices with healthy dips, herbal teas and nuts and smoothies—and as long as Jane stays within her weight range, she is allowed to snack to her heart's de-

light, so it's no problem if Jane does not have an appetite at mealtimes.

Jane listens wordlessly, panicking because she still cannot think of anything to say.

"Lisa! Over here!" Reagan beckons to the pretty American with dark hair and green eyes. Her friend is speaking heatedly to one of the cooks, then grabs something from a platter near the serving window and stalks toward them, muttering angrily.

"Despite what Betsy claims, a bran muffin is *not* banana bread." She glares at Jane as if waiting for a response.

"No?" Jane agrees uncertainly.

Reagan laughs. "Jane, meet Lisa. Feel free to ignore her."

"And the thing that's bullshit is," Lisa continues, still addressing Jane, "we're all *pregnant* and we get *cravings* and it seems that they should get snacks that satisfy our *cravings* which are really the *baby's* cravings. And isn't everything about kowtowing to these babies?"

Jane glances around the room nervously. The nearest Coordinator stands by the fire exit, typing on her device.

"Mind over matter," Reagan intercedes. "Your cravings are just your hormones, not you."

"I *am* my hormones," Lisa snipes, sitting heavily on a chair and taking a reluctant bite of the bran muffin. She complains under her breath that she detests raisins.

"Jane's my new roommate. And today's her first day."

"Welcome to the Farm," Lisa says dully.

The smile Jane is trying to muster dies before reaching her lips.

"Dammit, every cell in my body *needs* banana bread!" Lisa slams the bran muffin onto the table.

"I . . . I can make banana bread?" Jane offers timidly, looking at Lisa's scowling face with a mixture of nervousness and fascination.

Lisa bursts into laughter. "God, they would never let you near a *stove*. You might . . . singe the fetus!" But her voice has softened. "So. Do you know which baby you're carrying?"

Jane shakes her head, no, and Lisa declares, in a loud whisper directed at Reagan, "Neither. Does. Reagan."

Reagan sighs. "It doesn't matter!"

"Of course it matters!" snaps Lisa.

"Why does everybody ask this?" ventures Jane. "Anya, the one who is Russian?"

"Polish," interjects Lisa. "Don't call her Russian. She'll knife you."

Jane is not sure whether to smile. "Anya asked me this, also. Several times."

"She did, did she?" Lisa perks up. "So Anya is fishing for info. *In-ter-est-ing* . . ."

"Lisa's been carrying babies for Golden Oaks since the very beginning," Reagan interrupts, clearly wanting to change the subject. "She's on her third."

"And that's only because of the money." A grin flashes across Lisa's face. "I'm over the romance of being pregnant, unlike my friend Reagan here—"

Reagan rolls her eyes.

"—who still thinks there's something profoundly *meaningful* about it."

Jane is not used to people speaking like this—the words they use, how fast they fly, like Jane is being bombarded.

"It *is* an incredible thing to give someone life," Reagan says.

"Yeah, but that's not what all of us are doing here," Lisa retorts. "It turns out *my* Client could've carried her babies herself if she wanted to."

"But a lot of Clients can't," Reagan says to Jane. "A lot of them are barren because they're old. Or incapable somehow of—"

"What they *all* want is an edge for their babies." Lisa is looking at Jane, though Jane senses she is talking to Reagan. "I wouldn't be surprised if the Farm's started shooting up our fetuses with brain boosters. Or immunity enhancers or—"

"Those don't even exist!" Reagan snaps.

"But when they do, are you telling me they wouldn't—"

"Stop it."

"You don't think our Clients would pay anything to make sure their *uber*-babies are—"

Jane's stomach is roiling. She folds over herself again in hopes of quelling the nausea.

"Jane, sit up."

Bewildered, Jane obeys.

"First," Lisa says, "don't lie on the table unless you want a Coordinator up your ass. Second, and more important, you've got to understand what this place is. Okay? It's a factory, and *you're* the commodity. You've got to get the *Clients* on your side—not the Coordinators, and not Ms. Mae. I'm talking the parents and, especially, the mother."

"Lisa . . ." Reagan says in a warning tone.

"I . . ." Jane swallows. What if her Clients do not like her? What if they compare her to a Host like Reagan?

"I have not met—" Jane's eyes fill with tears.

"Well, not everyone does," Lisa says briskly. "Some Clients don't give a shit about their Host. But most do, because they're obsessed with everything related to their babies. It's the new narcissism. That's the Farm's gig: feeding it; *fanning* it."

Jane remains silent, her heart banging, wondering if she has made a mistake. If the job is more complicated than Ate said it would be.

"Whenever you *do* meet your Clients, your goal—your only goal—is to get them to *love you*. You want the mother to feel *good* and, even, *virtuous* about having you carry her baby. You want her to want to have another baby with you and *only* you. And when the parents decide to have Baby Two, and they insist that *you* carry it—well, then. You'll have *leverage*." Lisa pauses. "Do you know what 'leverage' means?"

Jane, embarrassed, shakes her head.

"It means Ms. Mae has to bend. Bend to your will, if you will. Because the Farm's got revenue targets, and the customer's always right—and if your Client only wants you? Well, that's leverage." Lisa's eyes sparkle. "*My* Clients adore me. And that means I can demand things with this third bambino—like, more money. And my own room. And visits from my man. And, even"—and now Lisa unleashes her voice—"BA-NA-NA BREAD!"

Jane ducks. A Coordinator yells at Lisa to pipe down.

"For fuck's sake!" Reagan hisses, shooting Lisa a dirty look. She turns to Jane, a tight smile on her face. "Don't listen to her. She's not usually this nuts. She's just hormonal."

"I *am* my hormones, I told you," Lisa grumbles.

"Take it one day at a time. Just focus on keeping yourself well for the baby. That's what's most important: your baby."

Jane is engulfed by the desire, so sharp it cuts, to be home. Away from these strangers and their too-fast, too-smart talking. She longs to be in bed with Amalia watching television. She wants to palm her baby's fat belly until Amalia falls asleep, her arms flung up over her head as is her habit, so open and trusting, like the world could never do her harm.

RICHARD ROPER

How Not to Die Alone

It's never too late to start living.

A NOVEL

PUTNAM

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– CHAPTER 1 –

Andrew looked at the coffin and tried to remember who was inside it. It was a man—he was sure of that. But, horrifyingly, the name escaped him. He thought he'd narrowed it down to either John or James, but Jake had just made a late bid for consideration. It was inevitable, he supposed, that this had happened. He'd been to so many of these funerals it was bound to at some point, but that didn't stop him from feeling an angry stab of self-loathing.

If he could just remember the name before the vicar said it, that would be something. There was no order of service, but maybe he could check his work phone. Would that be cheating? Probably. Besides, it would have been a tricky enough maneuver to get away with in a church full of mourners, but it was nearly impossible when the only other person there apart from him was the vicar. Ordinarily, the funeral director would have been there as well, but he had e-mailed earlier to say he was too ill to make it.

Unnervingly, the vicar, who was only a few feet away from Andrew, had barely broken eye contact since he'd started the service.

Andrew hadn't dealt with him before. He was boyish and spoke with a nervous tremor that was amplified unforgivingly by the echoey church. Andrew couldn't tell if this was down to nerves. He tried out a reassuring smile, but it didn't seem to help. Would a thumbs-up be inappropriate? He decided against it.

He looked over at the coffin again. Maybe he *was* a Jake, though the man had been seventy-eight when he died, and you didn't really get many septuagenarian Jakes. At least not yet. It was going to be strange in fifty years' time when all the nursing homes would be full of Jakes and Waynes, Tinkerbells and Appletisers, with faded tribal tattoos that roughly translated as *"Roadworks for next fifty yards"* faded on their lower backs.

Jesus, concentrate, he admonished himself. The whole point of his being there was to bear respectful witness to the poor soul departing on their final journey, to provide some company in lieu of any family or friends. Dignity—that was his watchword.

Unfortunately, dignity was something that had been in short supply for the John or James or Jake. According to the coroner's report, he had died on the toilet while reading a book about buzzards. To add insult to injury, Andrew later discovered firsthand that it wasn't even a very *good* book about buzzards. Admittedly he was no expert, but he wasn't sure the author—who even from the few passages Andrew had read came across as remarkably grumpy—should have dedicated a whole page to badmouthing kestrels. The deceased had folded the corner of this particular page down as a crude placeholder, so perhaps he'd been in agreement. As Andrew had peeled off his latex gloves he'd made a mental note to insult a kestrel—or indeed any member of the falcon family—the next time he saw one, as a tribute of sorts.

Other than a few more bird books, the house was devoid of anything that gave clues to the man's personality. There were no records

or films to be found, nor pictures on the walls or photographs on the windowsills. The only idiosyncrasy was the bafflingly large number of Fruit 'n Fibre boxes in the kitchen cupboards. So aside from the fact that he was a keen ornithologist with a top-notch digestive system, it was impossible to guess what sort of person John or James or Jake had been.

Andrew had been as diligent as ever with the property inspection. He'd searched the house (a curious mock-Tudor bungalow that sat defiantly as an incongruous interlude on the terraced street) until he was sure he'd not missed something that suggested the man had any family he was still in touch with. He'd knocked on the neighbors' doors but they'd been either indifferent to or unaware of the man's existence, or the fact it was over.

The vicar segued unsurely into a bit of Jesus-y material, and Andrew knew from experience that the service was coming to a close. He *had* to remember this person's name, as a point of principle. He really tried his best, even when there was no one else there, to be a model mourner—to be as respectful as if there were hundreds of devastated family members in attendance. He'd even started removing his watch before entering the church because it felt like the deceased's final journey should be exempt from the indifference of a ticking second hand.

The vicar was definitely on the home stretch now. Andrew was just going to have to make a decision.

John, he decided. He was definitely John.

"And while we believe that John—"

Yes!

"—struggled to some extent in his final years, and sadly departed the world without family or friends by his side, we can take comfort that, with God waiting with open arms, full of love and kindness, this journey shall be the last he makes alone."

Andrew tended not to stick around after the funerals. On the few occasions he had, he'd ended up having to make awkward conversation with funeral directors or last-minute rubberneckers. It was remarkable how many of the latter you would get, hanging around outside, farting out inane platitudes. Andrew was well practiced at slipping away so as to avoid such encounters, but today he'd briefly been distracted by a sign on the church noticeboard advertising the troublingly jaunty "Midsummer Madness Fete!" when he felt someone tapping him on the shoulder with the insistence of an impatient woodpecker. It was the vicar. He looked even younger close up, with his baby-blue eyes and blond curtains parted neatly in the middle, as if his mum might have done it for him.

"Hey, it's Andrew, isn't it? You're from the council, right?"

"That's right," Andrew said.

"No luck finding any family then?"

Andrew shook his head.

"Shame, that. Real shame."

The vicar seemed agitated, as if he were holding on to a secret that he desperately wanted to impart.

"Can I ask you something?" he said.

"Yes," Andrew said, quickly deciding on an excuse for why he couldn't attend "Midsummer Madness!"

"How did you find that?" the vicar said.

"Do you mean . . . the funeral?" Andrew said, pulling at a bit of loose thread on his coat.

"Yeah. Well, more specifically my part in it all. Because, full disclosure, it was my first. I was quite relieved to be starting with this one, to be honest, because there wasn't anybody here so it sort of felt like a bit of a practice run. Hopefully now I'm fully prepared for when there's a proper one with a church full of friends and family, not just a

guy from the council. No offense," he added, putting a hand on Andrew's arm. Andrew did his best not to recoil. He hated it when people did that. He wished he had some sort of squidlike defense that meant he could shoot ink into their eyes.

"So yeah," the vicar said. "How'd you think I did?"

What do you want me to say? Andrew thought. *Well, you didn't knock the coffin over or accidentally call the deceased "Mr. Hitler," so ten out of ten I'd say.*

"You did very well," he said.

"Ah, great, thanks, mate," the vicar said, looking at him with renewed intensity. "I really appreciate that."

He held out his hand. Andrew shook it and went to let go, but the vicar carried on.

"Anyway, I better be off," Andrew said.

"Yes, yes of course," said the vicar, finally letting go.

Andrew started off down the path, breathing a sigh of relief at escaping without further interrogation.

"See you soon I hope," the vicar called after him.

– CHAPTER 2 –

The funerals had been given various prefixes over the years—"public health," "contract," "welfare," "Section 46"—but none of the attempted rebrands would ever replace the original. When Andrew had come across the expression "pauper's funeral" he'd found it quite evocative; romantic, even, in a Dickensian sort of way. It made him think of someone a hundred and fifty years ago in a remote village—all mud and clucking chickens—succumbing to a spectacular case of syphilis, dying at the fine old age of twenty-seven and being bundled merrily into a pit to regenerate the land. In practice, what he experienced was depressingly clinical. The funerals were now a legal obligation for councils across the UK, designed for those who'd slipped through the cracks—their death perhaps only noticed because of the smell of their body decomposing, or an unpaid bill. (It had been on several occasions now where Andrew had found that the deceased had enough money in a bank account for direct debits to cover utility bills for months after their death, meaning the house was kept warm enough to speed up their body's decomposition. After the fifth harrowing

instance of this, he'd considered mentioning it in the "Any other comments" section on his annual job satisfaction survey. In the end he went with asking if they could have another kettle in the shared kitchen.)

Another phrase he had become well acquainted with was "The Nine O'Clock Trot." His boss, Cameron, had explained its origin to him while violently piercing the film on a microwavable biryani. "If you die alone"—stab, stab, stab—"you're most likely buried alone too"—stab, stab, stab—"so the church can get the funeral out of the way at nine o'clock, safe in the knowledge that every train could be canceled"—stab—"every motorway gridlocked"—stab—"and it wouldn't make a difference." A final stab. "Because nobody's on their way."

In the previous year Andrew had arranged twenty-five of these funerals (his highest annual total yet). He'd attended all of them, too, though he wasn't technically required to do so. It was, he told himself, a small but meaningful gesture for someone to be there who wasn't legally obligated. But increasingly he found himself watching the simple, unvarnished coffins being lowered into the ground in a specially designated yet unmarked plot, knowing they would be uncovered three or four more times as other coffins were fitted in like a macabre game of Tetris, and think that his presence counted for nothing.

As Andrew sat on the bus to the office, he inspected his tie and shoes, both of which had seen better days. There was a persistent stain on his tie, origin unknown, that wouldn't budge. His shoes were well polished but starting to look worn. Too many nicks from churchyard gravel, too many times the leather had strained where he'd curled his toes at a vicar's verbal stumble. He really should replace both, come payday.

Now that the funeral was over, he took a moment to mentally file

away John (surname Sturrock, he discovered, having turned on his phone). As ever, he tried to resist the temptation to obsess over how John had ended up in such a desperate position. Was there really no niece or godson he was on Christmas-card terms with? Or an old school friend who called, even just on his birthday? But it was a slippery slope. He had to stay as objective as possible, for his own sake, if only to be mentally strong enough to deal with the next poor person who ended up like this. The bus stopped at a red light. By the time it went green Andrew had made himself say a final good-bye.

He arrived at the office and returned Cameron's enthusiastic wave with a more muted acknowledgment of his own. As he slumped into his well-weathered seat, which had molded itself to his form over the years, he let out a now sadly familiar grunt. He'd thought having only just turned forty-two he'd have a few more years before he began accompanying minor physical tasks by making odd noises, but it seemed to be the universe's gentle way of telling him that he was now officially heading toward middle age. He only imagined before too long he'd wake up and immediately begin his day bemoaning how easy school exams were these days and bulk-buying cream chinos.

He waited for his computer to boot up and watched out of the corner of his eye as his colleague Keith demolished a hunk of chocolate cake and methodically sucked smears of icing from his stubby little fingers.

"Good one, was it?" Keith said, not taking his eyes off his screen, which Andrew knew was most likely showing a gallery of actresses who'd had the temerity to age, or something small and furry on a skateboard.

"It was okay," Andrew said.

"Any rubberneckers?" came a voice from behind him.

Andrew flinched. He hadn't seen Meredith take her seat.

"No," he said, not bothering to turn around. "Just me and the vicar. It was his very first funeral, apparently."

"Bloody hell, what a way to pop your cherry," Meredith said.

"Better that than a room full of weepers, to be fair," Keith said, with one final suck of his little finger. "You'd be shitting piss, wouldn't you?"

The office phone rang and the three of them sat there not answering it. Andrew was about to bite but Keith's frustration got the better of him first.

"Hello, Death Administration. Yep. Sure. Yep. Right."

Andrew reached for his earphones and pulled up his Ella Fitzgerald playlist (he had only very recently discovered Spotify, much to Keith's delight, who'd spent a month afterward calling Andrew "Granddad"). He felt like starting with a classic—something reassuring. He decided on "Summertime." But he was only three bars in before he looked up to see Keith standing in front of him, belly flab poking through a gap between shirt buttons.

"Helloooo. Anybody there?"

Andrew removed his earphones.

"That was the coroner. We've got a fresh one. Well, not a fresh body obviously—they reckon he'd been dead a good few weeks. No obvious next of kin and the neighbors never spoke to him. Body's been moved so they want a property inspection a-sap."

"Right."

Keith picked at a scab on his elbow. "Tomorrow all right for you?"

Andrew checked his diary.

"I can do first thing."

"Blimey, you're keen," Keith said, waddling back to his desk. *And you're a slice of ham that's been left out in the sun*, Andrew thought. He went to put his earphones back in, but at that moment Cameron emerged from his office and clapped his hands together to get their attention.

"Team meeting, chaps," he announced. "And yes, yes, don't you worry—the current Mrs. Cameron has provided cake, as per. Shall we hit the break-out space?"

The three of them responded with the enthusiasm a chicken

might if it were asked to wear a prosciutto bikini and run into a fox's den. The "break-out space" consisted of a knee-high table flanked by two sofas that smelled unaccountably of sulfur. Cameron had floated the idea of adding beanbags, but this had been ignored, as were his suggestions of desk-swap Tuesdays, a negativity jar ("It's a swear jar but for negativity!") and a team park run. ("I'm busy," Keith had yawned. "But I haven't told you which day it's on," Cameron said, his smile faltering like a flame in a draft.) Undeterred by their complete lack of enthusiasm, Cameron's most recent suggestion had been a suggestion box. This, too, had been ignored.

They gathered on the sofas and Cameron doled out cake and tea and tried to engage them with some banal small talk. Keith and Meredith had wedged themselves into the smaller of the two sofas. Meredith was laughing at something Keith had just whispered to her. Just as parents are able to recognize variants in the cries of their newborns, so Andrew had begun to understand what Meredith's differing laughs denoted. In this particular instance, the high-pitched giggle indicated that someone was being cruelly mocked. Given that they kept very obviously sneaking glances in his direction, it seemed it was probably him.

"Rightio, lady and gents," Cameron said. "First things first, don't forget we've got a new starter tomorrow. Peggy Green. I know we've struggled since Dan and Bethany left, so it's super-cool to have a new pair of hands."

"As long as she doesn't get 'stressed' like Bethany," Meredith said.

"Or turn out to be a knob like Dan," Keith muttered.

"*Anyway*," Cameron said, "what I actually wanted to talk to you about today is my weekly . . . honk! Honk!"—he honked an imaginary horn— ". . . fun idea! Remember, guys, this is something you can all get involved with. Doesn't matter how crazy your idea is. The only rule is that it has to be fun."

Andrew shuddered.

"So," Cameron continued. "My fun idea this week is, drumroll please . . . that every month we have a get-together at one of our houses and we do dinner. A sort of *Come Dine with Me* vibe but without any judgment. We'll have a bit of food, I daresay a bit of vino, and it'll give us a chance to do some real bonding away from the office, get to know each other a bit better, meet the family and all that. I'm mega-happy to kick things off. Whaddya say?"

Andrew hadn't heard anything past "meet the family."

"Is there not something else we can do?" he said, trying to keep his voice steady.

"Oh," Cameron said, instantly deflated. "I thought that was actually one of my better ideas."

"No, no, it is!" Andrew said, overcompensating now. "It's just . . . couldn't we just go to a restaurant instead?"

"Toooo expensive," Keith said, spraying cake crumbs everywhere.

"Well, what about something else? I don't know—Laser Quest or something. Is that still a thing?"

"I'm vetoing Laser Quest on the grounds I'm not a twelve-year-old boy," Meredith said. "I like the dinner party idea. I'm actually a bit of a secret Nigella in the kitchen." She turned to Keith. "I bet you'd go crazy for my lamb shank." Andrew felt bile, stir in his stomach.

"Go on, Andrew," Cameron said, confidence renewed by Meredith's giving his idea her blessing. He attempted a matey arm punch that caused Andrew to spill tea down his leg. "It'll be a laugh! There's no pressure to cook up anything fancy. And I'd love to meet Diane and the kids, of course. So, whaddya say? You up for this, buddy?"

Andrew's mind was racing. Surely there was something else he could suggest as an alternative? Life drawing. Badger baiting. *Anything.* The others were just looking at him now. He had to say something.

"Bloody hell, Andrew. You look like you've seen a ghost," Meredith said. "Your cooking can't be that bad. Besides, I'm sure Diane's a fabulous chef, among all her other talents, so she can help you out."

"Hmmm," Andrew murmured, tapping his fingertips together.

"She's a lawyer, right?" Keith said. Andrew nodded. Maybe there'd be some catastrophic world event in the next few days, a lovely old nuclear war to make them all forget about this stupid idea.

"You've got that beautiful old town house Dulwich way, haven't you?" Meredith said, practically leering. "Five-bed, isn't it?"

"Four," Andrew said. He hated it when she and Keith got like this. A tag team of mockery.

"Still," Meredith said. "A lovely big four-bed, smart kids by all accounts, and Diane, your talented, breadwinning wife. What a dark old horse you are."

Later, as Andrew prepared to leave the office, having been too distracted to do any meaningful work, Cameron appeared by his desk and dropped down onto his haunches. It felt like the sort of move he'd been taught in a course.

"Listen," he said quietly. "I know you didn't seem to fancy the dinner party idea, but just say you'll have a think about it, okay, mate?"

Andrew needlessly shuffled some papers on his desk. "Oh, I mean . . . I don't want to spoil things, it's just . . . okay, I'll think about it. But if we don't do that I'm sure we can think of another, you know, fun idea."

"That's the spirit," Cameron said, straightening up and addressing them all. "That goes for all of us, I hope. Come on, team—let's get our bond on sooner rather than. Yeah?"

Andrew had recently splashed out on some noise-canceling earphones for his commute, so while he could see the man sitting opposite's ugly sneeze and the toddler in the vestibule screaming at the utter injustice of being made to wear not one but two shoes, it simply appeared as a silent film incongruously soundtracked by Ella Fitzgerald's soothing

voice. It wasn't long, however, before the conversation in the office started to repeat itself in his head, vying with Ella for his attention.

"Diane, your talented, breadwinning wife . . . smart kids . . . Beautiful old town house." Keith's smirk. Meredith's leer. The conversation dogged him all the way to the station and continued as he went to buy food for that night's dinner. That's when he found himself standing in the corner shop by multi-bags of novelty potato chips named after celebrities and trying not to scream. After ten minutes of picking up and putting down the same four ready meals, feeling incapable of choosing one, he left empty-handed, walking out into the rain and heading home, his stomach rumbling.

He stood outside his front door, shivering. Eventually, when the cold became too much to bear, he brought out his keys. There was usually one day a week like this, when he'd pause outside, key in the lock, holding his breath.

Maybe this time.

Maybe this time it *would* be the lovely old town house behind that door: Diane starting to prepare dinner. The smell of garlic and red wine. The sound of Steph and David squabbling or asking questions about their homework, then the excitable cheers when he opened the door because Dad's home, Dad's home!

When he entered the hallway the smell of damp hit him even harder than usual. And there were the familiar scuff marks on the corridor walls and the intermittent, milky yellow of the faulty strip light. He trudged up the stairs, his wet shoes squeaking with each step, and slid the second key around on his key ring. He reached up to right the wonky number 2 on the door and went inside, met, as he had been for the last twenty years, by nothing but silence.

– CHAPTER 3 –

Five Years Previously

Andrew was late. This might not have been so much of a disaster if on the CV he'd submitted ahead of that morning's job interview he hadn't claimed to be "extremely punctual." Not just punctual: *extremely* punctual. Was that even a thing? *Were* there extremities of punctuality? How might one even go about measuring such a thing?

It was his own stupid fault, too. He'd been crossing the road when a strange honking noise distracted him and he looked up. A goose was arrowing overhead, its white underside lit up orange by the morning sun, its shrill cries and erratic movement making it seem like a damaged fighter plane struggling back to base. It was just as the bird steadied itself and continued on its course that Andrew slipped on some ice. There was a brief moment where his arms windmilled and his feet gripped at nothing, like a cartoon character who'd just run off a cliff, before he hit the ground with an ugly thud.

"You okay?"

Andrew wheezed wordlessly in reply at the woman who had just helped him to his feet. He felt like someone had just taken a sledge-

hammer to his lower back. But it wasn't this that stopped him from finding the words to thank the woman. There was something about the way she was looking at him—a half smile on her face, how she brushed her hair behind her ears—that was so startlingly familiar it left him breathless. The woman's eyes seemed to be searching his face, as if she too had been hit with an intense feeling of recognition and pain. It was only after she'd said, "Well, bye then," and walked off that Andrew realized she'd actually been waiting for him to thank her. He wondered if he should hurry after her to try to make amends. But just then a familiar tune began to play in his head. *Blue moon, you saw me standing alone.* It took all his concentration to shake it away, squeezing his eyes shut and massaging his temples. By the time he looked again the woman was gone.

He dusted himself down, suddenly aware that people had seen him fall and were enjoying their dose of schadenfreude. He avoided eye contact and carried on, head down, hands thrust into his pockets. Gradually his embarrassment gave way to something else. It was in the aftermath of mishaps like this where he would feel it stir at his core and start to spread out, thick and cold, making it feel like he was walking through quicksand. There was nobody for him to share the story with. No one to help him laugh his way through it. Loneliness, however, was ever vigilant, always there to slow-clap his every stumble.

Though somewhat shaken up after his slip, he was fine apart from a small graze on his hand. (Now that he was nearing forty he was all too aware there was a small but visible spot on the horizon where such a standard slip would become "having a little fall." He secretly welcomed the idea of a sympathetic stranger laying their coat over him as they waited for an ambulance, supporting his head and squeezing his hand.) But while he hadn't suffered any damage, unfortunately the same couldn't be said for his white shirt, which was now splattered with dirty brown water. He briefly considered trying to make

something out of this and the graze to impress his interviewer. "What, this? Oh, on my way here I was briefly diverted by diving in front of a bus/bullet/tiger to save a toddler/puppy/dignitary. Anyway, did I mention I'm a self-starter and I work well on my own *and* as part of a team?" He decided on the more sensible option and dashed into the nearest Debenhams for a new shirt. The detour left him sweaty and out of breath, which was how he announced himself to the receptionist at the cathedral of concrete that was the council offices.

He took a seat as instructed and sucked in some deep, steadying breaths. He needed this job. Badly. He'd been working in various admin roles for the council of a nearby borough since his early twenties, finally finding a position that had stuck, and which he had been in for eight years before unceremoniously being made redundant. Andrew's boss, Jill (a kind, rosy-cheeked Lancastrian with a "hug first, ask questions later" approach to life), had felt so terrible at having to let him go that she'd apparently called every council office in London asking about vacancies. The interview today was the only one that had come out of Jill's calls, and her e-mail to him describing the job was frustratingly vague. From what Andrew could tell it was similar to what he'd been doing before, largely admin based, though it involved something to do with inspecting properties. More importantly, it paid exactly the same as his last job and he could start the following month. Ten years ago there had been a chance he might have considered a fresh start. Traveling, maybe, or a bold new career move. But these days just having to leave the house left him with an unspecific feeling of anxiety, so hiking to Machu Picchu or retraining as a lion tamer wasn't exactly on the cards.

He tore at a loose flap of skin on his finger with his teeth, jiggling his knee, struggling to relax. When Cameron Yates finally appeared Andrew felt certain he'd met him before. He was about to ask if that was actually the case—perhaps he'd be able to use it to curry favor—but then he realized that he only recognized Cameron because he was

a dead ringer for a young Wallace from *Wallace and Gromit*. He had bulbous eyes that were too close together and large front teeth that jutted down unevenly like stalactites. The only real differences were his tufty black hair and home counties accent.

They exchanged some awkward small talk in the coffin-sized lift, and all the while Andrew couldn't tear his eyes away from the stalactites. *Stop looking at the fucking teeth*, he told himself, while staring directly at the fucking teeth.

They waited for someone to bring them two blue thimbles of lukewarm water before finally the interview began in earnest. Cameron started by rattling through the job description, barely pausing for breath as he outlined how, if Andrew were to get the role, he'd be dealing with all deaths covered under the Public Health Act. "So that's liaising with funeral directors to organize the services, writing death notices in the local paper, registering deaths, tracing family members, recovering funeral costs through the deceased's estates. There's an awful lot of the old paperwork malarkey, as you can imagine!"

Andrew made sure to nod along, trying to take it all in, inwardly cursing Jill for neglecting to mention the whole "death" thing. Then, before he knew it, the spotlight was on him. Disconcertingly, Cameron seemed as nervous as he was, switching from simple, friendly questions to meandering, confusing ones, a harsher edge to his voice—as if he were playing good cop/bad cop by himself. When Andrew was afforded a second to respond to Cameron's nonsense, he found himself stumbling over his words. When he did manage to string a sentence together his enthusiasm sounded like desperation, his attempts at humor just seeming to confuse Cameron, who on more than one occasion looked past Andrew's shoulder, distracted by someone walking past in the corridor. Eventually it got to a point where he felt so despondent he considered giving up on the spot and just walking out. In among his depression at how things were going he was still distracted by Cameron's teeth. For one thing, he'd started to

question whether it was stalactites or *stalagmites*. Wasn't there a thing about pulling down tights that helped you remember? It was at that moment that he realized Cameron had just asked him something—he had no idea what—and was now waiting for an answer. Panicked, he sat forward. "Ermmm," he said, in a tone he hoped conveyed that he was appreciative of such a thoughtful question and thus needed to give it due consideration. But this was clearly a mistake, judging from Cameron's growing frown. Andrew realized the question must have been a simple one.

"Yes," he blurted out, deciding to keep the answer short. Relief flooded him as Cameron's trampled Wallace smile reappeared.

"Wonderful. And how many?" he said.

This was trickier, though Andrew sensed a lightheartedness in Cameron's tone so this time plumped for a general, breezy response.

"Well, I suppose I sort of lose track sometimes," he said, trying a rueful smile. Cameron reacted with a false-sounding laugh, as though he couldn't quite tell if Andrew was joking. Andrew decided to fire back, hoping for more information.

"Do you mind me asking you the same question?" he said.

"Of course. I've just got the one myself," Cameron said enthusiastically. He reached into his pocket and started rummaging. The thought briefly crossed Andrew's mind that the man interviewing him for a job was about to pull out a lone testicle, as if he asked this question of every man he met, hoping desperately for a solo-ball owner. Instead, Cameron produced his wallet. It was only when he brought out a picture from within of a child trussed up in winter gear with skis on that Andrew understood what the question had been. He quickly replayed the conversation from Cameron's perspective.

"Do you have kids?"

"Ermmm . . . Yes."

"Wonderful. And how many?"

"Well, I suppose I sort of lose track sometimes."

Christ, had he just given the impression to a potential new boss that he was some sort of prolific Lothario who'd spent his life shagging around town and leaving a succession of women pregnant and homes broken?

He was still just looking at the photo of Cameron's child. *Say something!*

"Lovely," he said. "Lovely . . . boy."

Oh good, now you sound like the Child Catcher. That'll go down well. You start on Monday, Mr. Pedophile!

He grasped his plastic water beaker, long since empty, and felt it crack in his hand. This was a fucking disaster. How could he have blown things already? He could tell from Cameron's expression that he was past the point of no return. Quite what he'd say if Andrew just admitted to accidentally lying about having children he wasn't sure, but it seemed unlikely that it would suddenly turn things around. He decided his best option now was just to get through the rest of the interview while saving as much face as possible—like continuing to do mirror, signal, maneuver on a driving test having just run over a lollipop lady.

As he let go of the plastic beaker he noticed the graze on his palm and thought about the girl who'd helped him that morning. The wavy brown hair, that inscrutable smile. He could feel the blood starting to throb in his ears. What would it be like—to have a moment where he could just pretend. To play out a little fantasy all for himself. Where was the harm? Where, really, was the harm in spending the briefest moment imagining that everything had actually worked out fine and not fallen to pieces?

He cleared his throat.

Was he going to do this?

"How old is he?" he asked, handing the photo back to Cameron.

"He's just turned seven," Cameron said. "And yours?"

Was he actually going to do this?

"Well . . . Steph's eight and David's four," he said.

Apparently, he was.

"Ah, wonderful. It was when my boy Chris turned six that I really started to get the sense of what sort of person he was going to be," Cameron said. "Though Clara, my wife, always reckoned she could tell all that before he'd even left the womb."

Andrew smiled. "My wife Diane said exactly the same," he said.

And, just like that, he had a family.

They talked about their wives and children for a while longer, but all too soon Cameron brought the interview back around to the job, and Andrew felt the fantasy slipping away like water through his fingers. Before too long their time was up. Disconcertingly, instead of trucking out the usual line of whether Andrew had any questions for *him*, Cameron instead asked whether he had "any last words," as if he were about to be taken away and hanged. He managed to dredge up some vague waffle about what an interesting role it seemed and how much he'd relish the chance to work in Cameron's dynamic-sounding team.

"We'll be in touch," Cameron said, spoken with the sincerity of a politician pretending to like an indie band during a radio interview. Andrew forced a smile and remembered to make eye contact as he shook Cameron's hand, which was cold and wet, as if he'd been fondling a trout. "Thanks for the opportunity," Andrew said.

He found a café and used the free Wi-Fi to search for jobs, but he was too distracted to look properly. When he'd thanked Cameron "for the opportunity" it had nothing to do with the job, it was because he'd been given the chance to indulge, however briefly, in the fantasy of having a family. How strangely thrilling and scary it had been to feel so normal. He tried to forget about it, forcing himself to concentrate.

If he wasn't going to get another council job he'd need to expand his search, but it felt like an impossibly daunting task. There was nothing he could find that he seemed qualified for. Half the job descriptions themselves were baffling enough. He stared hopelessly at the large muffin he'd bought but not eaten, picking at it instead until it looked like a molehill. Maybe he'd make other animal burrows out of food and enter the Turner Prize competition.

He sat in the café for the rest of the afternoon, watching important businesspeople having their important business meetings and tourists thumbing excitedly through guidebooks. He stayed there long after all had left, pressing himself up against the radiator and trying to remain invisible to the young Italian waiter stacking chairs and sweeping up. Eventually he asked Andrew if he wouldn't mind leaving, the apologetic smile disappearing from his face as he spotted the muffin molehill crumbs that had spilled onto the table.

Andrew's phone rang just as he stepped outside. An unknown number.

"Andrew?" the person on the end of the line said. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes," Andrew said, though he barely could with the combination of a blustery wind and an ambulance driving past, siren screaming.

"Andrew, it's Cameron Yates. I just wanted to give you a call to say that it was really good to meet you earlier today. You really seemed to get the can-do culture I'm trying to build here. So, to cut a long story short, I'm very pleased to say I'd love you to come on board."

"I'm sorry?" Andrew said, jamming a finger in his free ear.

"We're offering you the job!" Cameron said. "There'll be the usual formalities, of course, but can't see any problems there, mate."

Andrew stood there, buffeted by the wind.

"Andrew? Did you catch that?"

"Gosh. Yes, I did. Wow. That's great. I'm . . . I'm delighted."

And he was. So delighted in fact that he beamed at the waiter

through the window. The waiter rewarded him with a slightly bemused smile.

"Andrew, listen, I'm just heading off to a seminar, so I'll ask someone to ping you an e-mail with all the deets. I'm sure there'll be a few bits and pieces to chat through, but don't sweat any of that now. You get home and give Diane and the kids the good news."

– CHAPTER 4 –

It was hard for Andrew to believe that it was only five years since he'd been standing in that windswept street, trying to take in what Cameron had just said. It felt like a lifetime ago.

He stirred listlessly at the baked beans currently spluttering in the travel saucepan on the stovetop, before depositing them on a crust of whole wheat he'd cut with his one still-sharp knife, its plastic handle warped and burned. He looked intently at the square of cracked tiles behind the cooker, pretending it was a camera. "So what I've done there is to combine the beans and the bread, and now I'll just add a blob of ketchup (I use Captain Tomato but any brand is fine) to make it a tasty trio. You can't freeze any of the leftovers, but luckily you'll have wolfed it all down in about nine seconds and you'll be too busy hating yourself to worry about that."

He could hear his neighbor humming downstairs. She was relatively new, the previous tenants having moved out a few months ago. They were a young couple—early twenties, both startlingly attractive; all cheekbones and toned arms. The sort of aesthetically pleasing

appearance that meant they'd never had to apologize for anything in their lives. Andrew would force himself to make eye contact with them and summon up a breezy greeting when they crossed paths in the hallway, but they never really bothered to reply. He was only aware that someone new had moved in when he heard the distinctive humming. He hadn't seen his new neighbor, but, oddly, he *had* smelled her. Or at least he'd smelled her perfume, which was so strong that it lingered permanently in the hallway. He tried to picture her, but when he tried to see her face it was just a smooth, featureless oval.

Just then, his phone lit up on the countertop. He saw his sister's name and his heart sank. He checked the date in the corner of his screen: March 31. He should have known. He pictured Sally checking her calendar, seeing a red ring around the thirty-first and swearing under her breath, knowing it was time for their quarterly call.

He took a fortifying gulp of water and picked up.

"Hello," he said.

"Hey," Sally said.

A pause.

"Well. How are you, little bro?" Sally said. "Everything cool?"

Christ, why did she still have to speak as though they were teenagers?

"Oh, you know, the usual. You?"

"Can't complain, dude, I guess. Me and Carl are doing a yoga retreat this weekend, help him learn the teaching side of it and all that jazz."

Carl. Sally's husband. Usually to be found guzzling protein shakes and voluntarily lifting heavy objects up and down.

"That sounds . . . nice," Andrew said. Then, after the sort of short silence that clearly denotes it's time to move on to the most pressing matter: "And how's it going with your tests and everything?"

Sally sighed.

"Had a bunch more last month. Results all came back inconclu-

sive, which means they still know sweet FA, basically. Still, I feel much better. And they think that it's probably not a heart thing, so I'm not likely to do a Dad and kick the bucket without warning. They just keep telling me the usual BS, you know how it is. Exercise more, drink less, blah blah blah."

"Well, good that they're not unduly concerned," Andrew said, thinking that if Sally shouldn't talk like a teenager he probably shouldn't talk like a repressed Oxford don. He'd have thought that after all these years it wouldn't feel like they were strangers. It was still that simple checklist of topics: Work. Health. Family (well, Carl, the only person who came close to a shared family member). Except, this time, Sally decided to throw in a curveball.

"So, I was thinking . . . maybe we should meet up sometime soon. It's been, like, five years now after all."

Seven, Andrew thought. *And the last time was at Uncle Dave's funeral in a crematorium opposite a KFC in Banbury. And you were high.* Then again, he conceded, he hadn't exactly been inundating Sally with invitations to meet up since.

"That . . . that would be good," he said. "As long as you can spare the time, of course. Maybe we could meet halfway or something."

"Yeah, it's cool, bro. Though we've moved, remember? We're in Newquay now—Carl's business, and everything? So halfway is somewhere else these days. But I'm going to be in London seeing a friend in May. We could hang then, maybe?"

"Yes. Okay. Just let me know when you're coming up."

Andrew scanned the room and chewed his lip. In the twenty years since he'd moved into the flat barely a thing had changed. Consequently, his living space was looking not so much tired as absolutely knackered. There was the dark stain where the wall met the ceiling in the area that masqueraded as a kitchen; then there were the battered gray sofa, threadbare carpet and yellowy-brown wallpaper that was meant to suggest autumn but in fact suggested digestive biscuits. As

the color of the wallpaper had faded, so had the chances of Andrew's actually doing anything about it. And his shame at the state of the place was only matched by the terror he felt at the thought of changing it or, worse, living anywhere else. There was at least one benefit to being on his own and never having anyone around—nobody could judge him for how he lived.

He decided to change the subject, recalling something Sally had told him the last time they'd spoken.

"How are things going with your . . . person?"

He heard a lighter sparking and then the faint sound of Sally exhaling smoke.

"My person?"

"The person you were going to see. To talk about things."

"You mean my therapist?"

"Yes."

"Ditched her when we moved. To be honest, dude, I was glad of the excuse. She kept trying to hypnotize me and it didn't work. I told her I was immune but she wouldn't listen. But I've found someone new in Newquay. She's more of a spiritual healer, I guess? I bumped into her while she was putting up an advert next to Carl's yoga class flyer. What are the chances?"

Well . . . , Andrew thought.

"So, listen, man," Sally said. "There was something else I wanted to talk to you about."

"Right," Andrew said, instantly suspicious. First arranging to meet, now this. Oh god, what if she was going to try to make him spend time with Carl?

"So—and I normally wouldn't do this as I know that . . . well, it's not something we'd normally talk about. But, anyway, you know my old pal Sparky?"

"No."

"You do, bud. He's the one with the bong shop in Brighton Lanes?"

Obviously.

"Okay . . ."

"He's got this friend. Julia. She lives in London. Crystal Palace way, actually, so not too far from you. She's thirty-five. And about two years ago she went through a pretty shitty-sounding divorce."

Andrew held the phone away from his ear. *If this is going where I think it's going . . .*

"But she's come out of the other side of it now, and from what Sparky tells me she's looking to, you know, get back in the saddle. So, I was just thinking, that, like, maybe you might—"

"No," Andrew said. "Absolutely not. Forget it."

"But, Andrew, she's super nice from what I can tell—pretty too, from the pics I've seen—and I reckon you'd like her a lot."

"That's irrelevant," Andrew said. "Because I don't want . . . that. It's not for me, now."

"'It's not for me.' Jesus, man, it's love we're talking about, here, not pineapple on pizzas. You can't just dismiss it."

"Why not? Why can't I? It's not hurting anyone, is it, if I do? If anything it's guaranteeing that nobody gets hurt."

"But that's no way to live your life, dude. You're forty-two, still totally in your prime. You gotta think about putting yourself out there, otherwise you're, like, actively denying yourself potential happiness. I know it's hard, but you have to look to the future."

Andrew could feel his heart start to beat that little bit faster. He had a horrible feeling that his sister was building up the courage to ask him about something they'd never ever discussed, not for want of trying on Sally's part. It was not so much the elephant in the room as the brontosaurus in the closet. He decided to nip things in the bud.

"I'm very grateful for your concern, but there's no need for it. Honestly. I'm fine as I am."

"I get that, but, seriously, one day we're gonna have to talk about . . . you know . . . stuff."

"No, we don't," Andrew said, annoyed that his voice had come out as a whisper. Showing any sort of emotion was going to come across like an invitation to Sally to keep up this line of questioning, as if he secretly did want to talk about "stuff," which he definitely, absolutely, didn't.

"But, bro, we have to at some point, it's not healthy!"

"Yes, well neither is smoking weed your whole life, so I'm not sure you're in any position to judge, are you?"

Andrew winced. He heard Sally exhale smoke.

"I'm sorry. That wasn't called for."

"All I'm saying," Sally said, and there was a deliberateness to her tone now, "is that I think it would be good for you to talk things through."

"And all *I'm* saying," Andrew said, "is that I really don't feel like that's something I want to do. My love life, or lack thereof, isn't something I feel comfortable getting into. And when it comes to 'stuff,' there's really nothing to say."

A pause.

"Well, okay, man. It's up to you I guess. I mean, Carl keeps telling me to stop bothering you about it, but it's hard not to, you know? You're my brother, bro!"

Andrew felt a familiar pang of self-loathing. Not for the first time, his sister had reached out and he'd basically told her to take a running jump. He wanted to apologize properly, to tell her that of course it meant a lot to him that she cared, but the words stuck in his throat.

"Listen," Sally said. "I think we're nearly ready to sit down to eat. So, I guess . . . speak to you later?"

"Yeah," Andrew said, screwing his eyes shut in frustration. "Definitely. And thanks, you know, for the call and everything."

"Sure. No problem, bro. Look after yourself."

"Yes. I will. Absolutely. And you too."

As Andrew made his way the short distance from the kitchenette to his computer he nearly walked straight into the Flying Scotsman, which chugged on unconcerned. Of all his locomotives, the Scotsman seemed to carry itself with the most cheerful insouciance (compared to the Railroad BR InterCity, for example, which always seemed petulant at being made to travel at all). It was also the very first engine, and the very first part of his model train collection as a whole, that he'd owned. He'd received it as a gift when he was a teenager, and he was instantly infatuated. Perhaps it was the unexpected source of the present rather than the thing itself, but over time he began to appreciate just how perfect it was. It took him years before he could afford to buy another engine. And then another. And then a fourth. And then track and sidings and platforms and buffers and signal boxes, until eventually all of the floor space in his flat was taken up with a complicated system of interweaving tracks and various accompanying scenery: tunnels made to look like they were cut into mountains, cows grazing by streams, entire wheat fields, allotments with rows of tiny cabbages being tended to by men wearing floppy hats. Before too long he had enough scenery to actively mirror the real seasons. It was always a thrill when he felt the change in the air. Once, during a funeral attended exclusively by the deceased's drinking pals, the vicar had made reference to the clocks going back as part of a clunky metaphor in his eulogy, and it was all Andrew could do not to punch the air with joy at the prospect of a whole weekend of replacing the currently verdant landscape with something much more autumnal.

It was addictive, building these worlds. Expensive, too. Andrew's meager savings had long since been spent on his collection, and other than rent, his pay packet now went almost exclusively to upgrading and maintenance. He no longer worried about all the hours, or

sometimes whole days, he spent browsing the Internet for ways to improve his setup. He couldn't remember the point at which he'd discovered and then signed up to the ModelTrainNuts forum, but he'd been on it every day since. The majority of people who posted there made his interest seem positively amateurish, and Andrew thoroughly admired every single one of them. Anyone—anyone at all—who thought to log on to a message board at 2:38 a.m. and post the message: PLEASE HELP A NEWBIE: Stanier 2–6–4T Chassis CRACKED. HELP?? was nearly as much of a hero to him as the *thirty-three* people who replied within minutes offering tips, solutions and general words of encouragement. In truth, he understood about 10 percent of all that was talked about in the more technical conversations, but he always read them post by post, feeling genuine joy when queries, sometimes having lain dormant for months, were resolved. He would occasionally post on the main forum with general messages of goodwill, but the game changer was after he began regularly chatting to three other users and was invited—via private message no less!—to join an exclusive subforum. This little haven was run by BamBam67, one of the longest-serving members of the site, who had recently been granted moderator rights. The two others invited into the fold were TinkerAl, by all accounts a young and passionate enthusiast, and the more experienced BroadGaugeJim, who'd once posted a photo of an aqueduct he'd built over a running stream that was so beautiful Andrew had needed to have a lie-down.

The subforum had been set up by BamBam67 to show off his new moderator privileges (and Bam *did* like to show off, often accompanying his posts with photos of his train setup that seemed to be more about letting them see the size of his very beautiful home). They discovered early on that they all lived in London, except for BroadGauge (the enthusiastic, avuncular member of the group), who had been "keeping it real in Leatherhead" for over thirty years, but the idea of their meeting up in real life had never been raised. This suited

Andrew (who went by Tracker) just fine. Partly because it meant there were times when he could modify his online persona to mask his real-life inadequacies (this, he had realized early on, was the entire point of the Internet), but also because these were the only (and therefore best) friends he had, and to meet them in real life and find out they were arseholes would be a real shame.

There was a marked difference between what happened on the main forum and the subforum. A delicate ecosystem existed in the former. Conversation had to be strictly on topic, and any user who flouted the rules was duly punished, sometimes severely. The most infamous example of this had been when TunnelBotherer6 had persistently posted about baseboards in a gears topic and had been branded a "waste of space" by the moderator. Chillingly, TB6 never posted again. But in the subforum, away from prying main-board moderator eyes, a slow shift occurred. Before long, it became a place where personal issues were discussed. It felt terrifying at first. It was like they were the Resistance poring over maps under a single lightbulb in a dusty cellar as enemy soldiers drank in the bar above. It had been BroadGaugeJim who'd been the first one to bring up an explicitly non-train issue.

Listen, chaps, he'd written, I wouldn't normally want to bother you with something like this, but to be perfectly honest I'm not quite sure who else to ask. Basically, my daughter Emily got caught "cyberbullying" someone at school. Mean messages. Photoshopped pics. Nasty stuff, from what I've seen. She tells me she wasn't the ringleader and feels really bad (and I believe her), but I still feel like I need to make sure she understands she can't be part of anything like that ever again, even if it means losing her mates. Just wondered if any of you might have any advice for a useless duffer like me!! No worries if not!!!!!

Andrew's scrambled eggs went cold as he waited to see what happened. It was TinkerAl who responded first, and the advice he gave was simple, sensible, yet obviously heartfelt. So much so that Andrew felt

momentarily overwhelmed. He tried writing his own response, but he couldn't really think of anything better than what TinkerAl had said. Instead, he just backed up Tinker's suggestion with a couple of lines, and resolved (perhaps a little selfishly) to be the helpful one next time.

Andrew logged on, heard the reassuring sound of the Scotsman rushing past behind him, and waited in eager anticipation of the little breeze that followed in its wake. He adjusted his monitor. He'd bought the computer as a thirty-second birthday present for himself. At the time it had seemed like a sleek and powerful machine, but now, a decade later, it was impossibly bulky and slow compared to the latest models. Nevertheless, Andrew felt an affection for the clunky old beast that meant he'd cling on to it for as long as it still spluttered into life.

Hi, all, he wrote. Anybody on for the night shift?

As he waited for the reply he knew would come within a maximum of ten minutes, he maneuvered carefully across the rail tracks to his record player and thumbed through his LPs. He kept them in a wonky pile rather than in neat rows on a shelf—that diminished the fun of it. In this more ramshackle style of ordering he could still occasionally surprise himself. There were some other artists and albums in there—Miles Davis, Dave Brubeck, Dizzy Gillespie—but Ella vastly outnumbered all of them.

He slid *The Best Is Yet to Come* out of its sleeve but changed his mind and put it back. When he altered his railway landscapes that was because of the changing seasons, but there wasn't as straightforward a logic when choosing which of Ella's records to listen to. With her, it was just a case of what felt right in the moment. There was only one exception—her version of "Blue Moon." He hadn't been able to play that particular song for twenty years, though that didn't stop the

tune from filtering into his head on occasion. As soon as he recognized the first notes, pain would grow at his temples, his vision would fog, and then came the sound of piercing feedback and shouting, mixing with the music, and the uncanny sensation of hands gripping his shoulders. And then, just like that, it was gone, and he'd be looking at a confused pharmacist or realizing he'd missed his bus stop. On one occasion a few years before, he'd walked into a record shop in Soho and realized that the song was playing on the shop's speakers. He'd left so hastily he'd ended up in a tense encounter with the shopkeeper and a passing off-duty police officer. More recently, he'd been channel-hopping and found himself watching a football match. Minutes later he was desperately searching for the remote to turn it off, because apparently "Blue Moon" was what the Manchester City fans sang. To hear the actual song was bad enough, but fifty thousand people bellowing it out of sync was on another level. He tried to tell himself that it was simply one of those unusual afflictions people suffer and just have to tolerate, like being allergic to sunlight, or having night terrors, but the thought lingered that at some point, probably, he would have to talk to someone about it.

He ran his fingers down the uneven record pile. Tonight it was *Hello Love* that caught his eye. He carefully dropped the needle and went back to his computer. BamBam67 had been first to reply.

> Evening, all. Night shift for me too. House to myself thankfully. Seen they're repeating that BBC thing from last year tonight? James May sitting in his shed rebuilding a Graham Farish 372–311 N Gauge steam loco. Apparently they did it all in one take. Anyway, don't bother with it. It's awful.

Andrew smiled and refreshed. There was TinkerAl right on cue:

> HAHA! Knew it wouldn't be your c.o.t.! I loved it I'm afraid!

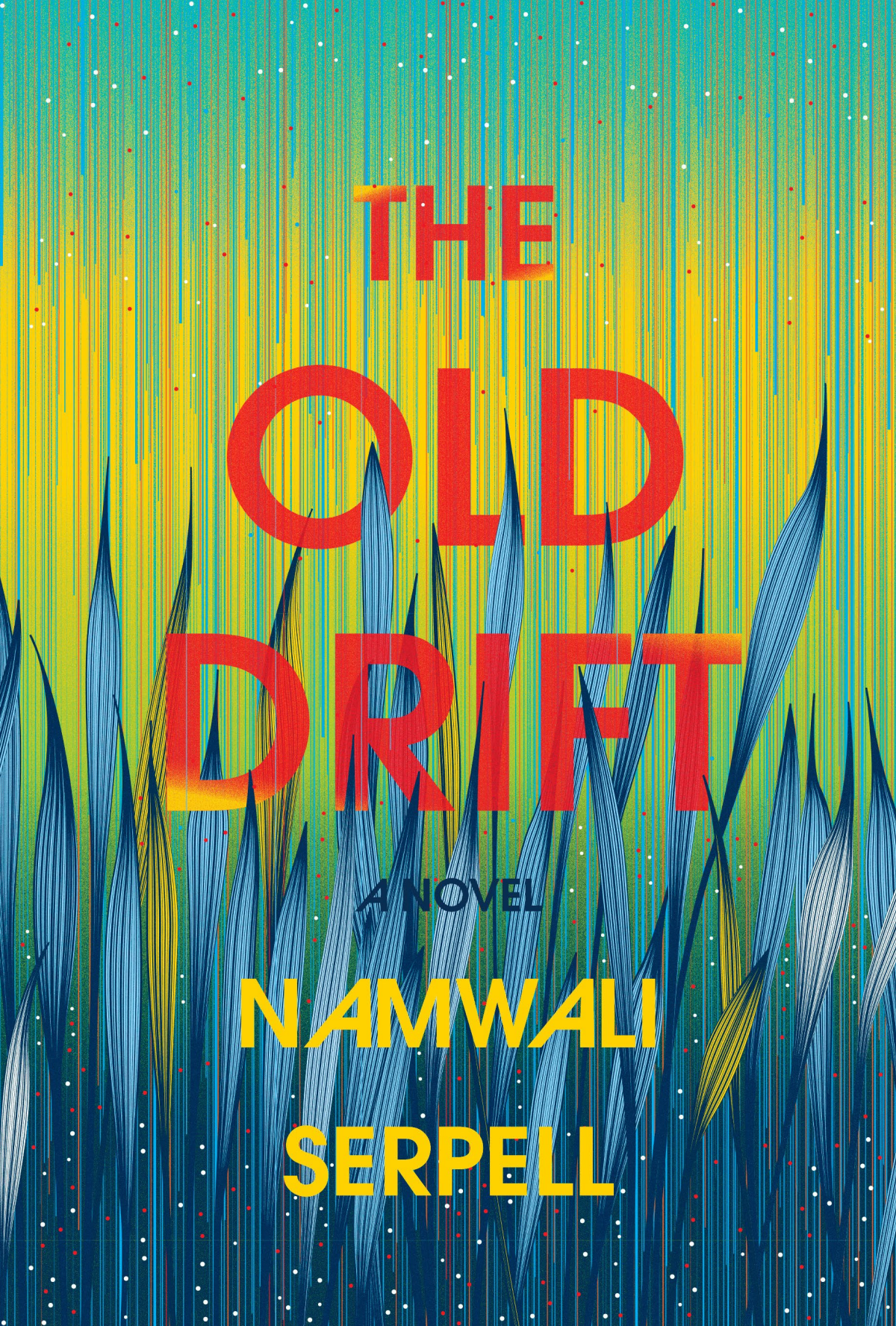
Refresh. Here was BroadGaugeJim:

> Evening shift for me too, squires. I watched the May thing first time around. Once he'd argued in favor of cork underlay over ballasted I'm afraid I couldn't really take the rest of it seriously.

Andrew rolled his head around on his shoulders and sank down low in his chair. Now that the four of them had posted, now that Ella was crooning and a train was rattling around the room, defeating the silence, he could relax.

This was when everything came together.

This was everything.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DRIFT
A NOVEL
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First Edition

The Falls

It sounds like a sentence: Victoria Falls. A prophecy. At any rate, that's the joke I used to make until Her Royal Majesty Queen Victoria actually died in 1901, just before I landed on the continent. Two years later, I set eyes on that African wonder named for an English queen and became as beguiled as the next man. I came for the Falls, and I stayed for them, too.

What they say is true – the spray can indeed be seen from thirty miles off, the roar heard from twenty. The last part of our trek from Wankie was hard going and it was eleven at night by the time we made camp about a mile from the Falls, under a gargantuan baobab tree. Tired as I was, I could not let the need of sleep come between me and my first sight of that vast tumble. I left the others and made my way alone to look over the Falls from above, from the so-called 'Devil's Cataract'. I shall never forget it.

The night was luminous with moonlight. In the foreground was the bluff of Barouka island. Beyond it, veiled in spray, the main falls leapt roaring into the chasm four hundred feet below. The spray was so powerful it was hard to say whether the Falls flowed up or down. The shadowy black forest writhed its branches before them. The lunar rainbow, pale and shimmering, gave the whole scene a touch of faery. I was awed beyond words, as if standing in the presence of a majestic Power quite ineffable. My hat came off and for an hour I stood bare-headed, lost in rapture.

No. I shall never forget that nocturnal view of the Victoria Falls, full in flood and drenched in moonlight. I spent thirty-two years within a mile of that spot, and I'll be damned if that isn't still the best lookout.

The next morning, I marked the occasion of my first encounter by carving my name and the date into the baobab tree: Percy M. Clark. 8 May 1903. This was unlike me but excusable under the circumstances. I set out for the drift five miles above the Falls, the port of entry into North-western Rhodesia. The Zambesi is at its deepest and narrowest here for hundreds of miles, so it's the handiest spot for 'drifting' a body across. At first it was called Sekute's Drift after a chief of the Leya. Then it was Clarke's Drift, after the first white settler, whom I soon met. No one knows when it became The Old Drift.

For two hours I sat alone on the southern bank, popping off a rifle at intervals. At long last, I saw a speck – a dugout coming from the other side. It seemed so far upriver, I wasn't quite sure it was coming for me; the river was so swift that a long slant was needed to bring the boat precisely to the spot where I waited. A dugout is a ticklish thing to handle in a strong current – a single crossways cough is enough to tip it over – but the Barotse are excellent river-boys. Standing to their work, they use ten-foot paddles to steer their primitive craft. They brought me back across and then my goods.

The Old Drift was then a small settlement of a half-dozen men – there were only about a hundred white men in all of the territory at the time. I stopped at a mud and pole store that served as the local 'hotel'. It belonged to a man who bore my surname, except his had the aristocratic 'e' attached. This would have been coincidence enough, but it turned out that he grew up in Chatteris in Cambridgeshire, practically next door to the university city I thought I'd long left behind. It seemed I couldn't get away from the old country, or its airs.

Fred 'Mopane' Clarke – a native moniker, for he was 'tall and straight and has a heart like a mopane tree' – had settled there five years earlier and become a forwarding agent, then started a transport service across the Zambesi. He later went on to great fortune building hotels and selling them off. But when I met him, we were simply two men making the best of it. Mopane was amused that I had tossed a coin to choose my new vocation – photography was a relatively new field in those days. I didn't bother to explain my ousting from the Trinity chemistry lab.

'The bollocks on you!' he said. 'Did you journey to Rhodesia on such a whim, too?'

'Yes,' I lied. 'Took up a post at a studio in Bulawayo. But toning and fixing is rather a chancy business in Africa, with the dust, not to mention the dust-devils. So I quit.' Another lie.

'But you've stayed on, it seems. Does life here in the bush suit you?'

'The settlers are a good sort. Honest, spirited. Don't turn their nose up at people. The Kaffirs are bewildering, of course, but seem pliable enough. The insects are rather an abomination.'

We exchanged bug stories. Tam-Pam beetles tugging at the hair, rhino beetles blundering into the knob, the putrid stink beetle and whistling Christmas bug. Scorpions, spiders, centipedes. Beasties all. I won the debate by telling him about the day I arrived in Bulawayo two years earlier. The sun vanished behind a black cloud: not a dust storm but a plague of biblical locusts! Then came the clamour: the frantic beating of pots and trays to scare them off. A hellish din, but effective.

'You shall face far worse here,' said Mopane cryptically. 'Do you intend to pioneer?'

'To wander. Pa always said, "My boy, never settle till you have to and never work for another man." Time to play my own hand, do a touch of exploring. I believe I shall be the first to follow the Zambesi from the Falls all the way to the coast,' I boasted.

'Like the good Dr Livingstone.'

'Oh. Yes, I suppose.' I shook off my frown. 'But without the religion.'

Mopane Clarke gripped my hand with a devilish grin.

I was ready for my escape into the wild. Leaving my camera equipment in Mopane's care, I set off for Kasangula, a kraal two and a half days away. It was bossed by a chief Quinani, a quaint old bird who squatted in the sun all day, snuffing, dressed in a leopard skin and a Union Jack hat. I hired five dugouts and fifty bearers from him, then set off upriver, planning to eat by the hunt.

The shooting was very good and quite varied back then. Partridge, pheasant, geese, guinea fowl, even wild turkey. The land abounded in game, from the stately eland to the tiny oribi. The first buck I bagged

was a big black lechwe: it stared right into the barrel of my heavy-bullet Martini rifle. Next was an indigenous species of antelope that Dr Livingstone had dubbed the 'puku': a shy, crepuscular creature, bigger than the impala, similarly golden but without the telltale toilet stripes, and with a frowsy look to its fur. A native told me the name came from a local word for 'ghost': Livingstone had sighted it in dry season, slipping in and out of the high yellow grass of the veldt. Makes for a good steak.

For a year, I journeyed in a go-as-you-please sort of style with my petty fleet of dugouts. There were several obstacles between me and the coast. For one, the tributaries of the Zambesi simply teemed with crocs and hippos. For another, it was a right task just getting my boys to do their job. They were superstitious of my whistling – which I did merely because I had nobody to talk to. And they wouldn't pass certain spots without landing to make offerings to the dead and watch the witch doctor 'do his stuff', with animal tails and charms around his neck, bones and bangles around wrists and ankles. He was a fearsome sight – or thought he was. The Barotse were in fact a powerful nation, with many conquered tribes paying tribute. Penalties for missed payments were extracted in gruesome fashion: I saw natives with ears hanging by the cartilage, with noses slitted or removed entirely. This vengeful spirit erupted more and more among my bearers, too.

We had reached as far as Sesheke when a hippo upset a dugout and lost us some time. I suggested we get a move on to navigate the rapids before dark. 'Nothing doing!' the boys pretty much said. 'We'll see about that,' I replied and showed my .450 Webley, driving my personal crew one by one at gunpoint into a boat. I told the rest that if they didn't follow, they'd have to fend for themselves: 'No more skoff for you!' Off I went with my hostages and made camp at the foot of the rapids. When the others pitched up at sundown, I made them kneel and rub their foreheads in the dust and give the royal salute. That finished the 'indaba'. I had got them in the native's weakest spot – the belly!

With setbacks like these – plus veldt fires, squalls, reedy banks that made it impossible to land – I made little progress. The worst difficulty of exploration, I learned, is that it is a tormenting isolation. There

was no chumming it up with the blacks, naturally, and the need for sympathetic company would have been unbearable were it not for the terrier bitch I'd been gifted at the Wankie colliery. That little wire-haired lady was my only pal, my inseparable companion. I sympathised with Dr Livingstone's affection for his dear Chitane, who drowned around these parts, they say. My Flossie had a marvellous nose and, though she could not save my journey, she saved my life in the end.

Late in my travels, King Litia, a sort of deputy to Lewanika, sent me a favourite chief of his to catch a lift. The most I can say for this chief, Koko, is that he had 'taking' ways. Unhappy over the tough barter I'd driven for his ride, he upset my dugout on a swift side channel of the river, unaware that I could swim like a fish. The consequences, however, were dire: I came down with a bout of 104-degree fever. I ordered a rest for me and my men. That night, feverish and half-asleep, I heard Flossie growling, and saw a dark figure crawling on hands and knees towards us. I gave a shout. The fellow replied that he wanted fire. Not plausible! There was a fire positively roaring on the other side of camp. It was plainly an attempt to knife me. I threatened to shoot, and he cleared. It was Koko – he had not forgotten the indignity of his own ten-foot drop into the water.

There are those who flatter themselves that they truly know the native. I would never make such a claim. The native is harder to understand than a woman. The more you know him, the less you know of him. The key is not to let his savagery in. To wit, I never whip a native unless he deserves it. A dog and a native are on a par: one should give them a good thrashing when they have earned it, but one should thrash neither until one's temper has cooled. So when we arrived at our destination, I kept my calm, tied Koko to a tree overnight, and turned him over to the new district commissioner at dawn. I released the few boys I had left – I had lost several to crocs and fever and run out of rations to feed the rest – and spent two days in bed, fighting my fever and awaiting trial.

During the hearing, darling Koko confessed at least five times that he'd have blotted me flat if luck had not contrived against him. The district commissioner, fresh from Oxford, was the sort who puts on a coat and cravat to visit a native queen. He asked me what I demanded for my trouble. Well, I demanded a hiding! The DC ruled thusly: ''Tis

a trivial case. I shall dock his pay.' I am giving you this as an absolute fact. Remember, it was a young country with a native population preponderating largely over a sprinkling of white. So Koko had his pay docked – and he shortly received it back in kind by pinching from my boss boy the handsome leopard skin I'd received from his king Litia! Koko, as I say, was a daisy.

By then, the rains had arrived, in high dudgeon. I got back to The Old Drift two days later, famished and alone, soaked to the skin and flayed to the bone by a wet saddle. I headed straight for Mopane's hotel. He greeted me, kindly did not poke at the wound of my failed voyage to the coast, and fed me what was left of lunch – a hunk of bread and a tin of Vienna sausages. After my modest repast, a hut was provided for me. It will be gathered that I needed no lullabying into the deep sleep that ensued. I was completely done up. So much for imperial exploration! Was this place cursed? Or was I?

I suppose I became a pioneer by default. When I first skittled here from Bulawayo, I had intended to settle across the river at Victoria Falls Town as soon as the railway bridge was complete – there would be great opportunities for those who got in early. I made my headquarters at The Old Drift for the time being. A year had passed since my first visit and the population was now fivefold but the place was still a mere trading post: a few wood and iron buildings and twice as many wattle and daub Kaffir huts.

The crowd, however, had become practically cosmopolitan. Van Blerk ran a store for a Bulawayo firm. Tom King ran a canteen for the Bechuanaland Trading Company. Jimmy, an American ex-cowboy, hunted hippos and started fistfights. A Greek made a living shooting meat – he once killed nine lions, mistaking them for boar. Mr L. F. Moore, the English chemist, edited the weekly paper, the *Livingstone Pioneer*. Zeederberg was a contractor for the post; the great event of the week, prefaced by a bugle, was sorting through a pile of His Majesty's mails, dumped from a Scotch cart onto the floor of a hut. A chap called 'The Yank' hung about, being lucky at poker, until his luck ran out. The only woman was the wife of a Dutch trader, an

extremely jealous man and an expert in the use of a hippo-hide *sjambok*. He disfigured anyone who dared glance at his dour duchess.

There were two 'bars' where we drank and gambled away the hours. A gramophone screeched in one corner, while in another, merchants and speculators threw dice for drinks. In a third corner was a roulette table, the imperturbable croupier raking chips and filling columns of half-crowns, chanting: 'Round and round the little ball goes, and where she stops there's nobody knows! No seed, no harvest – if you don't speculate, you can't accumulate, and she's off!' There was a four-blind game of poker every night and sometimes a spot of *vingt-et-un*. Of other social life, there was none. No societies, no dance committees, not a dress suit in sight. A postprandial lying contest, chiefly concerned with lions and niggers, might take place, or we'd drum up a party for a hippo hunt.

Amusements aside, fortune flipped lives as the storm flips the leaves of a tree. A smithy gave up for lack of funds; a cotton-gin man died of sheer starvation; a Hebrew stopped through and played impressive card tricks until we ran him out, our empty pockets flapping like flags. Any old drifter might come along with a week's beard, months of wear to his trousers, and years of treading to his boots. He might leave in a worse bedragglement or he might depart in the finest of clothes, plus a quid in his pocket.

Men came and went. Those who stayed tended to die. The dry-season heat was oppressive, and the thirst it engendered required a sedulous slaking. During the rains, November to March, the place was a right swamp. The mosquitoes gathered in hordes, humming like a German band, their stings sharp enough to penetrate an elephant's hide: *Anopheles*, energetic and indiscriminate. Loafer, lord and lout were treated with strict impartiality in these parts, for the mosquito is a true democrat, and cares not what accident of birth has led you here, nor whether the blood it quaffs be red or blue.

Fever was so prevalent at The Old Drift, no particular attention was given to anyone down with it. No need to bother with a medico with a monocle and white bags creased as a concertina. Just feed the victim drops of champagne or of Schweppes with a feather, bundle him up, and let him sweat it out until the shakes subside. I once wrote an editorial for the *Livingstone Pioneer* and this was my warning: 'cursed is

he who forgetteth his quinine o' nights, for the shakes and the pukes shall surely take him'. Out of the thirty-one settlers that season, no fewer than eleven died of black fever or malaria. The next year was far worse, with a loss of seventy per cent. Pioneering isn't all lavender.

We called the place Deadrock. There was a funeral about once a week. One of the survivors would serve as undertaker. We'd knock together a coffin out of old whisky cases, douse the departed in quicklime, then encase him with black limbo or calico. The coffin was put on a Scotch cart hauled by oxen to the graveyard. The rest of the town marched behind, clad in slacks and rolled-up shirtsleeves, no coats. There were no Bibles beyond the mission, so the elected undertaker would recite fragments of the Burial Service, the other mourners filling in where they could.

Once, a coffin got stuck halfway down because the grave was too narrow. The undertaker leaned in to see what was the matter and tipped right on top of it. We hoisted him up, then the coffin, and set about digging a wider hole. It happened again when our chemist, Mr Moore, disappeared into the bush, delirious, and was found days later in a dreadful state of putrefaction. When we lifted him, he simply fell apart. The air was blue and thick enough to cut. At the burial, our appointed undertaker masked his nausea with gin, then fell in the hole because he was tight!

There was a lot of drink at The Old Drift – understandable, what with the boredom and the savagery to keep at bay, to say nothing of the competitive sports: gambling, prospecting, surviving. But high as our death rate was, we were a cheery camp. If only I'd known the greatest threat to our beloved Deadrock was the railway bridge I had long anticipated. Where once we lived as brave pioneers, things were soon to become 'civilised' in the worst possible way.

When operations began on the foundations in 1904, I crossed the Zambesi to see what was what on its southern banks. I am proud to say I ate the first meal ever served at the Victoria Falls Hotel. This was at the start a long, simple structure of wood and iron, with a dining

room and bar. At the most it housed twenty men, at 12/6d per day. Its logo was a lion and a sphinx – Cape to Cairo, Cecil Rhodes's dream for a railway line that would run vertically up the continent.

The chef at the hotel was a Frenchman, Marcel Mitton, a hunter and a former miner. The barman was an American from Chicago – an ex-prizefighter named Fred who refereed our frequent brawls. Arabs and coloured men served the guests with a servility bordering on sarcasm, then sent the Kaffirs scurrying to do their jobs for them. Management was a man named Pietro Gavuzzi, a Piedmontese who had worked at the Carlton and the Savoy in London, and then at the Grand in Bulawayo before coming here. You'd think he would have been better suited for life on the railway frontier but he was the sort of man who grew his own strawberries to garnish the dinner plates.

While the bridge was being built, an outside bar called the Iron & Timber was set up for the workmen. A rough lot, even for the wilds, and they made the hotel uncomfortable for those more sedate and worldly. Gavuzzi was scared out of his wits by their antics. Whenever he came in sight of the Iron & Timber, he got chased round the premises. If caught, he was made to stand drinks all round. Once, the assembly collared him and tucked him up onto the mantelpiece, commanding him to sing. Warble he did, like a wood pigeon! Gavuzzi had not the knack of taking such fun fondly.

The Italians around here generally went the pious route. The Waldensian missionaries – the Coïssons and the Jallas – built churches and schools, then retired back to Italy laden with children and wealth. They never went full native, as we say. That sort of consorting was frowned upon. I once met a Jewish trader with four native wives and a host of salt-and-pepper children – people regarded him as pretty low down. Any overtures from native men in the other direction led straight to the gallows. Nothing seethes the blood of most settlers more than the thought of racial contamination.

Like most Europeans, Gavuzzi had brought a wife with him, an English girl. I knew at first glance that Ada was a shopkeeper's daughter. Always slumping around with a hangdog look, slinging her daughter everywhere with her. That girl, Lina, a lass of five, had a vicious streak – this place had clearly got to her, as I soon learned directly.

One night, I was in the hotel dining room, making friends with the top men on the bridge project – surveyors and engineers, that sort of personage. I was down with fever, but I had run out of prints, you see, and serving as forwarding agent for Mopane Clarke's trading business had not proved lucrative. I wanted to open a photography studio on this side of the river. Withstanding the trembles and blur, I stood the occasional drink, downed several myself, and tried to charm the gentler men. Things were going swimmingly when in waltzed Gavuzzi with his funny hat and vest, to see a man about a bill. Ada, who did the accounts, was behind him, holding Lina by the hand.

Now, it was a dizzy room already, tobacco smoke bitter in the air, half-naked Kaffirs careening about on errands, besuited Arab monkeys bowing over drinks trays. My fever was running amok, I was fagged out, and I could hardly hear – my head was a right balloon. Gavuzzi was an irritating man in the best of circumstances, and then he provoked me by cutting in. I shouted him off, he turned on his heel, and as he stepped away, I grabbed his hat, almost as a prank. It came off his head easily, but my grip went a touch too far and a patch of his hair came off with it, pulled up by the root!

I stared at it in my hand, wondering if it was a wig and we were in Parliament. Gavuzzi stood in shock, his pate turning scarlet, then sat on the floor with a bark. Ada rushed over quick as she could, given her condition – she was expecting – and left Lina in the corner. Most whelps would have wept but Lina shrieked with fury and when an innocent native boy rushed by with a tray, she struck him! Knocked him flat! He was never right in the head again. He became an imbecile, forever smiling at the daisies.

So much for drumming up funds for a studio. But I managed to procure a contract to photograph the bridge during the stages of its erection. And that's how I ended up joining Sir Charles Beresford Fox, the nephew of the bridge's designer, on a voyage to the bottom of the gorge. We climbed down the workers' ladders and then along the face of the sheer wall. It was perilous going, rocky and thorny. We got to within twenty feet of the base, tied a rope to a tree, and slid down.

We wandered along the bottom, clambering over rocks the size of my childhood home in Cambridge. Then the gorge narrowed to a thin ledge hanging over a rushing torrent. No exit.

We parted ways, feckless Fox pushing on while I headed back, having taken the snaps I wanted and wishing to get home by nightfall. As soon as I lost sight of my companion, a terrific explosion went off, sending rocks in all directions, one squarely at my head! Thankfully it missed and landed with a crash fifty yards away. Workers on the other end of the gorge had apparently set off their final blast of the day. By the time I got to the rope, I was too spent to climb. Willy-nilly, I was spending the night in that gorge.

I tied myself to a ledge and settled in. It was weird beyond description to lie in the dark, sensing the Falls without seeing them. The spray condensed and ran over me in rivulets. The mist floated round, moaning and whining, a faint whisper, a deep groan, the great roar swelling to thunder then dying again to a sibilant hush. I've often wondered how the guttural shout of the Falls can sometimes break off to sudden silence, like a thunderclap in a clear blue sky.

I lay there, thinking of all I had accomplished in Africa and all I had not, of Sir Charles and Fred 'Mopane' Clarke and what an extra 'e' on a name can do, of the suffocating grace of the high-born. Climbing down here for a mere spot of money had nearly brought death upon my head. I won't say my life passed before my eyes that night, but I barely slept for bitterness. When dawn broke at last, I raced up that rope.

I staggered the half-mile to camp and demanded a whisky and Fox's whereabouts. Turned out he'd had a far worse time than I. He found our rope but his hands slipped and he fell about a hundred feet. Fortune snatched him from death's jaws – he landed on a ledge. They'd had to crane him out. No broken bones but an awful shock, from which he never quite recovered. Meanwhile, I had already been reported dead, and the news sent back to Bulawayo. A truer freedom I never knew! Far better to be a dead man walking than a man on the run. An American born in the Kingdom of Hawai'i eventually dethroned me as Orpheus of the Gorge. When he climbed down, he was actually struck by a boulder from a blast – it only crushed his foot but he died the next day.

The railway was completed in 1904, the bridge in 1906, and the years following brought a host of official settlers. The British South Africa Company – Rhodes's imperial machine – owned The Old Drift and decided to move it to a sandy ridge six miles away. A drier, healthier spot, to be sure, but more importantly, closer to the rail. They renamed the town Livingstone, marked out 200 stands, some for government and some for settlers, and christened it capital of North-western Rhodesia. We dislocated pioneers could choose land wherever we liked, 6,000 acres at 3d per acre, and five years to pay it off. I got a permit for 2,000 acres but not wanting to compete with crafty old Mopane, I set up a curio shop across the river at Victoria Falls Town.

Decades later, they moved the capital of what became Northern Rhodesia 300 miles north to another dusty old town. This one was called 'Lusaaka' after a village headman and was built on a place called Manda Hill, which means graveyard: rather a fall in stature from 'Livingstone', I'd say. I tried to take the old permit I had bought in 1904 to the Lands Department Office in that new capital city. Could I perchance have my land in Livingstone? They laughed me out of the building. Ruled out by statute of limitations. Hardly startling – the white man's reign in Africa was already dying out by then.

After I set up my shop, I went back home to marry Kate. We'd known each other umpteen years but she insisted now was the time for the shackling. A poker game won me eighty pounds, enough for the fare home. I must say, the English countryside seemed cramped quarters after my years in the veldt. My siblings barely recognised old P.M., emaciated and with a face-fungus in patches, reach-me-downs hanging off me – a fairly disreputable wisp of humanity I was! I received strict orders to scrape off the beard and make haste to the outfitters, cash in hand. The assistants took a peek at my 'slops' and offered me the lowest price. 'Nothing better?' I asked. Up we went by degrees, the timorous Tims and I. Finally, it dawned on them: the tough had money to burn. Out came the luxury goods!

We married on 15 February 1906 at Great St Andrew's Church, Cambridge. Shock and dismay that the daughter of the Cambridge

Clerk of the Peace had tied the knot to my bedraggled self! The Zambesi may as well be the Lethe: one plumb forgets the millstone the question of money ties around the neck in Merrie Old England. I was in such a dither that I neglected to give Kate my elbow as we left the vestry, which I suppose only proved my 'country manners'. We honeymooned in Devonshire, but I was determined to sail back to Africa, where we could live in proper style.

When we arrived at Victoria Falls Town some months later, I learned I had once again been taken for a Johnny the Mug – the bloke I had hired to keep my shop and home had sold my belongings out from under me. I never caught the rascal. I was brought to tears by the kindness of my lenders. All but one – he knows who he is – forgave my debts.

Dear Kate had to build us a home from the ground up, from the very dust. My hutment was her hutment, misfortune be damned. At night, she curled close to me as the hyenas made the nights hideous with unremittent howling. One ached to hear them take two bars rest. Kate even shared my vigils when a leopard stole our chickens – we sat up, our nerves taut as banjo strings, hardly breathing until I shot the beast, fat as a stall-fed pig. Mostly she darned while I fished.

Once a week, we took a canoe across to Livingstone for a night out. Old Mopane had moved his trading company there and opened a bar and a couple of hotels. He always knew how to take advantage of a situation, even on shifting grounds. On our way to dinner or dancing, Kate and I would walk by his bar, and I'd peek in. The same old story: all classes from barrister to bricklayer tossing for drinks at the bar, singing raucous songs, and many a man laid out on benches. Naturally, I missed it, but ah, I was no longer a bachelor, roaming wide and handsome. I was a family man now, knee-halted and married – and happy! We were expecting, you see.

The great event drew near, preparations were made, and out popped a boy with a lovely head of black hair. He lived only a few minutes. Kate was nigh swallowed in grief. We kept tame guinea fowl in our yard and she often mistook their calls for his cry. We buried 'Jimmy' in the grounds of the Victoria Falls Hotel, there being no consecrated land. But remarks were made that touched us on the raw – I won't say who made them – so we reburied 'Jimmy' in our garden.

A year later, another child came early. There was a terrific storm that night, thunder trundling across the sky and a torrential downpour – seven inches in six hours! Staying dry was impossible: the thatch was an open net, the floor an ankle-deep swamp. Kate was feverish, I furious with anxiety. Time stomped on, heavy-footed. Well, the medico knew his job; my worry just made him seem slow. This time it was a girl. But we have two sons now, one named Victor to record our association with the Falls.

With my curios and pictorial postcards, the shop did a roaring trade, and as the years passed, the flood of excursionists put us on a fair footing. I saw an opportunity and started some transport companies: canoe, cart, trolley, rickshaw. The Victoria Falls Hotel stole each of those ideas straight from my pocket! The Rhodesian Railway Company owned it now and management was an excitable Welshman, always fuming about. I liked to smoke my pipe in his office to fumigate him further – to my detriment. When I refused to lower my price of a half-crown per head, he bought the rickshaw company out from under me! They still have the gall to sell my guidebook in the hotel giftshop. I do seem plagued by the unpunishable crimes of others.

But luck comes with lawlessness, too, and I did finally earn my due. In 1907, a shooting club was formed at Victoria Falls Town. Government issued us rifles and ammunition at a cut rate and the prize was a silver cup for the best score over six months. Some of the shooters got wanderlust; others gave up or left; at the end of six months, I was the only one competing. I beat the top score in a rather amusing fashion. One afternoon, I was out hunting pheasants and I spotted a pig moving through the bush. Up went my barrel, and I let him have it. There was a yell, and a nigger jumped up in the air and disappeared. Here was my 'pig'! I saw at once what was what. The boy had been sent to cut grass but he had been loitering in a *donga*, or ditch. Fearing I'd report him, he had cut for it, stooping low to escape notice, but not quite low enough – just about as low as the back of a young pig.

I found the boy unconscious, a crowd already standing around. I patched him up and sent for a doctor and set off for home. I soon became aware that a pair of native police constables were walking behind me.

'What the blazes are you on about?' I demanded.

'We were told to bring you in to the police station,' came the stilted reply.

This got my goat. Native police are never sent to take in a white. Had they no respect?

'You had better get,' I yelled, 'unless you want to get shot too!'

They got. Naturally, I reported to the colonial police myself. By the greatest of good fortune, I was not asked to produce my shooting licence – I didn't have one! Anyway, the boy suffered no great damage. Native hide is thick and the shot hadn't penetrated any vitals. The medic didn't even bother to remove the shrapnel embedded in the skin of his back, which left a pimply sort of rash. There followed months of ribbing *me*, however. 'Who shot the pig? What's the price of pork?' As it turned out, by the strangest coincidence, the native's name was 'N'gulubu', which means none other than 'pig'!

Skip ahead two years, and a native boy walks through my front gate. All a-grin. Familiar.

'Go round the back!' I shout – natives were not allowed to use the front entrance.

He stays where he is, grinning to the wind like a numbskull. It's the village idiot, I realise. The one the Italian girl, Lina, had struck down in the dining room. Imagine this:

'I'm N'gulubu,' says he and turns around to show me the Braille in his back.

'Oh, are you?' says I. 'Well, here's ten bob for you.'

Off he goes, fit as a fiddle and just as merry. Everyone was satisfied. Certainly I was: I had peppered a nig for ten bob – and got a shooting cup for it! It just goes to show – if I hadn't been down with the shakes in the first place, I'd have never snatched Gavuzzi's wig, Lina would have never struck that boy, he wouldn't have misjudged his crouch, and I'd have nabbed neither pig nor prize!

Every manner of visitor has braved the establishment of 'Mr Percy M. Clark, ARPS, FRGS, FRES', the oldest curio shop at Victoria Falls. Colonel Frank Rhodes and I talked long hours about his father, whose funeral procession I had photographed. In 1916, I was appointed official photographer to Lord Buxton and two future governors: Sir Cecil Rodwell of Southern Rhodesia and Sir Herbert Stanley of Northern Rhodesia – the two lands were finally divvied up. Sir Stewart Gore-Browne paid us many a visit – a strange man, and too free with the blacks by a mile, but our hospitality was well worth it: he helped us find sponsors for the children's education in England. I don't know if they will return, but Africa is in their blood.

I have seen this continent pass into dire civilisation. Where once one might hump one's blankets and step into the unknown, there's no unknown no more, as they say. Where once one might tramp toilsomely to gain a few meagre miles a day, now the motor car speeds by and the aeroplane growls overhead. Months stride past in an hour. There is no romance left here. I have seen moving pictures of the once shy and unapproachable Pigmy tribes of the Congo riding around in lorries. This new Africa may be of interest to those who frequent the closer-packed, noisier places in the world. But a greater, more profound noise rings in my ears just across from where I write – the Victoria Falls still keeps her vast and unchanging glory.

As for The Old Drift, which once had the dignity of a place on the map – well, it has been swallowed by swamp. I have chosen to put down roots at Victoria Falls Town, and here I will rot. But I still visit the old stomping grounds across the Zambesi now and again. All that remains is the cemetery: a dozen tumbled-down gravemarkers in the bush, dated between 1898 and 1908, some of the inscriptions eaten away by rain. It is a queer thing to wander the stones and call the roll of the dead and think on those poor crumbling sods. I read their names as warning shots:

> Georges Mercier! John Neil Wilson! Alexander Findlay! Ernest Collins! Miss E. Elliott! Samuel Thomas Alexander! David Smith! Unknown! Unknown! Unknown! Unknown! Unknown! Unknown! Unknown! Unknown! Unknown! Unknown! Unknown! Unknown! Unknown!

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