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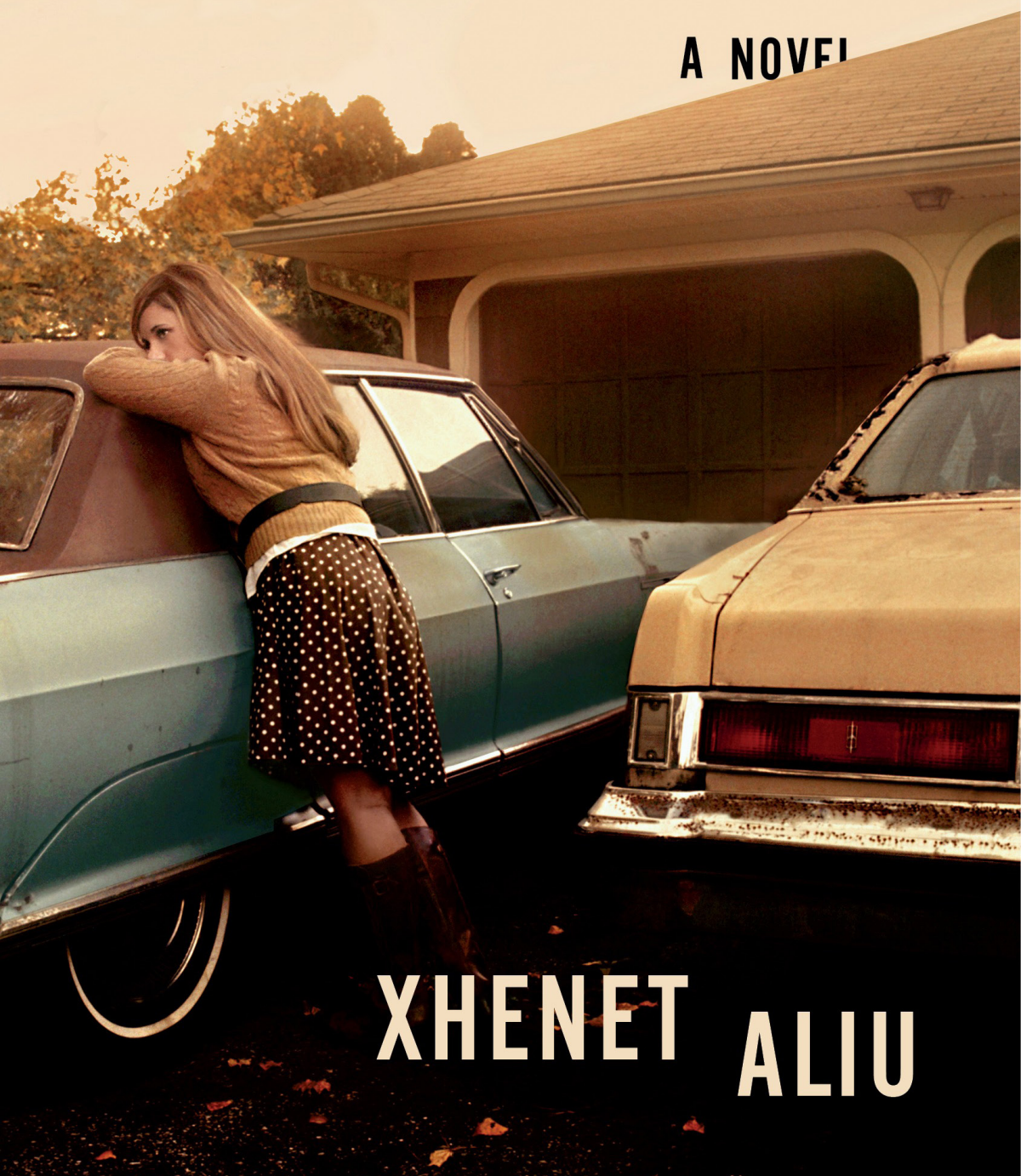
What Will You Read Next?

BRASS

A NOVEL



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CHAPTER ONE

Elsie

When the last of the brass mills locked up their doors and hauled ass out of town once and for all, it seemed all they left behind were blocks of abandoned factories that poked out from behind high stone gates like caskets floated to the surface after the Great Flood of '55.

But that wasn't true. They also left my father's hands with nothing to callus them, those poor idle bastards that once upon a time abandoned a Korean Stratocaster knockoff in favor of a Bridgeport milling machine, and just like most love triangles, it turned out he chose wrong. It left my mother slumping over the assembly line at the Peter Paul Mounds and Almond Joy factory down the street in Naugatuck, where she sometimes felt like a nut but more often she felt like a highball. It left my sister, Greta, younger than me by two years but with test scores that painted me a remedial toddler by compari-

son, with a tic that made her pull out her hair until the white bald patches of her scalp shone through like flags of surrender.

And when the last of the brass mills locked up their doors and hauled ass out of town once and for all, they left me with a change jar that hadn't even gotten me close to the wicked coupe that was going to drive me out of Waterbury so fast I wouldn't even bother to burn the skid marks that would mark my goodbye.

What I got instead was a job at the Betsy Ross Diner, slinging poutine fries and spanakopita to third-shifters headed to or coming back from their jobs as hospital guards, machinists, small-time drug dealers. And I got Bashkim, an Albanian line cook at a Greek diner named after an American patriot.

I swear to Allah, you are the most beautiful girl I have ever seen. That's what Bashkim said to me after three weeks, when he finally looked up at me in the kitchen window for the first time. It was 1996, the middle of March, a brutal part of the year when spring was supposed to hit but didn't, when I'd given up on ever being warm again.

My being beautiful was about as likely as me ever wrapping my fingers around the leather steering wheel of a souped-up six, but for the first time since I'd started working there, clocking in seemed worth the sweatbox polyester uniform and jingle-change tips. My mother had warned me when I took the job to watch out for the Albanians who worked at the Ross, because she heard they treated their women like sacks and that their tempers ran hotter than the deep fryers in the kitchen, while the nice Lithuanian boys I should've been dating had the decency to ignore their women altogether and drink themselves silently to death in their garages. *These Albanians,* she'd say, shaking her head, *they just speak Albanian to each other all the time*. Her own parents barely spoke English but also didn't want their kids to learn Lithuanian, lest they be accused by their neighbors

of being pinko bastards, so to her, open communication in any language was offensive and weird. But I was never one to take advice, and anyway, I figured she was talking about the teenage Albanians who jumped kids in the movie theater parking lot, or the middle-aged ones who choked me out of the dining room with the Marlboro Red smoke that leaked out of their mouths like cartoon thought bubbles. My mother wasn't talking about Bashkim. He was way worse than she could ever have known about, or she never would've lent me the money to buy the uniform.

I swear to Allah, you are the most beautiful girl I have ever seen.

Well hallelujah! or whatever the hell Muslims had to say about that. I might've had an Our Lady of Sorrows prayer card tucked into my wallet where the dollar bills were supposed to go, but I believed in Allah right then, because Allah believed in me. I'd been holding out hope that I wasn't really ugly, just a type of pretty that common people didn't get, and what was I surrounded by if not the common? But Bashkim, no way, he wasn't common. He'd lived halfway across the world, as far away from Waterbury as my grandparents once had. Albania. Europe. So it was Eastern Europe, with its dictators and Communism and plastic sandals worn with mismatched tube socks. No geography teacher ever taught us that Eastern Europe and Europe are not one place, not one people, not one neighbor lending sugar to the other. Anyway, the way my mother told it, Albanians were basically Arabs with a European mailing address, while we Lithuanians had had the good sense to be conquered by nice righteous Christian crusaders. Still, I was thinking that maybe Bashkim saw something familiar in me, something Old World and refined, despite the thousands of years of peasant stock that had culminated in the second-generation American plainness that was Elsie Kuzavinas. I thought maybe some of my grandparents' European blood still somehow coursed through my veins, despite forty-something years

in Waterbury, Connecticut: Brass Manufacturing Capital of the World.

I swear to Allah, you are the most beautiful girl I have ever seen.

Those weren't the first words he said to me, actually. Before that there was: How do they want that burger cooked? Why are you throwing away those creamers that aren't even used? How old are you?

Almost nineteen, I told him.

What's your name?

Elsie.

I swear to Allah, you are the most beautiful girl I have ever seen.

Bashkim's accent was even worse than my grandparents', who mostly let their twenty-six-inch Panasonic do the talking for them anyway. His voice started so far back in his throat that every word smacked of laryngitis, almost hurt to listen to. And Bashkim wasn't pretty, either, at least not in the bland way that girls like me were supposed to like. His nose and cheeks were as harsh as his voice, all angles and sharp points ready to pierce right through you if you looked him straight on. But his eyes, goddamn. So blue they were almost black, as if the grills in the kitchen had singed a permanent reflection of the butane-blue flame forever licking up under his chin.

"I swear to Allah, you are the most beautiful girl I have ever seen." He bore right into me with that stare, didn't look down while he sliced tomatoes into lopsided wedges that oozed green guts onto his apron.

"Shut up," I said.

"What reason to shut up? Don't you want to be a beautiful girl?"

"I don't care."

"You should care. You should feel lucky you are so pretty. Most people are not so pretty. Most people I don't like to look at so much."

Adem and Fatmir ignored him. The only English they understood was cussing, and anyway, I'd already figured out that the cooks at the Betsy Ross all had their favorite waitresses, wide-hipped single mothers of one or a couple, girls so desperate they heard compliments in the calls of *fat ass* that followed them out the kitchen doors. Compliments like that earned the cooks blushes, giggly slaps on the wrist, blow jobs in the employees' bathroom before the ten to two o'clock rush. So I guess Adem and Fatmir figured it was finally Bashkim's turn, that it was either shyness or the wife the waitresses told me he'd left back in the old country that had stopped him from calling out before. But what he said, it wasn't *fat ass* and it wasn't a compliment, not really. It was something more like a threat, at least with those eyes sharpening it into something that jabbed my gut like a switchblade.

"Unless you are ungrateful," he said. "Unless you are a bitch."

He got me on that one, man. Even my mother, Catholic to her core even if she hadn't said a Hail Mary since getting knocked up with me by a Holy Cross High School dropout, would agree it was something close to sin to be ungrateful.

Then Bashkim ignored me for the next three nights, even though I still walked slowly through the kitchen on my way to the employee exit to see if he'd look over. But he said nothing, so I just stepped outside to wait for my mother to pick me up, since I'd broken up with my last ride, Franky, three nights before, the timing not at all coincidental. I didn't know if I could pronounce Bashkim's name right, but even if I got the accents all wrong, it still sounded like a symphony to me compared to *Franky*. And Franky, not Frank, was his honest given Christian name, which was funny to me before it was embar-

rassing, although really, what did I have to be embarrassed about? One look at my stringy White Rain hair and yeah right I'd ever be the girlfriend of a boy named Laird or Lawrence or Anything the III. Those boys lived down in Westport or Fairfield and maybe, *maybe* the worst off of them got sent to Taft, the boarding school fifteen minutes away in Watertown. I bet it was the rich boys with disciplinary problems who got sent there: the rich parents thought their sons would watch the poor bastards who maintained their dorms pull off in dry-rotted Datsuns, and that they would imagine the poor bastards going home to their second-floor apartments on the East End of Waterbury, to their crinkly-eyed twenty-three-year-old common-law wives and their scraggly toddlers with chronic drips of Fudgsicle on their yellow tank tops even though Fudgsicles were too expensive to have in the house, and the troubled rich sons would think, Could that happen to me? though in fact, no, it could not happen to them.

So fine, I'd gotten rid of Franky, because it was true he was no knight in shining armor. But I wondered for a minute if that hunk of Toyota steel he used to drive me around in was close enough to it, because I didn't feel a single one of the eight degrees the bank's digital thermometer had said it was while I waited ten, then fifteen minutes for my mother, who had a history of leaving me stranded while she napped. And even if I found a dime to call from the pay-phone lobby, and even if she didn't sleep through the ringer, it would be ten minutes minimum before her LTD could even begin to climb out of first gear and keep pace with our neighbor Jimmy riding his daughter's pink ten-speed to some strip-mall pub after having sold his ancient Chevy for scrap metal. So I stomped my Buster Browns on the pavement, partly to keep the blood circulating but mostly just because—because the skid marks Franky's tires had made a week before were still frozen into a blackened patch of ice that I could

shatter if I kicked down hard enough, because to hell with my mother and to hell with Franky and to hell with the waitresses who were inside and warm and giving head to the cooks in exchange for baskets of hot cheese fries.

Then I heard, from behind me: *What are you doing, ding-dong?*

It was enough of a shock to scare the steady out of my legs and send me ass-down to the ground. "Huh?" I said and scrambled to get back to my feet.

"I said, 'What are you doing, ding-dong?'" Footsteps crunched over the gravel, and then Bashkim stood in front of me, fists gripping the red ties of a half dozen weeping trash bags.

I must've looked like someone who knew a thing or two about trash herself, down on the tar with my legs splayed, showing off the cotton briefs bunched underneath my pantyhose, the ugly, shiny pantyhose that only fat dance-line girls and diner waitresses wore. And I was the most beautiful girl Bashkim had ever seen, right? Obviously he didn't understand what the word meant in English, or else he'd gotten fluent enough to lie straight-faced in a second language.

"I fell down, jerk. Thanks for asking," I said.

Bashkim offered his hand to help me up, and his skin was as cold as the air, so his touch felt like needles. And he didn't let go when I was back on my feet, and I swore even with everything else out there frosted over I was somehow sweating, that a fever I didn't know I had was breaking.

Still, I managed to say, "And don't call me ding-dong. Nobody says that. Just call me an asshole if that's what you mean."

Instead he called my name.

"Elsie. Elsie," he said.

Where it came from, what it meant, I didn't know. But I knew where it went. Straight from the tips of my toes, which I thought had

been frostbitten to permanent numbness, but no, I was wrong, because a feather-tickle started there and then danced on up those shiny tights, which were suddenly warm as fur. Franky had never said my name twice like that, as if it sounded so good he had to hear it again. Rocco before him had never said it, or Joe Pelletier before him. Especially not Joe Pelletier before him, who instead had just shrieked when he tore what was left of my virginity, crying because he thought the blood on his thighs was his own.

"What are you doing out here? It's too cold for you out here," Bashkim said.

"It's too cold for anyone out here."

"It feels good to me. The grill is hot. Even in winter it feels like hell back there."

"Maybe hell froze over," I said. "And that explains why it's so cold in this town."

Bashkim finally let go of my hand and squinted at me, as if he'd lost a contact lens and had confused me for someone else this whole time.

"It's an expression," I said. "'When hell freezes over.'"

"I know that. I know the expression. You think this is hell here?"

Across the street, one sign remained lit in a plaza with a half dozen storefronts, a rent-to-own center that had managed to stick around a couple of years, even though the refrigerators people rented to own must've been hard to fill after the grocery store in the plaza had gone out of business. Next door to the Ross a floodlight shone from the garage where people brought their Dodge K-cars that had broken down on the way to the rent-to-own center, where they were shopping in the first place because they couldn't afford to buy refrigerators outright after putting their paychecks into last month's car repairs. And next door to the garage was a dingy twenty-four-hour

laundromat, where people washed their linens while waiting for the estimates from the mechanic, bleaching the brown halos left behind on their pillowcases after sweaty, sleepless nights worrying about where the next rent-to-own payment would come from if they couldn't get to work without their K-cars.

And then they came into the Ross for bottomless cups of Maxwell House, and left behind thin dimes for me.

"I think this is maybe the crappiest place on earth," I said.

Bashkim laughed and pulled a cigarette from behind his ear. "How much of earth have you seen?"

"Enough," I said, but I didn't mention that it'd all been in my grandfather's *National Geographic*s. "Can I have a cigarette?"

"You haven't seen nothing," he answered for me and pulled a soft pack from his front pocket, the Marlboro he shook from it curved from the shape of his thigh. The cigarette was still warm when it reached my lips, and it sent heat through the rest of my flesh before he even flicked his Bic to light it for me.

We both stood for a minute, exhaling, our white breath thick in the air between us like a chaperone.

"I'll be out of here when I get a car. And finish school. But mostly when I get a car," I said. My mother liked to remind me that I'd barely put away enough for a pine air freshener after three years of my big talk, but she was a woman who went by Mamie because she didn't like the sound of Mommy, said it reminded her of creepy skinny guys who pay money to be bossed around by ladies in leather. And she couldn't use Mom, because that was for women with tennis bracelets and husbands. I'd ride a Power Wheels down I-84 just to prove that lady wrong.

"I lived in three countries without a car. Now I have a car, and I don't leave to go anywhere anymore," Bashkim said.

"Don't tell me it's because you reached your destination."

Bashkim ashed his cigarette, then pulled the one from my lips and ashed that one, too. I decided to interpret that as a weird Albanian act of chivalry, though really, any act of chivalry would have been just as foreign to me.

"You're freezing," he said. "Hell froze over. Your boyfriend is picking you up?"

"My mother. I don't have a boyfriend."

"Yes you do. I am your boyfriend."

"I don't know if your wife will like that," I said.

"You don't say anything about my wife. That's rule number one."

Rule number one. It was settled, then. We had our first rule before we had our first kiss, but for damn sure that was what made him my boyfriend. And it hurt me to face that kind of truth, like seeing my ugly face on the video cameras on display in the front entrance at Sears, but I couldn't wait for rule number two.

The next night, Gjonni, on duty for what must've been his twenty-seventh straight hour, argued with Bashkim in words that sounded like a Zeppelin record played backward. I never could understand who at the Ross was actually related to each other, since everybody called each other Cousin, except for Gjonni, the boss, who went by Uncle, and Yllka, his wife, who people were too afraid of to call anything but her proper name. But I knew Gjonni and Yllka were real family to Bashkim, because the three of them fought the hardest, and because Bashkim and Yllka, who the waitresses told me shared actual blood, had matching deep creases scored across their foreheads and mouths, Yllka's just a little deeper set with middle age. She'd already gone home for the night, though, so this bout was strictly man-to-man.

Gjonni said to me, "You can use our phone to call your mother. You don't have to spend your money on the pay phone, princess."

Bashkim answered for me. "It's late, xhaxha, this is when regular people sleep. It's not busy. I will drive her home, I will come back."

Gjonni shook his head and spoke louder, talking so fast that I didn't think even Bashkim could catch it all in his native tongue. But even though Gjonni's voice overpowered Bashkim's, apparently Bashkim still won, because a few seconds later he was unknotting the apron strings around his waist.

"Let's go," he said.

He wadded the apron into a tight ball that tumbled apart when he threw it onto the counter behind him. Inside my intestines were doing the same, streaming into my legs like unspooled thread from a bobbin.

Bashkim led me to a Fiero in the parking lot, a white coupe in fresh-off-the-lot condition even though Pontiac had booted that model from the assembly line years before. It was the kind of sports car that Franky and the rest of the auto-shop meatheads in my school used to drive, since it implied muscle and always needed to be worked on, but it apparently also appealed to Eastern Europeans who were pretending to be James Dean without ever having seen a James Dean movie. Bashkim thumbed at a scratch that didn't exist before he unlocked the door for me.

"This is what you're saving for, huh?" he asked.

"Kind of," I said.

"You know how to drive something like this?" His pointer and middle fingers wrapped over the stick shift, those two digits thick enough to span the entire eight ball that, naturally, was the shifter's knob. Big thick fingers like that reminded me of the overfed amaretto-soaked shift bosses who always volunteered to play Santa at my mother's Christmas parties back when the factories would

spring for Christmas parties, but somehow on Bashkim they didn't gross me out. They seemed right, like he needed strong hands for more than just fondling preadolescents after a fistful of rum balls.

"Not really," I said.

"Your father did not teach you?"

"Last thing my father taught me how to drive had training wheels," I said.

"That's reverse."

"What? Where's reverse?" I asked, but he just wiggled the shifter somewhere else.

I tried to pay attention to what his clutch foot and shifting arm were doing as he lurched forward and pulled out onto Wolcott Road, but mostly I fiddled with the radio, rolling the knob from the AM talk radio station it was set on through a half dozen FM classic rock stations, all of them playing songs more worn-out than classic. Bashkim pressed harder on the gas, and the engine revved into the same shrill pitch as the Billy Squier pumping through the speakers.

"Aren't you supposed to shift it?" I asked.

"I know how to make this car move, ding-dong. You just pay attention."

The car was moving. Moving and bucking and growling like a rabid junkyard dog.

"Okay. You have to take a left up here at Stillson," I said, but he drove right past it and instead banged a last-minute right onto Long Hill, a road that lived up to its name, lined on both sides with woods dense enough to bury the victims of the kinds of things that took place in the neighborhood where Long Hill ended.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

Bashkim shrugged. If he was taking me somewhere to slay me, I hoped the newspaper would get it right when my body was discov-

ered and some local crime reporter had to come up with three hundred words about it: that I was happier to have died Bashkim's victim than his nothing-at-all.

Instead he pulled the car into the parking lot of an L-shaped warehouse tucked behind a gate of overgrown shrubbery and parked it nose-out at the farthest corner from the road. "Get in this seat," he said. I moved my hand to open the door but he grabbed my wrist. "Just crawl over me."

I swung my leg over to the driver's side and slid across his lap. He grasped my hips between his hands and held me on top of him for a few seconds. His lap was so warm a million tiny beads of sweat sprouted from my skin and I felt greasy and disgusting, exposed for what I was.

He let go.

"Tight squeeze," he said.

I nodded, pulled myself the rest of the way over to the driver's side, and gripped the steering wheel tight while he settled into the passenger seat.

"What are you doing, ding-dong?" he said. "You have to turn the car on if you want to drive it."

I turned the key in the ignition. The car turned over and retched and stalled out.

"You have to push the clutch in to start it," he said.

I pressed the clutch down and tried again. The car turned over and the engine kept running this time.

"Hey, I did it," I said.

"You have to move before you can say that." He pulled my hand onto the shifter and draped his over it. "You start in this gear. Push in the gas a little bit and let out the clutch a little bit at the same time."

The car choked like an asthmatic and puttered out.

"Little more gas," he said. "Let the clutch out slow. Very slow."

I tried it again. This time the car sneezed but kept rolling forward.

"Now we're going," he said. "Let the clutch go all the way. Now go faster. No, keep steering, too, ding-dong. Just drive around the whole outside of the parking lot. Hear how the engine is so loud now? Now you have to go to the next gear. Here," he said, and he guided my hand to second. "When the engine gets loud like that, you have to shift to a higher gear. There are five gears. You get to fifth gear on the highway only, usually. Here is too small to get higher than second, maybe third. You see, there's a picture on the knob there of where the different gears are, but you can feel it. In between the gears you are in neutral. It's the same as when you press the clutch, that's neutral. Get it?"

I nodded, even though I only kind of got it.

"Good. Now pull out onto the street. Make sure you're in first. Always start in first."

It wasn't graceful, but I managed to do what he said. For the first few minutes, he had to direct every move that each of my limbs made: *left leg over the clutch, now press down onto it, relax your right hand, now pull the shifter to the right, now push it to the left, slower now, faster now,* all acting and reacting and going against instinct. My left hand had to steer the car alone, and my bicep ached after only a few minutes of guiding it without the help of power steering. Driving the Fiero was nothing like driving my mother's LTD, which felt passive, like it was the road that was moving while I sat still. Bashkim navigated me through streets that I'd never driven down even though I'd spent my whole life in Waterbury.

"This is so awesome," I said, once I'd gotten used enough to the movements that Bashkim didn't have to prompt them step by step.

"Yes, and it will be more awesome when you can drive it over

twenty-five miles per hour. Always it was my dream to have an American sports car."

I didn't tell him that no American had ever dreamed of owning a Fiero, that at best they'd settled for it.

"Now pull into that parking lot up there on the right," he said, guiding me to another tucked-away warehouse. "Put the shifter in neutral and turn the car off."

After a minute he still hadn't given me the next direction, so I turned to him and asked silently for it. The glow from the nearest streetlamp barely lit the car, but even so, I could make out the lines around Bashkim's eyes, radiating like the beams of a sun in a child's drawing. He smiled, and it filled in the creases around his lips. Before that night I wondered how those lines had even gotten there, when I'd never once seen him smile.

"Now come over here." He patted his lap. "I want to teach you something else."

I obeyed. After all, he'd gotten me this far.

For weeks Bashkim and I dated in the front seat of that Fiero. He never let me drive it again, and I took that for another act of chivalry, that he wanted to chauffeur me around, because why would I want to take it for anything else?

But eventually I started complaining about the stick shift leaving a dent in my lower back, and that I was starting to feel like one of those two-dollar whores we sometimes cruised past on Cherry Street on our way to the Burger King. Finally he caved one night, negotiated with Gjonni to work a single instead of a double, and drove us to the dozen-room Queen Anne he shared with two dozen other people. The house was like most of them at the top of Hillside Avenue, all clapboards and gables and places for Rapunzel to let down

her hair, but nobody thought to call them mansions anymore, not since the brass executives who used to live there fled down to Georgia and the maids moved into the places they used to clean.

"Like *90210,* right?" Bashkim said.

"Yeah, it's, you know, big," I said. And it was, only those epic ceilings you couldn't reach even with a step stool just made extra room for all the sadness, all those lace curtains draped over foyer windows like widows' veils. It was a house built for pipe tobacco that reeked instead of Marlboro Reds.

"It needs soap and water," Bashkim said, looking at the three women leaning against a banister. It was obvious they didn't speak English, but they knew they were being accused of something, and they stared at me like I was the one who'd tattled. They scattered when we walked past but came back together when we closed the door to Bashkim's room behind us. Even if I didn't understand any of the words they used, I understood perfectly well what they were saying. Other than their outdated denim and the babushka that the oldest one among them wore, they were just the same as the girls back at Crosby High.

"They don't like me," I said to Bashkim.

"They don't like nobody, not even their husbands," he said.

"Do you like me?"

"I love you," he said, and it was a good thing there was a doorframe to lean against, because hearing him say that almost took me down. Bashkim had misused words with me before, like *blow work* when he meant *blow job,* but then again, I had been promoted from car girlfriend to bedroom girlfriend, so I thought: Well, maybe he means it?

So I said to him—whispered, really—"I love you, too," and he answered in Albanian, a word I never learned the meaning of but now assume meant something along the lines of *oops*.

There were tiny thumbtack holes all over the walls in Bashkim's room, little scars where the snapshots of his wife had obviously been the day before. I probably should've chosen to think of it as courtesy that Bashkim had shoved them all into a drawer with his underwear and tube socks, but instead it made me feel like one of those two-dollar whores down on Cherry Street all over again, which even my skank stretch jeans with the lace panels up and down the legs didn't make me do. Having something to hide made it seem like we were doing something wrong, when up until that point I was feeling like everything was pretty damn right.

"What was up here?" I asked.

"Up where?"

"On the wall. What was hanging? All the holes. Looks like you had pictures tacked up."

"There is nothing," he said and went back to work on me, which took so much effort on the air mattress that we finally just finished off on the floor.

But once he was done, I went back to thinking about the pictures that should've been hanging. A lady in a babushka and no smile, like the lady outside Bashkim's door. A lady dressed in gray even on her wedding day.

"What's the matter with you today?" Bashkim asked, after I passed on a cigarette and ignored him jabbing his thumb into my armpit. He flirted like a kindergartner, jabbing and poking and running away.

"Nothing's the matter," I said.

"Liar," he said.

"It's just."

Another thumb in the pit. "Spit it out, dum-dum," he said.

"It's just what's the story with your wife?"

"Ach," Bashkim said. He swung around and pulled up his BVDs,

but I grabbed on to his arm before he could put on his trousers. I planted my face into his back, which was hot and full of pimples that I had never noticed before.

"I didn't mean it like that," I said.

"I told you not to ask about my wife."

"We have to talk about it sometime," I said.

"Why?"

"Because I'm lying here naked in your room and you're telling me that you love me and you're going to have to leave me someday."

"I am not leaving anything ever anymore," he said. He pulled away, but he dropped his pants back on the floor and sat down on the mattress, and we sat there looking at our own useless limbs.

"Don't worry about Agnes," he said, finally. It was the first time he'd spoken her name aloud to me, and even though I was the one who brought it up, I wanted him to take it back.

"I can't help it," I said. "I know how this is going to end."

"You don't know nothing. She is not leaving Albania and I am not going back. What does that sound like to you?"

"It doesn't sound like anything. It sounds like exactly how things are right now."

"And that is not enough? You want more?"

"I don't know," I said, but I did know: of course it wasn't enough. I still needed a car and a ticket out of my mother's house and an epic sort of love you can get tattooed across your forearm without thinking twice about it.

"You want more?" he asked again, this time a little disgusted, and I was about to change my mind and tell him, *No, of course not, this is all I need,* because I was afraid that he would take even that away. But then he said, "She does not want more. She wants nothing," and I saw that the disgust wasn't directed at me, and I felt so much relief

that I had to smile, even though I knew that wasn't appropriate, like laughing at a funeral.

"Sorry," I said, but he wasn't looking at me anyway. He was looking at the holes in the wall like he was trying to make a pattern out of them, a constellation or something, but he couldn't read an astrology map any better than he could read English.

"That place, everything it did to us, to our families. She would be happy to die there like our fathers. Born in a camp, a prison, and she wants me to die there. It's sick. It's not the way things should be."

"Camp?"

"Yes, the camp, the labor camp," he said, like the phrase was supposed to jog my memory, but to me camp was just a place where practicing Catholics sent their kids to study the saints and where they usually instead popped their cherries. Bashkim saw my blank face and shook his head like a special ed teacher talking to his most hopeless student. "The work camps, they were places where enemies of the state were sent. Disgusting places. You would not even want to raise animals in there."

"And your father was in one?"

"My whole family. I was born in one," he said. "It was home until I was fourteen."

"Jesus," I said.

He shook his head. "There was no Jesus, no Allah. No god at all there."

The Albanians at the Ross, sometimes they talked about stuff like *the Party* and *the Prisons,* but I never really thought about what those words meant to them, because they were just line cooks and dishwashers, and every line cook and dishwasher I knew came from the kind of terrible third-world place that made Waterbury look like Daytona Beach or some other mystical paradise. I didn't want those

people to try to convince me that I really didn't have it so bad here, the way my grandparents, fifty years after landing in Waterbury, still said things to me like *You think cleaning a toilet is hard? Try living under the Bolsheviks.* I didn't want to think about how it was unfair that some people had it so much worse when I'd already committed to fixating on people who had it so much better. But Bashkim wasn't just a line cook from a land that it seemed like *Time* invented for a cover story. He was the person who taught me to drive a stick and give a proper hand job and make everything taste better with feta cheese. He was the first person I knew who was willing to go thousands of miles to upgrade a crap life for a better one, when my own people seemed to have landed in Waterbury only to take the first offer that was handed to them. He was perfect, an inch shorter than I thought I would've liked, but with an extra few inches around the biceps. That was the wrong thing to be thinking at that moment, but I was thinking it anyway. It took both of my hands to circle one of his arms.

"Why were you there?" I asked. "What did your father do?"

His muscles grew stiffer under my palms, and he shrugged. "He owned cows," he said.

I waited for him to continue, and when he didn't, I said, "And?"

He looked at me. "And nothing. That is enough. He had cows that he didn't report. He wanted to sell them, but the state found them and took the cows and took our property, and my parents were sent to dig in the fields."

"But that can't be it," I said. "You weren't allowed to have cows?"

"What do you mean, it can't be it? Of course it's it. You could not have anything that the Party didn't want you to have. That meat was for Hoxha. Everything was for Hoxha. That is all there was. You were either friend or enemy of the Party."

"What's Hoxha?"

"Not what, who. A dictator. I would not even call him a man."

"One man? How can one person eat all of that meat?"

Bashkim and I looked at each other, each of us shocked by how confused the other was. "One person could not. That was not the point. The point was that nothing was for you, everything was for him."

"But that's *it*? Really it? Just cows?"

"That's it? You do not understand at all. That was a big, dangerous thing. That was not just *it*."

"So it was like Russia? It was that bad?"

"Russia. I would have liked to escape to Russia."

"My grandparents escaped the Russians in Lithuania. They talk about it like it was the worst thing in the world, like half their schoolteachers got sent to Siberia," I said.

"The worst thing is when your own people are the ones torturing you. No Russian knows how to hurt you the way your own people do."

"God," I said. "Really?"

"And this is what she wants, to stay there and remember," he said, kind of quiet, like he was talking to himself.

"That's stupid," I said, and it was supposed to sound encouraging, but he wasn't listening to me anyway, or at least he wasn't looking at me. He was still reading those walls, a little more intently even. Maybe they were starting to make sense after all.

"The problem with Albanians now, it's Albania this, Albania that. Albania has most beautiful mountains, Albania has most beautiful seas. But what do they know about mountains or seas? They lived in a prison. Even the ones not in the camps, they lived in a prison. Then Hoxha dies and the Party falls and they go to Austria or U.K. and work in kitchens all day and night. They don't know nothing about any world outside of Albania. They just close their eyes so they don't

have to find out. Me, no, I know better. I come here and I won't go back. Never."

"I'm glad you're here," I said, like an idiot.

"When I get my money back, I will divorce her, and then the last of me is gone from there."

"Money?" I asked.

He smiled a little, and I could almost see that yellow canary feather stuck between his teeth. "Yes, money. Good money. An investment I made. One good thing about Albania, it's, what do you say, the ground floor now. You put a little money in now, it comes back soon four and five times more. This money I made at the Ross this month, already it's twice as much." He shook his head. "I will be paid back. It's too late for my father, but I will be paid back."

Investment, he said. A year in America and he already understood better than I did what this country was built on. As far as I was concerned, an investment was some kind of cheap ploy to make you give someone your money in exchange for promises that are impossible to fulfill, the way the billboard for Western Connecticut State University on I-84 said INVEST IN YOUR FUTURE, and showed a smiling nurse-to-be checking the pulse of an old lady who'd soon not even be alive. It was a scam, the billboard. I went to an information session and they told me there was a two-year waiting list to even be accepted to the nursing program, but in the meantime I could take core classes like English and Sociology, which would give me the kind of solid foundation it takes to be unhirable for life. When Bashkim said the word *investment,* though, it didn't sound quite so hopeless. He had a light in his eyes that the recruiters for WCSU most certainly did not. And he was also talking divorce, which was the whipped cream and cherry on top of it all. Never mind that I'd seen enough prime-time TV to know never to believe it when your boyfriend talks about leaving his wife. But Bashkim wasn't a soap opera villain,

some conniving *90210* hunk, he was for real, and I knew it because he was talking about leaving Aggie not for my sake but for his. The way he said it, all bitter and disgusted. And the opposite way he said *investment,* all hopeful and smug, he obviously understood something about it that I did not, even though the word was in my native tongue.

So I asked him what he meant, and he just laughed.

"It's not something to explain to a woman. All you have to know is I won't be flipping hamburgers forever. Soon I buy my own place, you know? Gjonni can be my cook."

"And what will I do?"

"You will do nothing. You will just enjoy. You will drive your own sports car that I buy for you."

"A Jetta," I said. "Not a sports car. A new Jetta."

"What else?"

"An apartment in Manhattan."

"What else?"

"Um, a fancy dog. A poodle or something."

"Okay," he said. "Whatever you want." He wasn't even smiling like it was part of a joke. He was for real, this plan he had was for real, and I was lucky enough to be invited along. Maybe everything he was talking about was just a hypnotist's pocket watch swinging before my eyes, but even if there was a little piece of me that thought I should know better, there was no way I'd refuse the offer. An impossible dream was better than no dream at all.

MARY LYNN BRACHT

White Chrysanthemum

A NOVEL

PUTNAM

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It is nearly dawn, and the semidarkness casts strange shadows along the footpath. Hana distracts her mind so that she doesn't imagine creatures reaching for her ankles. She is following her mother down to the sea. Her nightdress streams behind her in the soft wind. Quiet footsteps pad behind them, and she knows without looking back that her father is following with her little sister still asleep in his arms. On the shore, a handful of women are already waiting for them. She recognizes their faces in the rising dawn light, but the shaman is a stranger. The holy woman wears a red and royal blue traditional hanbok *dress, and as soon as they descend upon the sand, the shaman begins to dance.*

The huddling figures step away from her twirling motions and form into a small group, mesmerized by the shaman's grace. She chants a greeting to the Dragon Sea God, welcoming him to their island, beckoning him to travel through the bamboo gates toward Jeju's tranquil shores. The sun sparkles on the horizon, a pinpoint of iridescent gold, and Hana blinks at the newness of the coming day. It is a forbidden ceremony, outlawed by the occupying Japanese government, but her mother is insistent upon holding a

traditional gut *ritual before her first dive as a fully fledged* haenyeo. *The shaman is asking for safety and a bountiful catch. As the shaman repeats the words over and over, Hana's mother nudges her shoulder and together they bow, foreheads touching the wet sand, to honor the Dragon Sea God's imminent arrival. As she stands, her sister's sleepy voice whispers, "I want to dive, too," and the yearning in her voice tugs on Hana's heart. "You will be standing here one day soon, Little Sister, and I will be right beside you to welcome you," she whispers back, confident of the future that lies ahead of them.*

Salty seawater drips down her temple, and she wipes it away with the back of her hand. I am a *haenyeo* now*, Hana thinks, watching the shaman twirl white ribbons in circles along the shore. She reaches for her sister's small hand. Side by side they stand, listening to the waves tumbling onto the beach. The ocean is the only sound as the small group silently acknowledges her acceptance into their order. When the sun rises fully above the ocean waves, she will dive with the* haenyeo *in deeper waters and take her place among the women of the sea. But first they must return to their homes in secret, hidden from prying eyes.*

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Hana, come home. Her sister's voice is loud in her ears, jolting her back to the present, to the room and the soldier still asleep on the floor beside her. The ceremony fades into the darkness. Desperate not to let it go, Hana squeezes her eyes shut.

She has been held captive for nearly two months, but time moves painfully slow in this place. She tries not to look back on what she has endured, what they force her to do, what they command her to be. At home, she was someone else, something else.

Ages seem to have passed since then, and Hana feels nearer to the grave than to memories of home. Her mother's face swimming up to

meet her in the waters. The salt water on her lips. Fragments of memories of a happier place.

The ceremony was one of power and strength, just like the women of the sea, just like Hana. The soldier lying next to her stirs. He will not defeat her, she promises herself. She lies awake all night imagining how she will escape.

Hana

Jeju Island, Summer 1943

Hana is sixteen and knows nothing but a life lived under occupation. Japan annexed Korea in 1910, and Hana speaks fluent Japanese, is educated in Japanese history and culture, and is prohibited from speaking, reading, or writing in her native Korean. She is a second-class citizen with second-class rights in her own country, but that does not diminish her Korean pride. Hana and her mother are *haenyeo*, women of the sea, and they work for themselves. They live in a tiny village on Jeju Island's southern coast and dive in a cove hidden from the main road that leads into town. Hana's father is a fisherman. He navigates the South Sea with the other village men, evading imperial fishing boats that loot Korea's coastal waters for produce to repatriate back to Japan. Hana and her mother only interact with Japanese soldiers when they go to market to sell their day's catch. It creates a sense of freedom not many on the other side of the island, or even on mainland Korea, a hundred miles to the north, enjoy. The occupation is a taboo topic, especially at market; only

the brave dare to broach it, and even then only in whispers and behind cupped hands. The villagers are tired of the heavy taxes, the forced *donations* to the war effort, and the taking of men to fight on the front lines and children to work in factories in Japan.

On Hana's island, diving is women's work. Their bodies suit the cold depths of the ocean better than men's. They can hold their breath longer, swim deeper, and keep their body temperature warmer, so for centuries, Jeju women have enjoyed a rare independence. Hana followed her mother into the sea at an early age. Learning to swim began the moment she could lift her head on her own, though she was nearly eleven the first time her mother took her into the deeper waters and showed her how to cut an abalone from a rock on the seafloor. In her excitement, Hana lost her breath sooner than expected and had to race upward for air. Her lungs burned. When she finally broke the surface, she breathed in more water than oxygen. Sputtering with her chin barely above the waves, she was disoriented and began to panic. A sudden swell rolled over her, submerging her in an instant. She swallowed more water as her head dipped beneath the surface.

With one hand, her mother lifted Hana's face above the water. Hana gulped in air between racking coughs. Her nose and throat burned. Her mother's hand, secured at the nape of her neck, reassured her until she recovered.

"Always look to the shore when you rise, or you can lose your way," her mother said, and turned Hana to face the land. There on the sand, her younger sister sat protecting the buckets containing the day's catch. "Look for your sister after each dive. Never forget. If you see her, you are safe."

When Hana's breaths had returned to normal, her mother released her and commenced diving with a slow forward somersault down into the ocean's depths. Hana watched her sister a few moments longer, taking in the serene sight of her resting on the beach, waiting for her family to return from the sea. Fully recovered, Hana swam to the buoy and

added her abalone to her mother's catch, which was stowed safely in a net. Then she performed her own somersault, down into the ocean's thrumming interior, in search of another sea creature to add to their harvest.

Her sister was too young to dive with them when they were that far from the shore. Sometimes, when Hana surfaced, she would look first to the shore to find her sister chasing after seagulls, waving sticks wildly in the air. She was like a butterfly dancing across Hana's sightline.

Hana was already seven years old when her sister was finally born. She had worried she would be an only child her whole life. She had wished for a younger sibling for so long—all of her friends had two, three, or sometimes even four brothers and sisters to play with each day and to share the burden of household chores, while she had to suffer everything alone. But then her mother became pregnant, and Hana swelled with such hope that she beamed each time she caught a glimpse of her mother's growing stomach.

"You're much fatter today, aren't you, Mother?" she asked the morning of her sister's birth.

"Very, very fat and uncomfortable!" her mother replied, and tickled Hana's taut stomach.

She tumbled onto her back and giggled with delight. Once she caught her breath, Hana sat beside her mother and placed a hand on the outermost curve of her bulging stomach.

"My sister or brother must be nearly done, right, Mother?"

"Nearly done? You speak as though I'm boiling rice inside my belly, silly girl!"

"Not rice, my new sister . . . or brother," Hana added quickly, and felt a timid kick against her hand. "When will she, or he, come out?"

"Such an impatient daughter sits before me." Her mother shook her head in resignation. "Which would you prefer, a sister or a brother?"

Hana knew the correct answer was a brother, so that her father would have a son to share his fishing knowledge with, but in her head

she answered differently. *I hope you have a daughter, so that one day, she can swim in the sea with me.*

Her mother went into labor that evening, and when they showed Hana her baby sister, she couldn't contain her happiness. She smiled the widest smile her face had ever known, yet tried with all her might to speak as though she was disappointed.

"I'm sorry that she is not a son, Mother, truly sorry," Hana said, shaking her head in mock sorrow.

Then Hana turned to her father and pulled his shirtsleeve. He leaned down, and she cupped her hands around his ear.

"Father, I must confess something to you. I'm very sorry for you, that she is not a son to learn your fishing skills, but . . ." She took a deep breath before finishing. "But I'm so happy I have a sister to swim with."

"Is that so?" he asked.

"Yes, but don't tell Mother."

At seven years old, Hana was not skilled in the art of whispering, and gentle laughter rippled through the group of her parents' closest friends. Hana grew quiet. Her ears burned. She hid behind her father and peeked at her mother from underneath his arm to see if she had also heard. Her mother gazed at her eldest daughter and then looked down at the hungry infant suckling her breast and whispered to her newest daughter, just loud enough for Hana to hear.

"You are the most loved little sister in the whole of Jeju Island. Do you know that? No one will ever love you more than your big sister."

When she looked up at Hana, she motioned for her to come to her side. The adults in the room grew quiet as Hana knelt beside her mother.

"You are her protector now, Hana," her mother said in a serious tone.

Hana gazed at her tiny baby sister. She reached out to caress the black tuft of hair sprouting from her scalp.

"She's so soft," Hana said with wonder.

"Did you hear what I said? You are a big sister now, and with that comes responsibilities, and the first one is that of protector. I won't always be around; diving in the sea and selling at the market keeps us fed, and it will be left up to you to watch over your little sister from now on when I can't. Can I rely on you?" her mother asked, her voice stern.

Hana's hand shot back to her side. She bowed her head and dutifully answered.

"Yes, Mother, I will keep her safe. I promise."

"A promise is forever, Hana. Never forget."

"I will remember, Mother, always," Hana said, her eyes glued onto her little sister's peacefully dozing face. Milk dripped from the side of the baby's open mouth, and her mother wiped it with a swipe of her thumb.

As the years passed, and Hana began to dive with her mother in the deeper waters, she grew accustomed to seeing her sister in the distance, the girl who shared her blankets at night and whispered silly stories into the darkness, until she finally succumbed to sleep. The girl who laughed at everything and anything, a sound that made everyone nearby join in. She became Hana's anchor, to the shore and to life.

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Hana knows that protecting her sister means keeping her away from Japanese soldiers. Her mother has drilled the lesson into her: *Never let them see you! And most of all, do not let yourself be caught alone with one!* Her mother's words of warning are filled with an ominous fear, and at sixteen Hana feels lucky this has never happened. But that changes on a hot summer day.

It is late in the afternoon, long after the other divers have gone to the market, when Hana first sees Corporal Morimoto. Her mother wanted to fill an extra net for a friend who was ill and couldn't dive that day.

Her mother is always the first to offer help. Hana comes up for air and looks to the shore. Her sister is squatting on the sand, shading her eyes to look out toward Hana and their mother. At nine years of age, her sister is now old enough to stay on the shore alone but still too young to swim in the deeper waters with Hana and her mother. She is small for her age and not yet a strong swimmer.

Hana has just found a large conch and is ready to shout at her sister to express her joy, when she notices a man heading toward the beach. Treading water so that she can lift herself higher to see him more clearly, Hana realizes the man is a Japanese soldier. Her stomach knots into a sudden cramp. Why is he here? They never come this far from the villages. She scans the beach within the cove to see if there are more, but he's the only one. He is heading straight for her sister.

A ridge of rocks shields her sister from his view, but it won't do so for long. If he stays on his current path, he will stumble upon her, and then he will take her away—ship her off to a factory in Japan like the other young girls who disappear from the villages. Her sister isn't strong enough to survive factory work or the brutal conditions they are subjected to. She is too young, and too loved, to be taken away.

Searching the horizon for her mother, Hana realizes she is down below, oblivious to the Japanese soldier heading toward the water's edge. She has no time to wait for her mother to resurface, and even if she did, her mother is too far away, hunting near the edge of the reef where it drops into a cavernous void with no seafloor in sight for miles. It is Hana's job to protect her little sister. She made a promise to her mother, and she intends to keep it.

Hana dives beneath the waves, swimming at full speed toward the beach. She can only hope to reach her sister before the soldier does. If she can distract him long enough, perhaps her sister can slip away and hide in the nearby cove, and then Hana can escape back into the ocean. Surely he wouldn't follow her into the water?

The current crushes against her as though desperate to push her back

out to sea, toward safety. Panicking, she breaches the water's surface and takes in a deep breath, catching a glimpse of the soldier's progress. He is still headed for the rocky ledge.

She starts to swim above the waves, aware she is exposing herself but unable to bear staying too long beneath the water for fear of missing the soldier's advance. Hana is halfway to her sister when she sees him stop. He digs in his pocket for something. Plunging her head back into the water, she swims even faster. In her next breath, she sees him light a cigarette. With every subsequent breath, he moves just a little more. He blows out a puff of smoke, takes a drag, breathes it out, again and again with each lift of her head, until the last breath, when he looks toward the ocean and notices Hana's race toward him.

Only ten meters away from the shore, she hopes he can't see her little sister from where he stands. She is still hidden by the rocks, but not for long. Her small hands are on the stony sand, and she is beginning to push herself up to standing. Hana can't shout at her to stay down. She swims faster.

Hana pitches beneath the surface, pulling the water out of her way with each stroke, until her hands touch the sandy ground. Then she shoots to her feet and runs through the last few meters of shallow water. If he has called out to her as she runs toward the ledge, she can't hear him. Her heart thunders in her ears, blocking out all sound. It feels like she has traveled across half the earth in that sprint to the shore, but she can't stop yet. Her feet fly across the sand toward her sister, who is smiling at her in ignorance and preparing to greet Hana. Before her sister can speak, Hana lunges at her, seizing her shoulders and knocking her to the ground.

She covers her sister's mouth with her hand to keep her from crying out. When she sees Hana's face hovering above her, she knows better than to cry. Hana gives her a look only a little sister would understand. She pushes her sister into the sand, wishing she could bury her to hide her from the soldier's sight, but she has no time.

"Where did you go?" the soldier calls down to Hana. He is standing on a low rock ledge overlooking the beach. If he stands on the edge he could look down and see them both lying beneath him. "Has the mermaid transformed into a girl?"

His boots crunch on the stones above them. Her sister's trembling body feels fragile in Hana's hands. Her fear is contagious, and Hana, too, begins to tremble. She realizes there is nowhere for her sister to run. From his vantage point, he can see in every direction. They will both have to escape into the ocean, but her sister can't swim for very long. Hana can remain in the deep water for hours, but her little sister will drown if the soldier decides to wait them out. She has no plan. No escape. The realization sits heavy in her gut.

Slowly, she releases her sister's mouth and takes one last look into her frightened face before standing. His eyes are sharp, and she feels their piercing touch as they creep over her body.

"Not a girl, but a grown woman," he says, and lets out a low, grumbling laugh.

He is wearing a beige uniform and field boots, with a cap that shades his face. His eyes are black like the rocky ledge beneath his feet. Hana is still recovering from her swim to shore, and each time she gasps for breath, he glances at her chest. Her white cotton diving shirt is thin and she hurriedly covers her breasts with her hair. Her cotton shorts drip water down her shivering legs.

"What are you hiding from me?" he asks, trying to peer over the ledge.

"Nothing," Hana quickly answers. She steps away from her sister, willing his gaze to follow her. "It's just . . . a special catch. I didn't want you to think it was not claimed. It's mine, you see." She hauls one of the buckets onto the ledge, leading him farther away from where her sister lies.

His attention remains on Hana. After a pause, he glances out to sea and up and down the beach.

"Why are you still here? All the other divers have gone off to the market."

"My friend is ill, so I'm catching her share so she won't go hungry." It is a partial truth and comes easily.

He keeps looking around as though searching for witnesses. Hana looks out to her mother's buoy, but she is not there. She still hasn't seen the soldier or even noticed Hana's absence. Hana begins to worry her mother is in trouble beneath the surface. Too many thoughts flood her mind. He starts to inspect the edge of the rock ledge once more, as though he senses her sister's presence beneath him. Hana thinks quickly.

"I can sell them to you, if you're hungry. Perhaps you can take some back to your friends."

He doesn't seem convinced, so she tries to push the bucket closer to him. Seawater spills over the rim, and he quickly sidesteps to avoid its drenching his boots.

"I'm so sorry," she says quickly, steadying the bucket.

"Where is your family?" he suddenly asks.

His question catches Hana off guard. She looks over the water and sees her mother's head duck beneath a wave. Her father's boat is far out to sea. She and her sister are alone with this soldier. She turns back to him in time to see two more soldiers. They are heading toward her.

Her mother's words echo in her mind: *Most of all, do not let yourself be caught alone with one.* Nothing Hana says will save her now. She has no power or autonomy against imperial soldiers. They may do with her as they wish, she knows this, but she is not the only one at risk. She tears her eyes away from the rolling waves that beckon her to dive back in, to escape.

"They're dead." The words sound true even to her own ears. If she is an orphan, then there is no one to silence for her abduction. Her family will be safe.

"A tragic mermaid," he says, and smiles. "There *are* treasures to be found at sea."

"What have you got there, Corporal Morimoto?" one of the approaching soldiers calls out.

Morimoto doesn't look back at them, his eyes remaining on Hana. The two men flank her, one on either side. Morimoto nods at them, a curt tip of his head, before trudging back up the sand the way he came. The soldiers grab her arms and drag her behind him.

Hana doesn't scream. If her sister tried to help, they would just take her, too. Hana will not break her promise to keep her sister safe. So she goes without saying a word, but her legs defend her in wordless opposition by refusing to work. They hang from her body like useless logs, weighing her down, but it doesn't deter the soldiers. They grip her harder and raise her off the ground so that her toes drag thin trails in the sand.

The Girl Who Never Read Noam Chomsky

a novel

Jana Casale

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CHAPTER 1

Deciding to Read Noam Chomsky

"I'd like to read Noam Chomsky," Leda said. At this point in her life she had a stack of books she kept by the bed and a splinter in her right hand. She should have thought more closely about cleaning out her microwave. She had class on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays. Each week she'd sit in the window seat at the back of her school's library and study. On this day she had cried listening to "All You Need Is Love" as she took the subway to school. She didn't want people to know she was crying, so she took great care to blink away as many tears as she could, but she did so hope that *there was nothing you could do that couldn't be done.* She ate a partially crushed scone as she studied that afternoon. Later she'd have another scone before bed. This was the only time in her life she consumed multiple scones in one day. As she ate she thought about the boy who lived in the apartment across the street and the word *Umbria*. The scone was blueberry, and after she finished it she folded up the wax paper and put it in her left coat pocket.

The only reasons she'd remember for wanting to read Chomsky were all the varied intellectual ones that took precedence in her mind: an article she'd read, a speech she'd heard, a professor's suggestion. She didn't think of that day or that boy in the coffee shop, but that influence was no less significant, as faint and feckless as it was, a startling, disintegrating moment between herself and this stranger bursting and scattering like any and all moments of her life. She gave little more attention to it at the time than to the scone or to herself crying over a song she loved.

The coffee shop itself was near her apartment and one she frequented often. "This café is so small, but its aesthetic is exceptional," was the way it had been described by a middle-aged woman in trendy clothes who once stood next to her in line. The woman bought a large coffee and some type of vegan muffin. Leda thought the muffin looked tasty and bought the same one and then took a bite and realized it was vegan. From then on when she thought of the café she thought of it as *so small with an exceptional aesthetic and terrible vegan muffins.* Not long after, they'd started selling vegan donuts that were considerably better, but Leda would never find herself trying them. If she had, it's unlikely she would have amended her perception of the place. It was already burned into her by the ephemeral moment beside that woman in line.

That day, though, she ordered a hot chocolate and sat at a table in the corner. What she loved most about sitting at the coffee shop was not the coffee or the shop but the brief, listless feeling it gave her of having her life together. She could sit beside the richness and warmth and see herself as something so divinely competent. *This is what it is to be an independent person,* and she'd take a sip. *This is what it is to be a cosmopolitan person,* and she'd take a sip. So easily could she lose herself in the sense. It was haunting and complicated and undeniably silly. Outside she watched as a woman picked up dog poop in a plastic bag. *At least I know that I don't really have my life together. At least I know that I don't know,* she thought. She sat for a while longer before noticing the boy to her right. He was smartly dressed with flood pants and thick-rimmed glasses. His hands were large, and he was reading *American Power and the New Mandarins.* She leaned forward in her seat and ran her fingers through her hair. Most days she held a very strong belief that her hair looked terrible except right after she'd run her fingers through it. She fixed her shirt and adjusted her boobs, which had been lost in her bra to some degree. The boy looked like he was about twenty-four and possibly went to Boston University or was applying to a funded graduate program. She hoped he'd come over and say something charming or witty, as she imagined a man with such nice glasses might. She cleared her throat to get his attention, but he didn't look up from his book.

She got her phone out of her bag as noisily as possible and then sighed loudly, but nothing. After waiting a bit longer, she got up and walked past his table, headed for the napkins. She took three. He didn't notice her. She reached her hand down to the fourth napkin; for a second she had a sense that he might be watching her, but when she turned around she saw he hadn't looked up. She stood there for what was an inappropriate amount of time to get napkins, but she couldn't help it. *Why can't I just go talk to him?* she thought. He had such a dumb sweater on and his face was sour. She considered that maybe he wasn't even reading but pretending to read, seeking that same sense of solace she felt sitting with her hot chocolate. *Who is he in this coffee shop? No one, just like me. Can't we be no one together?* In an unprecedented strike of confidence, she decided to walk up to him. It was impulsive and decisive. If you'd asked her then, she may have said her hair always looked nice and that she didn't need to run her fingers through it at all.

"What are you reading?" she asked him.

"What?"

"That book."

"What?"

"What are you reading?"

"Oh . . . It's by Noam Chomsky."

"Oh."

The silence between them felt stale and all-consuming. She searched for the right segue into marriage and children, but there was nothing.

"I just needed a napkin," she said, waving the napkins.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing . . . Can I have this chair?" she said, pointing to an empty chair that didn't belong to his table at all but to the empty table beside him.

". . . I guess so?"

She dragged the chair noisily in the direction of where she had been sitting. When she sat back down her hot chocolate was cold. She pretended she got a phone call and left.

That was her last encounter with the future BU graduate.

A few weeks later she bought *Problems of Knowledge and Freedom* in a small bookstore specializing in rare and overpriced books. Walking through the aisles, she ran her fingers down the spines of books and smelled the softness of paper over her, under her. She didn't think of the boy or the napkins, but she did think of Noam Chomsky as the book cover grew sweaty in her palm. She relaxed her hand, wiped the sweat on her skirt, opened the book to page 53, closed it, and took a deep breath.

CHAPTER 2

The First Innate Truth

Nearing her early twenties, leda had become obsessed with being linear. Latitude and longitude had formerly been ascribed to maps and a vague notion of Christopher Columbus she stored on the dwindling shelf of third-grade history in the back of her mind. To be linear was to be lines of thinness from her head to her feet. Lines and thinness. Thinness like her legs lifted over her head as she lay on the beach watching her legs, stinging sand in her eyes, blue everywhere. Lying down she could get away with it, but standing it was undeniable to her that she was not nearly linear enough. "Latitude Is Attitude," she saw on a T-shirt once and never understood. Even as she was now so concerned with linearity and the latitude of herself, that T-shirt was still a confused lake in her mind. The girl who wore it had large breasts. And that was all she really remembered. *I do not want to live in the horizontal of my stomach. I do not want to be my thighs. I want to be linear.* This compulsion to be linear began at age twelve and would persist until her death. It was very important, VERY IMPORTANT not to be fat. This was the first innate truth of her womanhood.

CHAPTER 3

New Year's

On her walk home she thought about a presentation she gave in class. She considered that maybe she talked for too long. The desperate face of the pretty girl in the front row plagued her. *Why did that girl look so desperate? Was the presentation too long? Boring, maybe?* She thought of herself standing and talking away like an idiot. She tapped her thigh as she walked and turned the music up in her earphones, then turned it down a bit. The song was about a girl getting a New Year's kiss. *New Yearsssss,* she thought.

One New Year's she got kissed by a boy she knew from childhood. His name was Sol, and he talked slowly. As children they had played at each other's house here and there, until one fateful afternoon when Sol invited her into his parents' room to sit on their waterbed.

"This . . . is . . . my parents' . . . room."

The room was small, smothered by the oversized waterbed. The purple sheets worsened the skewed bed-to-room ratio. Sol sat down first and bounced lightly.

"It's a . . . waterbed."

She sat down next to him and felt the wave of the bed below; to her right was a framed picture of a cat on the nightstand, and to her left was Sol, smiling. She liked the waterbed and wondered what it must be like to sleep on. Then Sol's father came in and said: "This is very inappropriate."

That was the last time Sol and she ever spent any real time together, save for the New Year's encounter, which could be described as brief at best. A girl she had only just become friends with her freshman

year of college invited her to the party. "Come to my party!" the girl said, as she wore a beige peacoat.

There wasn't any dancing, and Leda spent the night standing around, awkwardly attempting to make conversation with strangers. A cognitive neuroscience major from Harvard talked to her for a while.

"What is it you study?" he said.

"Writing."

"And what are your plans with that?" He was drinking soda but was taking small enough sips that it seemed like alcohol.

"I don't know . . . I mean, I want to write, but I'll probably teach. I'd like to write, you know, but I'll have to teach."

"Oh, well, it sounds like you've got it all worked out," he said.

She wondered why this Harvard student was judging her. He had neglected to untuck a pant leg from his sock and his hair looked as if it hadn't been washed in a considerable amount of time. She folded her arms and regretted wearing such a low-cut shirt. The neuroscientist (or whatever he was) eventually walked away and she thought, *Don't go.* Being alone was decidedly worse than reevaluating her life choices. Then she saw Sol.

He looked the same as he did when he was ten, only maybe a little fatter. He was wearing what appeared to be a vintage shirt with the 7UP logo on it. *What would ever possess him to wear that? Does he think it's irony or something?* she wondered, but didn't fully want to consider because she was so grateful for the potential company.

"Sol!"

He turned to look at her and blinked hard.

"Oh . . . wow . . . I can't believe . . . it's you." He blinked hard again.

"Yeah it is. How are you? Where are you these days?"

"Oh . . . you know . . . around." He blinked hard again. By now she realized he'd developed a tic. *Maybe he's been through trauma. Maybe he's lived a life I couldn't understand beyond waterbeds and 7UP.* She felt suddenly compelled to fix whatever it was in him that was causing all the blinking. She reached out, gently touching his arm.

As their conversation muddled on, she realized that he was as

bored and desperate as she was fumbling through this New Year's night, and such a realization led to the immediate bond of: we are both bored, lonely, and miserable. Had Sol more social understanding, he might have attempted to talk to someone else. Since he didn't, she didn't feel the need to pretend she'd rather talk to anyone else either, so they stood together for the two hours leading up to midnight, mutually accepting each other's forced but dearly appreciated company.

"I wish there was dancing," she said.

"Like . . . *Dance . . . Dance . . . Revolution*?"

"No. I mean, like, real dancing."

"Oh . . . I can't . . . really dance."

"I'm sure you're good at it." She looked at his pants. They were a little stained.

"Not . . . really . . . but I'd . . . dance with you . . . if you wanted."

She thought that was sweet.

At 11:59:50 everyone started counting down to midnight. The sudden collective loudness was startling. She thought, *Here we are all alone pretending to have time together.* Then it was midnight.

There wasn't a moment for her to think about kissing Sol. Before the party, she got dressed in the foaming need to have a New Year's kiss. She watched her naked reflection in the mirror, and although she wished to be more linear, she traced the outline of her hip bone and thought of a boy holding her, kissing her. But standing there with clumsy, slow, ticking Sol she didn't think of kissing him. When midnight hit, she watched the crowd in unison undulation, and right in between "Happy" and "New Year" he kissed her as her head was turned. Just the corner of her lips. Slowly, clumsy, gentle. She felt a swell of warmth in her checks, his 7UP pudgy irony pressed against her. It was over by the time it began, and she didn't know how to act afterward, but it would be remembered in her life as the single most erotic New Year's kiss she would ever receive.

When leaving the party, she and Sol exchanged phone numbers in the ritual of feigned interest in further communication. They said their goodbyes for too long, and she stumbled a little as she walked away. She put on her red winter coat and thought about the water-

bed. The rolling motion, and sleep, a dream about a boat, blue, and a feathered mask she bought and hung in her room as a child. Before leaving she held the doorknob for a moment, feeling the winter cold draft through the bottom of the doorway and her palm pressed against the cool steel of the knob. *This is the New Year.* As she went to push open the door, Sol called out to her.

"Leda."

She looked back at him filling an empty space in the unwinding party. She wanted to call out to him, but she just waved.

CHAPTER 4

Hollandaise Sauce

Leda watched a woman in the subway seat across from her with a grocery bag. The woman was older and held a container of hollandaise sauce on her lap. She moved her hands over the lid, opening and closing it as she chewed indiscriminately. The smell of the hollandaise sauce filled the subway car, and Leda turned away a bit to avoid the stale odor of food on public transportation. The woman's clothes were dirty and the grocery bag looked as if it had been used many times to carry many things. Her face was gray and her eyelids were sunken. Leda noticed a small brooch attached to a faded ribbon in her hair. It didn't make the woman's appearance any better, any less gray, any less unkempt, but it was there. *I guess you always have to do something with your hair,* she thought, and touched her own hair, silky and young. Somewhere, she imagined, this woman had done many things. Soft things and hard things and was beautiful with a brooch. There was a countertop she held onto and a man who stood beside her telling her fancy possibilities that made her laugh lightly and feel probable. The woman got off at the next stop. Her coat brushed Leda as she pushed past and the smell of hollandaise lingered behind.

For the rest of the ride Leda spent her time folded into herself. She listened to music and watched the people moving then still. Somewhere in her knowledge of cosmopolitan life she was aware that attempting to meet the gazes of strangers was dangerous. Her mom said, "You are moving to the city now. You will no longer be able to look at anyone." Leda looked at anyone. She would look at men and

catch their stares floating in the underground current. *Yes, I will sleep with you,* her stare would say, *but not really, because I am only looking at you, and I wouldn't sleep with you anyway.* Sometimes men would meet her stare; sometimes they wouldn't. Her fragility and feelings of linearity hung in the balance so thinly that her sense of self could inflate or deflate in the precious few seconds of a stranger's glance. It was a troubling and weightless system of moment-by-moment worthiness or worthlessness. It was exhausting and oftentimes depressing. Sometimes so much so that she wouldn't bother with it at all and would look at her phone instead.

The train was mostly empty. There was a man in a suit to her right. He wasn't looking at her. She leaned her head back against the seat. The subway was warm, and she was almost too hot in her coat. For a moment she thought about taking it off but decided against it after remembering what she was wearing. She'd recently ordered a shirt from an online store called Amour Vert. All the clothes were made of tree pulp or vegan silk. If you spent more than two hundred dollars they'd plant a tree. She'd wanted the blouse in a print of delicate yellow flowers, "wildflower" they'd called it, but it was sold out in her size so she went with the green stripes instead. Now that it was hers she thought she liked the green stripes more. It flattered her complexion, she thought, and it made her look linear, she thought. By a happenstance of so little she would never be the girl who wore yellow flowers and because of it she'd be convinced she liked green stripes. Either way the blouse was too sheer to be worn comfortably on the subway, even if just in front of the guy in the suit who wouldn't look at her.

She lifted her head back up and pulled off her gloves. First she tucked them into each other and placed them on her lap, then in her bag, then she thought better of it and put them in her coat pocket. This was how it was in the wintertime as she made her way from train to school and home again; the panic and the subsequent relief that she hadn't lost her gloves were a triumph realized multiple times a week. The lost gloves of her life would be left in the places as follows: two subways, a park bench, a bagel shop, a boat. The boat was a rowboat, and the glove was her father's. It was a big leather glove

borrowed from him as they went fishing the single time in her life she would ever go fishing. He told her a story about a radiator, and she felt sick from the tide. The long, narrow blue horizon grayed as the weather turned to rain. He rowed them back to shore, and she watched her father struggle with the oars. She felt younger than she was until she saw him struggle. At that moment she realized she was an adult now, and her father struggled with rowing. She didn't remember the glove until he asked for it later, and then she knew she'd lost it. It was the left glove.

The subway rolled beneath her, pulling through the only stop that was aboveground. Suddenly, the car filled with natural light and the people became instantly softer. Outside she could see the city unfolding rapidly. The buildings, a park, the people were too small to see from the train. Then as quickly as everything was before her it sunk away back into the underground of artificial light.

The next stop was hers. As she got up she saw a small child holding a piece of colored chalk. The little girl looked around dazedly and tried to draw on the subway door. Her mother pulled her back, and the child dropped the chalk. Leda watched her look for it but instantly forget it as her mother handed her a little plastic flower. The girl spun the flower in her hand and smiled. Leda couldn't see the chalk, but she worried about it rolling around loose behind them. She wished she could say, "Your chalk. You forgot about your chalk." She watched the little girl walk off ahead of her, holding her mother's hand and spinning the flower. She stepped off the train and checked for her gloves. They were still in her pocket. She looked back for the chalk, not that she would have picked it up, but to see if it was there. It wasn't, but she thought she'd heard it rolling as the train roared away.

CHAPTER 5

Writing

Leda got home and threw off her jeans. it was late afternoon, and the sunshine was still brilliant and warming, filtering in through the half-drawn blinds left neglected from morning. She played an Édith Piaf record, and then a song by a band she couldn't remember the name of. It was something like "Leelong," but it wasn't Leelong. She changed into a white tank top and her bad underwear, turned the heat down, stretched out on the floor, and flipped through a magazine. Her bare feet were pressed up against the wall, and she kicked in beat with the music. The magazine article was about fifty ways to please a man in bed. *How stupid,* she thought. *Most of them don't even know one way to please a woman.*

"Try dressing up as a naughty nurse and use a stethoscope to hear your man's heartbeat pound away!" it read.

Leda imagined that there were many sad women reading this article and doing tentative Google searches for stethoscopes, and perhaps even a few went through with the whole charade. *Somewhere in the world right now a woman is holding a stethoscope and a penis at the same time,* she thought. She flipped through the rest of the magazine, smelled a perfume sample, and took a quiz entitled: "What Kind of Sexual Warrior Are You?" which yielded the result: "You are fierce and relentless. No man can get out from under you, and that isn't a bad thing!" Leda wondered who wrote the quiz and how they came up with the criteria for the descriptions. *What a depressing job,* she thought, but she still appreciated it. It was nice to be a sexual warrior. She could agree that she was fierce and relentless, so much better

than "coy and demure," as another description read. After a while everything was boring in the way it always was, her apartment, sitting around, the magazine, the music, her bare feet pressed up against the wall. She thought back to the train, and the walk home, and the smell of her neighbor's cooking, something peppery and bright. The day had reminded her of a story she'd thought of writing about cherries. She got out her computer and started typing.

> The summer I went from a C cup to a D cup was the best summer of my life. I'd started work at a cherry stand and the long days of sitting, as well as the incremental sugary snacks, had caused me to gain a little over ten pounds. All of July I was in denial but by August I'd started to note the difference, so I'd skip breakfast or walk to work. I never attempted to lose the weight in any significant way, and, in retrospect, there must have been some kind of subconscious attempt on my part to preserve it because as soon as I could no longer wear my smallest clothes I found a certain solace, a liberation in no longer caring. Before that I'd spent so much time and concern over my weight, but the day I switched bras marked a march toward the heaviest and ultimately the freest I would ever be.

Leda sat up and reread what she wrote and thought it was okay but lacked a certain polish. She braided a braid in her hair and looked at her knees. One of them she'd missed when shaving. She'd spend much of her life with unshaven, or nearly unshaven, legs. There would only be two occasions that she'd actually shave in the way she had intended. One was a Wednesday at the age of thirty-seven and one was a Sunday at the age of fourteen. She'd never consider leg hair removal to be a failure of her life, but really it was.

That night she finished her story, ate pizza, and masturbated before bed. She thought of a man tying her up and having sex with her from behind. The man was no one in particular because it wasn't about him. When she slept she dreamt of fifty ways to cherry, and when she woke up she rewrote the ending to her story twice.

CHAPTER 6

Workshop

"I REALLY DON'T GET THE ENDING," THE GIRL ACROSS FROM HER SAID. "Are we supposed to feel sorry for the main character? Because I really don't. And it's boring. Why do I care?"

"I don't really have a problem with the ending, but I feel that the cherry thing is too heavy-handed. It's clearly an allusion to virginity," the boy two seats down said.

Leda dreaded her Thursday class all week. It was a fiction workshop given by the editor in chief of her university's prestigious literary journal. She'd registered for the class seconds after registration had opened under the influence of friends who'd said things to the effect of: "You have to take a class with Patricia Rainer!" "Patricia is the best!" "It will change your life!" The very first day Patricia Rainer came to class in a coat with a fox hair collar and Leda thought, *I'm not going to get along with this person.*

The class itself was populated by hipsters who name-dropped Jack Kerouac and small-batch coffee roasters. They were edgy. They were clean. They held crippling insecurities managed by entitlement and a distaste for popular music. It was not uncommon for many of them to rip into a story with the kind of zeal that could only be attributed to a lingering despondency related to their parents' divorce or some such problem. This was what Leda held on to as the skinny girl across from her with the bralette and pinched face tore her story apart. Leda would think, *Maybe you should take up ice-skating and then you would have more confidence and wouldn't feel the need to tell everyone they are terrible. You are only sad because you are terrible, but ice-skating*

may help you feel better about yourself.

"I also think it's heavy-handed, but I think it only comes across that way because nothing happens. It's a story about nothing," Pinched Bralette said.

"I don't have a problem with that, though. Just 'cause it's about nothing doesn't mean nothing happens," the boy beside her said.

His name was Nick and Leda had been in two classes with him in the past, including a poetry workshop. She remembered this one poem he wrote about being in the woods with his father. He used the word "evergreen" and she thought that was nice. They never spoke much outside of class, but they did have one conversation standing in line for the elevator. He'd asked her what she was taking next semester and told her about a place nearby that gave out free sandwiches on Fridays. As he spoke she thought he seemed like someone who had never touched breasts before, a sense she derived from an almost indiscernible nervousness in the way he breathed, a sound that could be described as an almost whistle at each inhale. Upon noticing it she felt taller and more luminous. For the most part she lived her life thinking of herself as a person, Leda. But then all of a sudden, out of nowhere, out of the cold harsh common dregs of patriarchy, some man would jump up and remind her she was in fact not a person at all but a woman. Usually it was derogatory, but on rare occurrences, as it was with Nick, it would remind her of the blissful and unequivocal truth: they were afraid of her. All of them. It made her feel limitless and powerful. No longer human at all, something more, something greater, a superhero flying through the sky and sinking away the breaths of all mortal men.

She was happy that Nick had found it in himself to defend her work against Pinched Bralette. Pinched Bralette, who was otherwise known as Abby, doodled on a notepad as he spoke.

"I thought the perspective was really nice," he said. Pinched Bralette looked up for a second, squinted her eyes, and went back to drawing. *Go ahead and draw, asshole,* Leda thought.

She waited patiently as the conversation turned from whether her piece was boring or not to whether Cleo was a good choice of a name for her main character. One girl said: "I like Cleo, but I think

she seems more like a blond than a brunette, but maybe that's just me." Leda underlined "Cleo" in her notes, writing, "blond?" in the margin.

Leda was not permitted to speak until the end of the workshop, but if she could have spoken she would have said, "But what about the polish of it? Does it lack a certain polish that keeps it from being any good?" But she couldn't, so she just sat there and nodded, silently unanswered.

As the critique came to an end, Patricia, who had formally said little more than the occasional "Ummhmm," began to stir as if she were planning on speaking. Throughout the workshop, Leda kept looking at her for at least some kind of facial reaction, but the professor looked as dull and unassuming as the gray-blue turtleneck she wore. Finally, after Pinched Bralette said, "You know, you should really read *Big Sur* by Jack Kerouac," Patricia spoke.

"That's an excellent suggestion, Abby. Jack Kerouac is one of my absolute favorites." She nodded thoughtfully at Abby, and then turned to face Leda and took a big breath in her very calm and particular manner.

"I think there are a lot of things working with this piece. I very much appreciate the use of the cherry stand. It gives the story a sort of rural quality that I quite like. I don't think it's a story about nothing, but I have to say, I think, Leda, you need to really consider what it is you're saying here. In this case your heroine is a sort of superwoman. She has risen above any personal insecurities or vulnerabilities. She's almost a poster child of this feminist ideal. And as much as I appreciate the idea that you are getting at with that, I think you may have more to offer us than this."

The room was quiet and maliciously still. Patricia had such control over the way she spoke that it seemed to forbid the possibility of any interruption. Leda didn't notice any of it though; she didn't even really consider the way Patricia spoke or the soft way she turned the paper in her hand. She just heard what she said and sat there feeling smaller and smaller. Her story and its cherry stand melting away into an oblivion witnessed by twelve hipsters and herself in mortifying silence.

When she got home she heated up some soup, but she hadn't done it right because it exploded all over the microwave. She ate a sandwich instead, but the cheese was old and dried out. She called her mom as she ate.

"I hate workshops. I always leave and think, 'I'll never look at that story again,' " she said.

"I understand that, but you can't get so down on yourself. You know you're a great writer," her mom said.

"Do I know I'm a great writer? I feel like a failure."

"Stop it! You're not a failure."

Leda always called her mom to complain about everything terrible in her life. Most conversations ended with her saying something to the effect of "And I'm getting fat" and her mom telling her she was not getting fat. Her mom understood precisely what made her tick. What pulsing affirmation was needed to get her through from day to day and week to week and month to month and year to year. Leda called, and her mom answered, and they loved each other like one, two, three. Easy, fresh, perfect.

"I thought you said you didn't even like this professor," her mom said.

"I don't like her. Well, I don't know. It's not that I don't like her; it's just that I feel like, she basically said the whole story is a joke. That I don't know what I'm talking about. It just makes me think that maybe I just don't know anything. Maybe I'm just believing all this stuff about myself, and none of it's true."

"I think you're giving the whole thing too much thought right now. Go to bed. You'll feel better tomorrow."

"Okay, but I'm also getting fat."

"You're not fat, Leda! I love you. And you are a great writer. Don't forget that, ever."

Leda let herself eat an entire bag of Hershey's Kisses that night. She thought about Pinched Bralette and sexless Nick. She tried not to think about what Patricia said, but whenever she did she'd feel a burning in her chest and her ears would buzz a little. It was nervousness or sadness or the feeling of uncertainty that she'd become so accustomed to, a feeling that would be familiar all her life. The next

morning she did feel better, but she never went back to the cherry stand story. Years later she'd find a copy of it and read the first paragraph. It did lack polish.

KAREN CLEVELAND

NEED TO KNOW

A NOVEL

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I STAND IN THE DOORWAY OF THE TWINS' ROOM AND WATCH them sleep, peaceful and innocent, through crib slats that remind me of bars on a prison cell.

A night-light bathes the room in a soft orange glow. Furniture crowds the small space, far too much of it for a room this size. Cribs, one old, one new. A changing table, stacks of diapers still in their plastic. The bookcase Matt and I assembled ourselves, ages ago. Its shelves now sag, overloaded with the books I could recite by heart to the older two, the ones I've been vowing to read more often to the twins, if only I could find the time.

I hear Matt's footsteps on the stairs and my hand clenches around the flash drive. Tight, like if I squeeze hard enough, it'll disappear. Everything will go back to the way it was. The past two days will be erased, nothing more than a bad dream. But it's still there: hard, solid, real.

The hallway floor creaks where it always does. I don't turn. He comes up behind me, close enough that I can smell his soap, his shampoo, the smell of *him* that's always been oddly comforting,

that now inexplicably makes him more of a stranger. I can feel his hesitation.

"Can we talk?" he says.

The words are quiet, but the sound is enough to stir Chase. He sighs in his sleep and then settles, still curled into a ball, like he's protecting himself. I've always thought he's so much like his father, the serious eyes, taking everything in. Now I wonder if I'll ever truly know him, if he'll keep secrets so heavy they'll crush anyone close to him.

"What's there to say?"

Matt takes a step closer, puts a hand on my arm. I move away, enough to free myself from his touch. His hand lingers in the air, then falls to his side.

"What are you going to do?" he asks.

I look at the other crib, at Caleb, on his back in his footed pajamas; cherubic blond curls, arms and legs splayed like a starfish. His hands are open, his pink lips open. He has no idea how vulnerable he is, how cruel the world can be.

I always said I'd protect him. I'd give him the strength that he lacks, make sure he has every opportunity, keep his life as normal as possible. How can I do that, if I'm not around?

I would do anything for my kids. *Anything*. I uncurl my fingers and look at the flash drive, the little rectangle, nondescript. So small, but with so much power. Power to fix, power to destroy.

Rather like a lie, when you think about it.

"You know I don't have a choice," I say, and I force myself to look at him, my husband, the man I know so well, and at the same time not at all.

TWO DAYS EARLIER

CHAPTER 1

"BAD NEWS, VIV."

I hear Matt's voice, words anyone would dread, but a tone that's reassuring. Light, apologetic. It's something unfortunate, sure, but it's manageable. Anything truly bad and his voice would be heavier. He'd use a complete sentence, a complete name. *I have some bad news, Vivian*.

I hold the phone to my ear with a raised shoulder, swivel my chair to the other side of the L-shaped desk, to the computer centered under gray overhead bins. I guide the cursor to the owl-shaped icon on the screen and double-click. If it's what I think it is—what I know it is—then I only have a bit longer at my desk.

"Ella?" I say. My gaze drifts to one of the crayon drawings tacked to the high cubicle walls with pushpins, a pop of color in this sea of gray.

"A hundred point eight."

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. We've been expecting it. Half her class has been sick, falling like dominoes, so it was only a

matter of time. Four-year-olds aren't exactly the cleanliest bunch. But today? It had to happen today?

"Anything else?"

"Just the temp." He pauses. "Sorry, Viv. She seemed fine when I dropped her off."

I swallow past the tightening in my throat and nod, even though he can't see me. Any other day and he'd pick her up. He can work from home, at least in theory. I can't, and I used up all my leave when the twins were born. But he's taking Caleb into the city for the latest round of medical appointments. I've been feeling guilty for weeks that I'll have to miss it. And now I'll be missing it and *still* using leave I don't have.

"I'll be there in an hour," I say. The rules say we have an hour from the time they call. Factoring in the drive and the walk to my car—it's in the outer reaches of Langley's sprawling parking lots—that gives me about fifteen minutes to wrap up work for the day. Fifteen minutes less leave to add to my negative balance.

I glance at the clock in the corner of my screen—seven minutes past ten—and then my eyes shift to the Starbucks cup beside my right elbow, steam escaping from the hole in the plastic lid. I treated myself, a splurge in celebration of the long-awaited day, fuel for the tedious hours ahead. Precious minutes wasted in line that could have been spent digging through digital files. Should have stuck to the usual, the sputtering coffee maker that leaves grounds floating at the top of the mug.

"That's what I told the school," Matt says. "School" is actually our day care center, the place where our youngest three spend their days. But we've been calling it school since Luke was three months old. I'd read it could help ease the transition, lessen the guilt of leaving your baby for eight, ten hours a day. It didn't, but old habits die hard, I guess.

There's another pause, and I can hear Caleb babbling in the background. I listen, and I know that Matt's listening, too. It's like we're conditioned to do so at this point. But it's just vowel sounds. Still no consonants.

"I know today was supposed to be a big day . . . ," Matt finally says, and trails off. I'm used to the trailing off, the evasive conversations on my open line. I always assume someone's listening in. The Russians. The Chinese. That's part of the reason Matt's the first one the school calls when there's a problem. I'd rather him filter some of the kids' personal details from the ears of our adversaries.

Call me paranoid, or just call me a CIA counterintelligence analyst.

But really, that's about all Matt knows. Not that I've been trying in vain to uncover a network of Russian sleeper agents. Or that I've developed a methodology for identifying people involved in the highly secretive program. Just that I've waited months for this day. That I'm about to find out if two years of hard work is going to pay off. And if I stand a chance at that promotion we desperately need.

"Yeah, well," I say, moving my mouse back and forth, watching Athena load, the cursor in the shape of a timer. "Caleb's appointment is what's important today."

My eyes drift back to the cubicle wall, the bright crayon drawings. Ella's, a picture of our family, stick arms and legs protruding straight from six round happy faces. Luke's, a bit more sophisticated, a single person, thick jagged scribbles to color in hair and clothing and shoes. *MOMMY,* it says in big capital letters. From his superhero phase. It's me, in a cape, hands on my hips, an *S* on my shirt. Supermommy.

There's a familiar feeling in my chest, the pressure, the overwhelming urge to cry. *Deep breaths, Viv. Deep breaths*.

"The Maldives?" Matt says, and I feel the hint of a smile creep to my lips. He always does this, finds a way to make me smile when I need it most. I glance at the photograph of the two of us on the corner of my desk, my favorite from our wedding day, almost a decade ago. Both of us so happy, so *young*. We always talked about going somewhere exotic for our ten-year anniversary. It's certainly not in the cards anymore. But it's fun to dream. Fun and depressing at the same time.

"Bora Bora," I say.

"I could live with that." He hesitates, and in the gap I hear Caleb again. More vowel sounds. *Aah-aah-aah*. In my head, I'm calculating the months Chase has already been making consonant sounds. I know I shouldn't—all the doctors say I shouldn't—but I am.

"Bora *Bora*?" I hear from behind me, faux-incredulous. I put my hand over the mouthpiece of the phone and turn. It's Omar, my FBI counterpart, an amused expression on his face. "That one might be hard to justify, even for the Agency." He breaks into a grin. Infectious as ever, it brings one to my own face, as well.

"What are you doing here?" I say, my hand still covering the mouthpiece. I can hear Caleb babbling in my ear. *O*'s this time. *Ooh-ooh-ooh*.

"Had a meeting with Peter." He takes a step closer, perches on the edge of my desk. I can see the outline of his holster at his hip, through his T-shirt. "The timing may or may not have been a coincidence." He glances at my screen and the grin fades ever so slightly. "It was today, right? Ten A.M.?"

I look at my screen, dark, the cursor still in the shape of a timer. "It was today." The babbling in my ear has gone quiet. I roll my chair so that I'm turned, just a touch, away from Omar and remove my hand from the mouthpiece. "Honey, I have to go. Omar's here."

"Tell him I said hi," Matt says.

"Will do."

"Love you."

"Love you, too." I set the phone down on its base and turn back to Omar, who's still sitting on my desk, denim-clad legs outstretched, feet crossed at the ankles. "Matt says hi," I tell him.

"Aaah, so *he's* the Bora Bora connection. Planning a vacation?" The grin's back, full force.

"In theory," I say with a half-hearted laugh. It sounds pathetic enough that I can feel color rise to my cheeks.

He looks at me for a moment longer, then thankfully down at his wrist. "All right, it's ten-ten." He uncrosses his ankles, crosses them the opposite way. Then leans forward, the excitement on his face unmistakable. "What have you got for me?"

Omar's been doing this longer than I have. A decade, at least. He's looking for the actual sleepers in the U.S., and I'm trying to uncover those running the cell. Neither of us has had any success. How he's still so enthusiastic never fails to amaze me.

"Nothing yet. I haven't even taken a look." I nod at the screen, the program that's still loading, then glance at the black-and-white photograph tacked to my cubicle wall, beside the kids' drawings. Yury Yakov. Fleshy face, hard expression. A few more clicks and I'll be inside his computer. I'll be able to see what he sees, navigate around the way he does, pore through his files. And hopefully prove that he's a Russian spy.

"Who are you and what have you done with my friend Vivian?" Omar asks with a smile.

He's right. If it wasn't for the line at Starbucks, I'd have logged in to the program at ten A.M. on the dot. I'd have had a few minutes to look around, at least. I shrug and gesture at the screen. "I'm trying." Then I nod toward the phone. "But in any case, it's going to have to wait. Ella's sick. I need to go pick her up."

He exhales dramatically. "Kids. Always the worst timing."

Movement on the screen draws my attention, and I roll my chair closer. Athena's finally loading. There are red banners on all sides, a slew of words, each signifying a different control, a different compartment. The longer the string of text, the more classified. This one's pretty darn long.

I click past one screen, then another. Each click is an acknowledgment. Yes, I know I'm accessing compartmented information. Yes, I know I can't disclose it or I'll go to jail for a very long time. Yes, yes, yes. Just get me to the information already.

"This is it," Omar says. I remember he's there and glance at him out of the corner of my eye. He's looking away purposefully, studiously avoiding the screen, giving me privacy. "I feel it."

"I hope so," I murmur. And I do. But I'm nervous. This methodology is a gamble. A big one. I built a profile for suspected handlers: educational institution, studies and degrees, banking centers, travel within Russia and abroad. Came up with an algorithm, identified five individuals who best fit the pattern. Likely candidates.

The first four turned out to be false leads, and now the program's on the chopping block. Everything rests on Yury. Number five. The computer that was the hardest to break into, the one I had the most confidence in to begin with.

"And if it's not," Omar says, "you did something that no one else has been able to do. You got close."

Targeting the handlers is a new approach. For years, the Bureau's been trying to identify the sleepers themselves, but they're so well assimilated it's next to impossible. The cell is designed so that sleepers don't have contact with anyone but their handler, and even that is minimal. And the Agency's been focused on the ringleaders, the guys who oversee the handlers, the ones in Moscow with direct ties to the SVR, Russian intelligence.

"Close doesn't count," I say quietly. "You know that better than anyone."

Around the time I started on the account, Omar was a hard-charging new agent. He'd proposed a new initiative, inviting entrenched sleepers to "come in from the cold" and turn themselves in, in exchange for amnesty. His reasoning? There had to be at least a few sleepers who wanted to turn their covers into reality, and we might be able to learn enough from the turned sleepers to penetrate the network as a whole.

The plan was rolled out quietly, and within a week we had a walk-in, a man named Dmitri. Said he was a midlevel handler, told us information about the program that corroborated what we knew—handlers like himself were responsible for five sleepers each; he reported to a ringleader who was responsible for five handlers. A completely self-contained cell. That got our attention, for sure. Then came the outrageous claims, the information that was inconsistent with everything we knew to be true, and then he disappeared. Dmitri the Dangle, we called him after that.

That was the end of the program. The thought of publicly admitting there were sleepers in the U.S., of admitting our inability to find them, was already barely palatable to Bureau seniors. Between that and the potential for Russian manipulation—dangling double agents with false leads—Omar's plan was roundly criticized, then rejected. *We'll be inundated with other Dmitris,* they said. And with that, Omar's once-promising career trajectory stalled. He fell into obscurity, plugging away, day after day, at a thankless, frustrating, impossible task.

The screen changes, and a little icon with Yury's name appears. I always get a thrill out of this, seeing my targets' names here, knowing we have a window into their digital lives, the information they think is private. As if on cue, Omar stands up. He knows

about our efforts to target Yury. He's one of a handful of Bureau agents read into the program—and its biggest cheerleader, the person who believes in the algorithm, and in me, more than anyone else. But still, he can't access it directly.

"Call me tomorrow, okay?" he says.

"You got it," I reply. He turns, and as soon as I see his back, heading away, I focus my attention on the screen. I double-click the icon and a red-bordered inset appears, displaying the contents of Yury's laptop, a mirror image that I can comb through. I only have minutes until I need to leave. But it's long enough for a peek.

The background is dark blue, dotted with bubbles of different sizes, in different shades of blue. There are icons lined up in four neat rows on one side, half of them folders. The file names are all in Cyrillic, characters that I recognize but can't read—at least not well. I took a beginning Russian class years ago; then Luke arrived and I never went back. I know some basic phrases, recognize some words, but that's about it. For the rest I rely on linguists or translation software.

I open a few of the folders, then the text documents inside them. Page after page of dense Cyrillic text. I feel a wave of disappointment, one I know is nonsensical. It's not like a Russian guy sitting on his computer in Moscow is going to be typing in English, keeping records in English, *List of Deep-Cover Operatives in the United States*. I know that what I'm looking for is encrypted. I'm just hoping to see some sort of clue, some sort of protected file, something with obvious encryption.

High-level penetrations over the years have told us that the identities of the sleepers are known only to the handlers, that the names are stored electronically, locally. Not in Moscow, because the SVR—Russia's powerful external intelligence service—fears moles within its own organization. Fears them so much that they'd rather risk los-

ing sleepers than keep the names in Russia. And we know that if anything should happen to a handler, the ringleader would access the electronic files and contact Moscow for a decryption key, one part of a multilayer encryption protocol. We have the code from Moscow. We've just never had anything to decrypt.

The program's airtight. We can't break in. We don't even know its true purpose, if there is one. It might just be passive collection, or it might be something more sinister. But since we know the head of the program reports to Putin himself, I tend to think it's the latter—and that's what keeps me up at night.

I keep scanning, my eyes drifting over each file, even though I'm not entirely sure what I'm looking for. And then I see a Cyrillic word I recognize. друзья. *Friends*. The last icon in the last row, a manila folder. I double-click and the folder opens into a list of five JPEG images, nothing more. My heart rate begins to accelerate. Five. There are five sleepers assigned to each handler; we know that from multiple sources. And there's the title. *Friends*.

I click open the first image. It's a headshot of a nondescript middle-aged man in round eyeglasses. A tingle of excitement runs through me. The sleepers are well assimilated. Invisible members of society, really. This could certainly be one of them.

Logic tells me not to get too excited; all our intelligence says the files on the sleepers are encrypted. But my gut tells me this is something big.

I open the second. A woman, orange hair, bright blue eyes, wide smile. Another headshot, another potential sleeper. I stare at her. There's a thought I'm trying to ignore, but can't. These are just pictures. Nothing about their identities, nothing the ringleader could use to contact them.

But still. *Friends*. Pictures. So maybe Yury's not the elusive handler I was hoping to uncover, the one the Agency devoted resources

to finding. But could he be a recruiter? And these five people: They must be important. Targets, maybe?

I double-click the third image and a face appears on my screen. A headshot, close-up. So familiar, so expected—and yet not, because it's here, where it doesn't belong. I blink at it, once, twice, my mind struggling to bridge what I'm seeing with what I'm *seeing,* what it means. Then I swear that time stops. Icy fingers close around my heart and squeeze, and all I can hear is the whoosh of blood in my ears.

I'm staring into the face of my husband.

CHAPTER 2

FOOTSTEPS ARE COMING CLOSER. I HEAR THEM, EVEN THROUGH the pounding in my ears. The haze in my mind crystallizes, in an instant, into a single command. *Hide it*. I guide the cursor to the X in the corner of the picture and click, and Matt's face disappears, just like that.

I turn toward the sound, the open wall of my cubicle. It's Peter, approaching. Did he see? I glance back at the screen. No pictures, just the folder, open, five lines of text. Did I close it in time?

A niggling voice in my head asks me why it matters. Why I felt the need to hide it. This is Matt. My husband. Shouldn't I be running to security, asking why the Russians have a picture of him in their possession? There's a wave of nausea starting to churn deep in my stomach.

"Meeting?" Peter says. One eyebrow is raised above his thick-rimmed eyeglasses. He's standing in front of me, loafers and pressed khakis, a button-down that's buttoned a touch too close to the top. Peter's the senior analyst on the account, a holdover from the Soviet era, and my mentor for the past eight years. There's no one

more knowledgeable about Russian counterintelligence. Quiet and reserved, it's impossible not to respect the guy.

And right now there's nothing strange in his expression. Just the question. Am I coming to the morning meeting? I don't think he saw.

"Can't," I say, and my voice sounds unnaturally high-pitched. I try to lower it, try to keep the tremor out of it. "Ella's sick. I need to pick her up."

He nods, more of a tilt of his head than anything. His expression looks even, unfazed. "Hope she feels better," he says, and turns to walk away, over to the conference room, the glass-walled cube that's better suited for a tech start-up than CIA headquarters. I watch him long enough to see that he doesn't look back.

I swivel back to my computer, to the screen that's now blank. My legs have gone weak, my breath coming quick. Matt's face. On Yury's computer. And my first instinct: *Hide it*. Why?

I hear my other teammates ambling toward the conference room. Mine is the closest cubicle to it, the one everyone walks past to get there. It's usually quiet down here, the farthest reaches of the sea of cubicles, unless people are heading to the conference room or to the Restricted Access room just beyond it—the place where analysts can lock themselves away, view the most sensitive of sensitive files, the ones with information so valuable, so hard to obtain, that the Russians surely would track down and kill the source if they knew we had it.

I take a shaky breath, then another. I turn as their footsteps come closer. Marta's first. Trey and Helen, side by side, a quiet conversation. Rafael and then Bert, our branch chief, who does little more than edit papers. Peter's the real boss and everyone knows it.

We're the sleeper team, the seven of us. An odd bunch, really, because we have so little in common with the other teams in the

Counterintelligence Center, Russia Division. They have more information than they know what to do with; we have virtually nothing.

"You coming?" Marta asks, pausing at my cubicle, laying a hand on one of the high walls. The scent of peppermint and mouthwash wafts over when she speaks. There are bags under her eyes, a thick layer of concealer. One too many last night, by the look of things. Marta's a former ops officer, likes whiskey and reliving her glory days in the field in equal measure; she once taught me how to pick a lock with a credit card and a bobby pin I found at the bottom of my work bag, one that keeps Ella's hair in a bun for ballet class.

I shake my head. "Sick kid."

"Germy beasts."

She drops her hand, continues on. I offer a smile to the others as they pass. *Everything's normal here*. When they're all in the glass cube and Bert pulls the door shut, I turn back to the screen. The files, the jumble of Cyrillic. I'm trembling. I look down at the clock in the corner of the screen. I should have left three minutes ago.

The knot in my stomach is twisted tight and thick. I can't actually leave now, can I? But I have no choice. If I'm late to get Ella, it's strike two. Three and we're out; the school has waiting lists for every class and wouldn't think twice. Besides, what would I do if I stayed?

There's one sure way to find out exactly why Matt's picture is here, and it's not by looking through more files. I swallow, feeling sick, and guide the cursor to close Athena, shut down the computer. Then I grab my bag and coat and head for the door.

HE'S BEING TARGETED.

By the time I reach my car, my fingers like icicles, my breath coming in little white bursts, I'm certain.

He wouldn't be the first. The Russians have been more aggressive than ever this past year. It started with Marta. A woman with an Eastern European accent befriended her at the gym, had some drinks with her at O'Neill's. After a few, the woman flat out asked if Marta would be interested in continuing their "friendship" with a discussion about work. Marta refused and never saw her again.

Trey was next. Still in the closet at the time, he'd always come to work functions with his "roommate," Sebastian. One day I saw him, shaken and pale, on his way up to security. I later heard through the grapevine he'd received a blackmail package in the mail—photos of the two of them in some compromising positions, a threat to send them to his parents if he didn't agree to a meeting.

So it's not a stretch to think the Russians know who I am. And if they know that, then learning Matt's identity would be a piece of cake. Figuring out where we're vulnerable would be, too.

I turn the key in the ignition and the Corolla makes its usual choking sound. "Come on," I murmur, turning the key again, hearing the engine gasp to life. Seconds later a blast of icy air hits me from the vents. I reach down, turn the dial so that it's on the hottest setting, rub my hands together, then throw the car into reverse. I should let it warm up, but there isn't time. There's never enough time.

The Corolla is Matt's car, the one he had even before we met. To say it's on its last legs is an understatement. We traded in my old car when I was pregnant with the twins. Got a minivan, used. Matt drives that one, the family car, because he does more of the drop-offs and pickups.

I'm driving by rote, as if in a daze. The farther I go, the more the knot in my stomach tightens. It's not the fact that they're targeting Matt that worries me. It's that word. *Friends*. Doesn't that suggest some level of complicity?

Matt's a software engineer. He doesn't know how sophisticated the Russians are. How ruthless they can be. How they'd take just the smallest of openings, the tiniest sign that he might be willing to work with them, and they'd exploit it, twist it to compel him to do more.

I reach the school with two minutes to spare. A blast of warm air strikes me when I step inside. The director, a woman with sharp features and a permanent scowl, glances pointedly at the clock and gives me a hard look. I'm not sure if it's *What took you so long?* Or *If you're back this early, clearly she was sick when you dropped her off*. I offer a half-hearted apologetic smile as I walk by, though on the inside I'm screaming. Whatever Ella has, she caught it from here, for God's sake.

I walk down the hall lined with kids' artwork—handprint polar bears and glittery snowflakes and watercolor mittens—but my mind is elsewhere. *Friends*. Did Matt do something to make them think he'd be willing to work with them? All they'd need is the smallest sign. Something, anything, to exploit.

I find my way into Ella's classroom, tiny chairs and cubbies and toy bins, an explosion of primary colors. She's in the far corner of the room, alone on a bright red kid-size couch, a hardcover picture book open on her lap. Segregated from the other kids, it seems. She's in purple leggings I don't recognize; I vaguely remember Matt mentioning he'd taken her shopping. Of course he did. She's been outgrowing clothes left and right.

I walk over with outstretched arms, an exaggerated smile. She looks up and eyes me warily. "Where's Daddy?"

Inside I cringe, but I keep the smile plastered on my face. "Daddy's taking Caleb to the doctor. I'm picking you up today."

She closes the book and sets it back on the shelf. "Okay."

"Can I have a hug?" My arms are still outstretched, albeit droop-

ing. She looks at them for a moment, then walks into a hug. I clasp her tightly, burying my face in her soft hair. "I'm sorry you're not feeling well, sweetie."

"I'm okay, Mom."

Mom? My breath catches in my throat. Just this morning I was Mommy. Please don't let her stop calling me Mommy. I'm not ready for that. Especially not today.

I face her and paste another smile on my face. "Let's go get your brother."

Ella sits on the bench outside the infant room while I walk inside to get Chase. The room depresses me as much today as it did seven years ago, when I first dropped off Luke. The diaper-changing station, the row of cribs, the row of high chairs.

Chase is on the floor when I walk in. One of his teachers, the young one, scoops him up before I get to him, cuddles him close, lays kisses on his cheek. "Such a sweet boy," she says, smiling at me. I feel a pang of jealousy, watching. This is the woman who got to see his first steps, the one whose outstretched arms he toddled into for the first time, while I was at the office. She looks so natural with him, so comfortable. But then, of course she does. She's with him all day long.

"Yes, he is," I say, and the words sound awkward.

I get both kids bundled into puffy jackets, hats on their heads—it's unseasonably cold today for March—and then into their car seats, the ones that are hard and narrow enough to fit three across the back of the Corolla. The good ones, the safe ones, are in the minivan.

"How was your morning, sweetie?" I ask, glancing at Ella in the rearview mirror as I back out of the parking spot.

She's quiet for a moment. "I'm the only girl who didn't go to yoga."

"I'm sorry," I say, and as soon as the words are out of my mouth I know they're not the right ones, that I should have said something else. The silence that follows feels heavy. I reach for the stereo dial, turn on the kids' music.

I glance in the rearview mirror again, and Ella's looking out the window, quiet. I should ask another question, engage her in conversation about her day, but I say nothing. I can't get the picture out of my head. Matt's face. It was recent, I think. Within the past year or so. How long have they been watching him, watching us?

The drive from school to home is short, winding through neighborhoods that are a study in contradictions: new-construction McMansions interspersed with older homes like ours, a house far too small for six, old enough that my parents could have grown up in it. The D.C. suburbs are notoriously expensive, and Bethesda's one of the worst. But the schools are some of the best in the country.

We pull up to our house, neat and boxlike, two-car garage. There's a small front porch that the previous owners added, one that doesn't really match the rest of the house, that we don't use nearly as much as I thought we would. We bought the place when I was pregnant with Luke, when the schools made it seem worth the massive price tag.

I look at the American flag hanging near the front door. Matt hung that flag. Replaced the last one when it faded. He wouldn't agree to work against our country. I know he wouldn't. But did he do *something*? Did he do enough to make the Russians think he might?

There's one thing I know for certain. He was targeted because of me. Because of my job. And that's why I hid the picture, isn't it? If he's in trouble, it's my fault. And I need to do what I can to get him out of it.

I LET ELLA WATCH cartoons on the couch, one after another. Usually we cap it at a single episode, an after-dinner treat, but she's sick, and I can't get my mind to focus on anything except the picture. While Chase naps and she's zoned out in front of the TV, I clean the kitchen. Wipe down the countertops, the blue ones that we'd replace if we had the cash. Scrub stains off the stovetop, around the three burners that still work. Organize the cabinet full of plastic containers, matching lids with containers, stacking the ones that fit together.

In the afternoon, I bundle up the kids and we walk to the bus stop to pick up Luke. His greeting is the same as Ella's. *Where's Dad?*

Dad's taking Caleb to the doctor.

I make him a snack and help him with his homework. A math worksheet, adding two-digit numbers. I didn't know they were already up to two digits. Matt's the one who usually helps.

Ella hears Matt's key in the lock before I do, and she's off the couch like a shot, bounding for the front door. "Daddy!" she shouts as he opens the door, Caleb in one arm, groceries in the other. Somehow he still manages to squat down and give her a hug, ask her how she's feeling, even as he's wriggling Caleb's jacket off. Somehow the smile on his face looks genuine, *is* genuine.

He stands up and ambles over to me, gives me a peck on the lips. "Hi, honey," he says. He's in jeans and the sweater I gave him last Christmas, the brown one that zips at the top, a jacket over it. He sets the bag of groceries down on the counter, adjusts Caleb on his hip. Ella's clinging to one of his legs; he rests his free hand on her head and strokes her hair.

"How'd it go?" I reach for Caleb and I'm almost surprised when

he willingly moves into my arms. I squeeze him and kiss his head, inhale the sweet smell of baby shampoo.

"Great, actually," Matt says, peeling off his jacket, laying it on the counter. He walks over to Luke and musses his hair. "Hey, kiddo."

Luke looks up, beaming. I can see the gap where he lost his first tooth, the one that went under his pillow before I got home from work. "Hey, Dad. Can we play catch?"

"In a bit. I need to talk to Mom first. Did you already work on your science project?"

There's a science project?

"Yeah," Luke says, and then his eyes dart to me, like he forgot I was there.

"Tell the truth," I say, my voice sharper than I mean it to be. My eyes find Matt's, and I see his eyebrows rise, just the smallest bit. But he doesn't say anything.

"I *thought* about the science project," I hear Luke murmur.

Matt walks back over, leans against the counter. "Dr. Misrati's really happy with the progress. The echo and EKG looked good. She wants to see us back in three months."

I squeeze Caleb again. Finally, some good news. Matt starts unloading the contents of the grocery bag. A gallon of milk. A package of chicken breasts, a bag of frozen vegetables. Cookies from the bakery—the kind I always ask him not to buy, because we can make the same thing for a fraction of the price. He's humming to himself, some tune I don't recognize. He's happy. He hums when he's happy.

He bends down, pulls out a pot and a pan from the bottom drawer, sets them on the stove. I give Caleb another kiss as I watch him. How is he so good at all this? How can he have so many balls in the air and not drop them?

I turn away from him, toward Ella, who's back on the couch. "You doing okay in there, sweetie?"

"Yeah, Mom."

I can hear Matt stop, his movements frozen. "Mom?" he says softly. I turn around, see the concern etched on his face.

I shrug, but I'm sure he can see the hurt in my eyes. "Guess today's the day."

He sets down the box of rice he's holding and wraps me in a hug, and all of a sudden the wall of emotion that's been building inside me threatens to come crashing down. I hear his heartbeat, feel his warmth. *What happened?* I want to ask. *Why didn't you tell me?*

I swallow, take a breath, pull away. "Can I help with dinner?"

"I got it." He turns around, adjusts the dial on the stove, then leans over and grabs a bottle of wine from the metal rack on the counter. I watch as he uncorks it, then pulls a glass out of the cabinet. Fills it halfway, carefully. He hands it to me. "Have a drink."

If only you knew how much I need one. I offer him a small smile and take a sip.

I get the kids' hands washed, strap the babies into their high chairs, one at either end of the table. Matt scoops stir-fry into bowls, sets them down in front of us at the table. He's chatting with Luke about something, and I'm making the right expressions, like I'm part of the conversation, but my mind is elsewhere. He looks so happy today. He's been happier than usual lately, hasn't he?

In my mind, I see the picture. The folder name. *Friends*. He wouldn't have agreed to anything, would he? But this is the Russians we're talking about. All he had to do was give them the slightest opening, the slightest indication he *might* consider it, and they'd pounce.

There's a tingle of adrenaline running through me, a sensation that's akin to disloyalty. That thought shouldn't even be crossing my mind. But it is. And sure, we need the money. What if he thought he was doing us a favor, providing another source of income? I try to remember the last time we argued about money. He came home with a Powerball ticket the next day, stuck it to the fridge under the corner of the magnetic dry-erase board. Wrote *I'm sorry* on the board, a little smiley face beside it.

What if they pitched him, and in his mind it was like winning the lotto? What if he doesn't even know he was pitched? What if they tricked him, if he thinks he's lining up some perfectly legitimate side job, something to help us make ends meet?

God, it all comes down to money. How I hate that it all comes down to money.

If I'd known, I'd have told him to be patient. It'll get better. So we're in the red right now. But Ella's almost in kindergarten. The twins will be out of the infant room soon; we'll save some money in the toddler room. We'll be in better shape next year. Much better. This is just a rough year. We knew it would be a rough year.

He's talking with Ella now, and her sweet little voice pierces through the fog in my mind. "I'm the only girl who didn't go to yoga," she says, the same thing she told me in the car.

Matt takes a bite of his food, chews carefully, watching her the whole time. I hold my breath, wait for his response. He finally swallows. "And how did that make you feel?"

She cocks her head to the side, just the slightest bit. "Okay, I guess. I got to sit in the front for story time."

I stare at her, my fork suspended in midair. She didn't care. She didn't need an apology. How does Matt always find the right words, always know exactly what to say?

Chase is sweeping the remnants of his dinner onto the floor

with chubby, food-stained hands, and Caleb starts laughing, slamming his own hands down on his tray, sending stir-fry sauce flying. Matt and I push back our chairs at the same time, off to get the paper towels, to start wiping faces and hands covered in sauce and globs of food, a well-practiced routine at this point, the tandem cleanup.

Luke and Ella are excused from the table and tear off to the family room. When the twins are clean, we set them down in the family room, too, and start cleaning the kitchen. I pause midway through spooning leftovers into plastic containers to refill my wineglass. Matt glances over, shoots me a quizzical look as he wipes down the kitchen table.

"Rough day?"

"A bit," I answer, and I try to think of how I would have answered the question yesterday. How much more would I have said? It's not like I'm telling Matt anything classified. Anecdotes about coworkers, maybe. Hinting around at things, talking around issues, like the big information load today. But it's scraps. Nothing the Russians would actually care about. Nothing they should be paying for.

When the kitchen's finally looking clean, I throw my last paper towel into the trash and sink back down into my chair at the table. I look at the wall, the blank wall. How many years have we been in this place now, and it's still not decorated. From the family room I hear the television, the show about monster trucks, the one Luke likes. The faint melody of one of the twins' toys.

Matt comes over, pulls out his chair, sits down. He's watching me, concern on his face, waiting for me to speak. I need to say something. I need to know. The alternative is going directly to Peter, to security, telling them what I found. Allowing them to begin investigating my husband.

There must be an innocent explanation for all this. He hasn't been approached yet. He has been, but he doesn't realize it. He didn't agree to anything. He certainly didn't agree to anything. I drain the last of my wine. My hand is trembling as I set the glass back on the table.

I stare at him, no idea what I'm going to say. You'd think in all these hours I would have come up with something.

His expression looks totally open. He must know something big is coming. I'm sure he can read it all over my face. But he doesn't look nervous. Doesn't look anything. Just looks like Matt.

"How long have you been working for the Russians?" I say. The words are raw, unprocessed. But they're out now, so I watch his face closely, because his expression matters far more to me than his words. Will there be honest confusion? Indignation? Shame?

There's nothing. Absolutely no emotion crosses his face. It doesn't change. And that sends a bolt of fear through me.

He looks at me evenly. Waits a beat too long to answer, but just barely. "Twenty-two years."

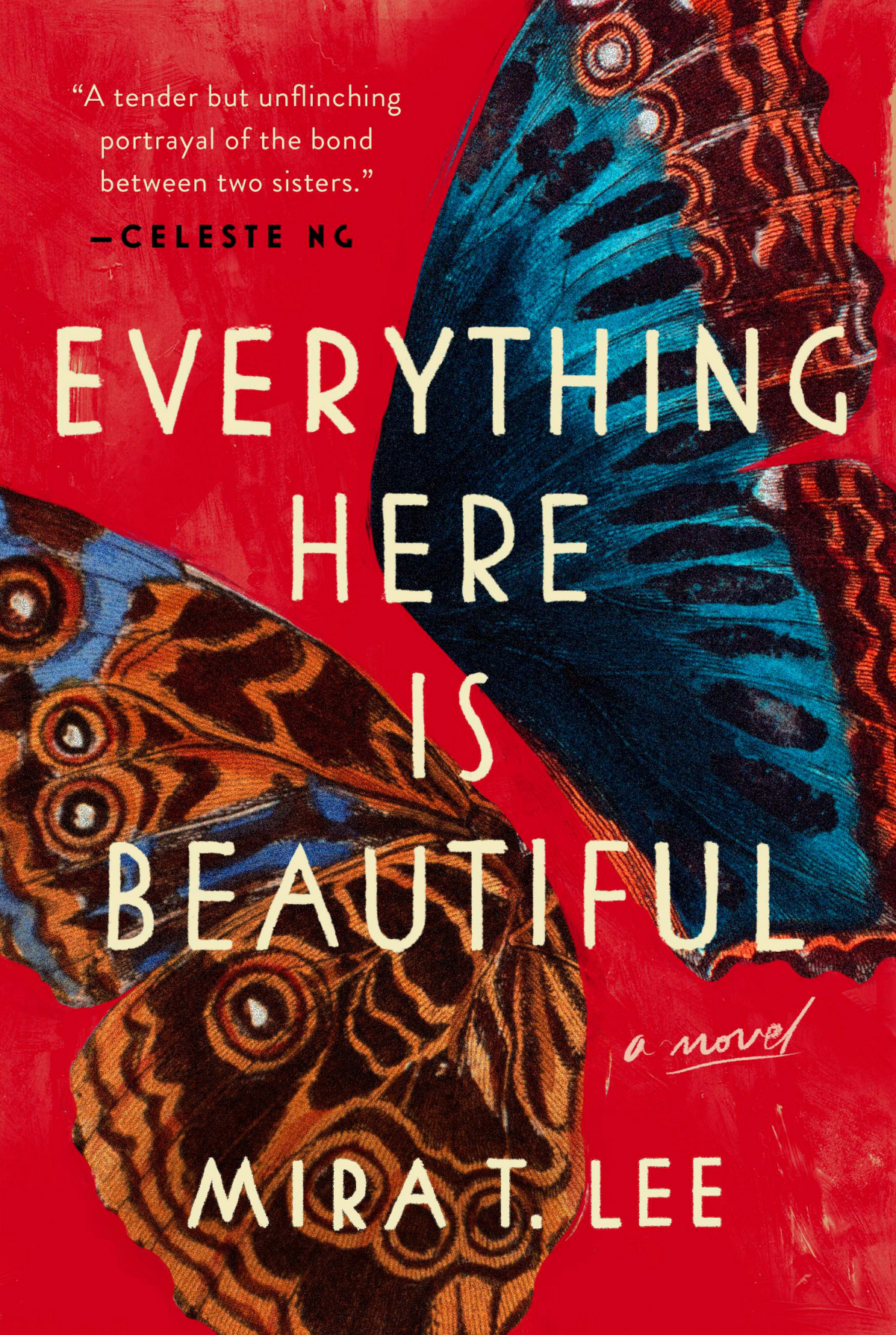
"A tender but unflinching portrayal of the bond between two sisters."

—CELESTE NG

EVERYTHING HERE IS BEAUTIFUL

a novel

MIRA T. LEE



Prologue

A summer day in New Jersey. A house with a yard. The younger one, four, likes to fold her body over the seat of her swing, observe the world from upside down. She circles her feet, twists the pair of steel ropes until they're all the way wound. She kicks up her legs. The swing spins. She likes the sensation of dizziness.

The older one, eleven, in the kitchen, chops ginger and scallions, puts on the rice. Sets out a small plate of pickled radishes.

It is early morning. Their mother is still asleep. On Mondays and Thursdays she attends night classes at the local college. On Fridays she works at the accounting office until late. "One more year," she has said, though she has promised this before. She has come a long way since her husband died and she was forced to come alone to America. The mother will soon sit for another actuarial exam. "An excellent profession," she tells the girls with pride. They know only that it involves a lot of math.

The older one sits at the kitchen table. Opens her tin pan of watercolors, paints with quick, smooth strokes. She will try a still life today, that bowl of peaches, or a vase of Shasta daisies fresh-picked

from the garden. She likes the feeling of focus. When the rest of the world falls away.

"*Jie!* Come look!" her sister calls from outside.

The older one doesn't look up.

"Come here, I found something!"

She sets down her brush, heads out to the yard. The screen door slams shut behind her.

"Can you see it, Jie? There."

In the corner, by the fence. Wet grass tickles her feet. The younger one points to something in the low branches of the dogwood tree.

"It's a spiderweb, Mei-mei. See how its threads stretch from this branch to that one?"

It is their first summer in New Jersey. Their first house with a yard. Before, they lived in Third Uncle's basement, in Tennessee.

The younger one's eyes, wide.

"Don't worry, Mei. You don't have to be scared. Spiders won't hurt you. They catch flies and mosquitoes and all kinds of other insects. See the web? The spider spins it with a silk from its body. It's sticky. The bug gets caught in those strands and the spider eats it. It sucks out the blood."

The younger one nods, ponders this information. The older one turns to go back inside.

"But . . ."

The older one, impatient, though she isn't sure why. "What, Mei?"

Her sister is pointing to the web again. It shimmers in the sun. Catches the morning light.

"Look, Jie. See? It's beautiful."

1

Miranda

Lucia said she was going to marry a one-armed Russian Jew. It came as a shock, this news, as I had met him only once before, briefly, when I was in town for a meeting with a pair of squat but handsome attorneys. His name was Yonah. He owned a health food store in the East Village, down the street from a tattoo parlor, across from City Video, next door to a Polish diner, beneath three floors of apartments that Lucia said he rented out to the yuppies who would soon take over the neighborhood. He had offered me tea, and I took peppermint green, and he scurried around, mashing Swiss chard and kale in a loud, industrial blender, barking orders to his nephews, or maybe they were second or third cousins (I never knew, there were so many), because they were sluggish in their work of unloading organic produce off the delivery trucks. He yelled often. I thought, This Yonah is quite a rough man.

He dusted the wine, mopped the floor, restocked packages of dried figs and goji berries and ginseng snacks on the shelves. He was industrious, I could see, intent on making his fortune as immigrants do. Lucia said he played chess. I'd never known my sister to play chess, though she was always excellent at puzzles as a child. Yonah

didn't seem to me the kind to play chess either, nor to drink sulfite-free organic wine or eat goji berries. But as they say, love is strange. And I wouldn't begrudge my sister love, nor any stranger, not even one who smoked, and was the kind of man who looked disheveled even fresh after a shower, and would leave his camo briefs lying around on the bathroom floor. I admit I was disturbed, creeped out, by his prosthetic arm, which he wore sometimes, though more often I'd find it sitting by itself in a chair.

Lucia brought him to visit our mother, who was dying. Our mother was tilted back in a green suede recliner, wrapped in cotton blankets, watching the *Three Tenors* video we'd given her the previous year. She took a long look at this man—his workingman's shoulders, his dark-stubbled jaw, his wide, flat nose. Her Yoni had the essence of a duck, Lucia said (endearingly), or maybe a platypus, though she'd never seen one up close. My sister liked to discern people's animal and vegetable essences. In fact, she was usually right.

Our mother winced as her gaze settled upon his left arm, a pale, peachy shade that did not match the rest of him. "What happened to your arm?" she said.

"An accident, when I was twenty-one." He said it quietly, but without any shame.

"In Soviet Union?"

"In Israel. I moved there when I was teenager."

"You are divorced," she said, and I tried to read his thoughts in the fluttering of his blue-gray eyes. I wondered if Lucia had warned him that our mother was like that. I wondered what had been shared, what omitted, when the two of them exchanged stories over chess, over wine. I wished to say to this man: *Do you really think you now know our Lucia?*

"Thirteen years," he said. "I have been divorced for thirteen years." Our mother winced again, though it could've been from the pain shooting through her bowels, or her bones, or her chest.

"You are Jewish," she said. "Jewish are so aggressive. You have children?"

"Two," he said. "They are with their mother, in Israel."

At the mention of the other woman, our mother spat. Once, I suppose, she would have wanted to know more, like what did he do, or how old were the children, or what were their names, or did they play musical instruments, and we might have told him that Lucia could recite twenty Chinese poems by the time she was three, or that she was a real talent on the violin, or that she'd suffered a terrible bout of meningitis at age six and nearly died.

"Why are you divorced?" she asked.

"We were married too young," he said. The skin of his face seemed to hang off his cheekbones. A basset hound, I later said to Lucia.

"This is life," he said to our mother.

She did not seem quite satisfied with this answer, though she nodded, expelled a heavy sigh. "Take care of my daughter," she said.

But she was not looking at him. She was looking at me.

She fell asleep. Two weeks later, she was gone.

"Three piles," said Lucia. "Everything in three piles."

Keep. Salvation Army. Trash.

This was our strategy, tasked as we were with selling the house in New Jersey, as specified by our mother's will (our childhood home, marred by death, now considered "inauspicious"). So we sorted CorningWare and gas bills and soy sauce and ice trays and Cabbage Patch dolls and garden hoses and yarn and frying pans and Maurice Sendak books and twin bed sheet sets with faded Raggedy Ann and Andy pillowcases. Keep. Trash. Keep. Keep. Salvation Army. Trash. And when we reached Ma's bedroom, a hallowed hush, as if to acknowledge the finality in this sacred act of disturbance on

which we now embarked. The desk where she'd worked, pencil in hand; the throw pillows Lucia sewed one year in home economics class; the portable radio; the clock; her *Reader's Digest*s; the bed where she'd lain tethered to her morphine drip, eyes closed, silent, body slack at last.

"Fashion show?" whispered Lucia.

"Well . . ." Why not?

We peered in the closet, the one we'd raided often as impish children. We picked out two vintage cotton sundresses, one with chevron stripes, the other, zigzags. "Twirl!" said Lucia. "You," I said, and in unison, our skirts puffed out like upside-down tulips.

We burst into tears. Twelve cycles of chemotherapy, three surgeries, three courses of radiation, two clinical trials, three remissions, four recurrences, over nine grueling years—yet the permanence of Ma's absence still came as a shock.

We worked until late. At two in the morning, we decided to bake. We blasted Abba and Blondie and the Rolling Stones, broke out in song as flour and sugar flew everywhere. "Almonds!" said Lucia. "We need almonds!" Chinese almond cookies were Ma's favorite, so we set down our spatulas, drove to the twenty-four-hour pharmacy to shop for nuts.

We'll be roommates someday in an old folks' home! We'll be cranky and play bridge and complain to the nurses about our hemorrhoids. Ha ha, when you're eighty I'll only be seventy-three!

No doubt the grief made us giddy. The late hour. The fatigue. But it was like that, to be with Lucia.

We fell asleep in the family room, the house buttery warm, the waffle-weave of sofa cushions imprinted on our cheeks. And then morning came. And with it came Yonah, roaring up the driveway in a giant rental truck.

They married quickly, in City Hall. Lucia wore a sparkly tank top with pink bicycle pants, silver hoop earrings. She beamed, like a bride. Yonah wore his best khakis, a wrinkled white shirt, a bright red tie. I thought, *This* is who my sister is marrying: a man the shade of gravy, with a missing limb and a spaghetti-sauce-colored tie. I'd never expected my sister to marry a more conventional man, or a Chinese man, or a highly educated man with a spotless résumé. Lucia had dated a Greek boy in high school, chosen NYU over Cornell, rejected math and sciences for English, all to our mother's dismay. And while her college dormmates had busied themselves with one incestuous hookup after the next, Lucia met a soft-spoken drummer who lived with four other musicians in Tribeca, ditched her violin for electric bass. She found her wanderlust, too, forgoing the air-conditioned offices and suits our mother and I were both familiar with to teach English in Ecuador, tutor in Brazil, volunteer at an orphanage in Bolivia. In her early twenties, she worked as a travel writer in Latin America for a small start-up firm, before returning to study journalism. She wrote feature articles now for a newspaper in Queens—the next best thing, I suppose, as there she was friendly with halal butchers, Egyptian barbers, Salvadoran cooks and the old Chinese grocers who sold dog penises and exotic mushrooms for six hundred dollars a pound.

Still, I had not imagined this.

Yonah beamed, like a groom. He beamed with the whole of his wide, duck face and his wiry brows and his small, sticking-out ears. "Take picture now!" he barked, and I followed him through the rectangular window of my camera, trying to see what Lucia could see, and yes, he was rugged, fit, masculine. Attractive, one could say. I'd never thought of Lucia marrying before me—after all, she was younger by seven years. My *mei-mei*.

They had signed prenuptial agreements, at my insistence. I did not think Yonah was marrying for our mother's money (not a fortune, but far from meager), nor for Lucia's American citizenship, but I felt my concern was reasonable. "Take more picture!" he said. I did not like how often he spoke in imperatives, though I understood that English was not his native tongue. We had that in common. I did try to like him, I did.

After the two-minute ceremony, he hugged me fiercely, strong as a bear. "*Sister!*" he said. "*Achoti! Hermana! Sestra! Belle soeur!*"

"*Jie*," said Lucia.

"*J-yeah!*" he said in a remarkably accurate third tone. He laughed from his belly. I liked that about him. Then he scooped up Lucia with his good arm and carried her down seven flights of stairs, out to the plaza where spring blossoms danced and songbirds chirped and a rainbow might have appropriately appeared. He spun her around and around and Lucia shrieked with delight, her arms outstretched, head thrown back, bobbed hair and sharp chin shining in rays of new sun. "My wife, she is beauuuu-ti-ful," he sang, and Lucia's eyes shone with such clarity that even my most shrouded worries burned off like a morning fog. They were in love. Our mother, I was sure, could know this safely, from wherever that place is where the dead view the living.

He welcomed me to their home. It was cramped: a two-room apartment adjacent to the kitchen of the health food store. It smelled like cigarettes. In the windowless bedroom, four black-and-white

security monitors sat stacked on a large, steel desk cluttered with paper cups and ashtrays and framing nails and remote controls and piles of Lucia's small, girly clothes. Lucia decorated their marital bed with oddly shaped pillows—clover, heart, frog, banana. She loved to lie there snacking on pita chips or yogurt-covered pretzels, watching the store. "That's where he first saw me eating macadamias," she said dreamily, pointing to the bulk nut bins on security screen one.

In the living room, a twin mattress was laid out on the floor. It served as a bed for Yonah's visiting nieces and nephews or cousins or uncles, whoever was passing through. Lucia loved the bustle, the chaotic, hostel-like feel of the place. The Organic Kibbutz, she called it. And now it was her home, too.

"Do you believe in happily ever after?" she asked me that day, as we sipped peppermint tea from our paper cups. I recalled the stone-faced art professor I'd recently dated for six weeks, felt a slight, involuntary jerk of my brow. Slight, but noticed, because Lucia noticed these kinds of things.

"Oh, Jie." She sighed. "You could at least *try* to believe." She reached over to hug me, patted my head, like she used to as a child.

That night I lay on the twin mattress and listened to the sounds of the two of them panting and moaning, gooey and fucking like rabbits. My sister was officially a newlywed. A wife. It came to me suddenly, as a blunt ache inside—I'd never felt more alone.

Yonah was frugal; our mother would've approved. Every other Sunday he dragged in furniture from that Middle Eastern flea market on Twelfth and B. "Listen," he said. That's what he always said: "Listen. You wanna know something? The yuppies, they love this stuff. You know how much this cost?"

I examined the three-by-four-foot tea-stained mohair rug.

"Twenty bucks!" he said. "Secondhand store, you pay two hundred; this one you clean, it's like perfect."

"Perfect!" said Lucia.

She painted the bench outside the store a bright berry red. Bought a dozen tropical-looking plants to decorate the café area, which had been recently expanded to include a fancy soup and salad bar, and now all the neighborhood characters came to mingle in the exposed-brick aura of their urban oasis, lounging to trip-hop or Moby or Ella Fitzgerald (Lucia promptly declared them her favorites) while young people huddled over soy milk beverages, many of them lesbian hipsters or drama students or aspiring environmental activists.

I cannot say I particularly liked the way my sister behaved around her new husband or how he'd speak to her often as though she were a child. "Lucy Goooosey," he said (she'd hated that nickname all her life), "I made you your favorite food in all the world . . . shakshuka!"

Shakshuka?

Lucia loved our mother's spare ribs—yes, those tender pork spare ribs marinated overnight in honey and garlic and five-spice powder. "I love you Lucy Goosey," he said, scooping runny egg and tomato into her mouth. He kept kosher. Our mother would've been disappointed; she would not have trusted a grown man who was coarse like a rhino but who ate like a bird.

I did like how he always made efforts to welcome his customers: "*Hola!*" to Juan Carlos, the Colombian guitarist, "*Guten Morgen!*" to redheaded Mikael, "*Konichiwa!*" to Mrs. Sato and "*Chow chow!*" to Mrs. Sato's long-haired Pomeranian. They liked him. They liked to stop and chat at his store. Later, Lucia told me, "Yoni, he can't read or write English."

"What?" I said. "What do you mean?"

Lucia shrugged. This saddened me, because my sister had always loved words—their sounds, their rhythms, the moods they conveyed. As a child, she'd sit for hours on the toilet with a dictionary in her lap, circling her favorite words with a stubby red pencil.

"But how does he run the store?" I said.

"He has business partners, *cousins*," she said. "Uncle Leo does the bookkeeping. Cousin Abby does the ordering. Yoni manages the workers. He's a *people person*." She would teach him if he wanted to learn. Later she said maybe he didn't want to learn.

"But he reads and writes Hebrew," I said.

"Sometimes." She shrugged again. "Do you know how many words I write down in a day?" She took out her tall, spiraled reporter's notebook and flipped through page after page of meticulous notes and lists. "I write down *everything*."

"So?" I said.

"Yesterday, Yoni wrote down six Hebrew words."

"Six words?" I said. I did not understand. I worried about her then. I tried hard to read her tiny handwriting, and her face.

"Six words," she said. "Some days one. Some days none."

"So what?" I said.

"Can you imagine?" she said. "He organizes everything in his *brain*."

Yes, this was pure Lucia.

She found an immigration lawyer, filled out duplicate copies of form after form, gathered glowing letters from the lesbian owners of the tattoo parlor down the street, the manager of City Video, the Polish chef next door, and within six months Yonah became a proud green card carrier. Lucia could be resourceful like that; efficient, like our mother. And then she was determined to help him quit smoking. She brought home pamphlets and read them aloud, signed him up for support groups, bought nicotine gum, hid his ashtrays, then his Marlboro Reds (until he roared), and made him watch videos of blackened, cancer-infested lungs. She monitored his cough, and when it didn't go away for four weeks she made him his first doctor's appointment in ten years.

Occupying the twin mattress that winter was Yonah's aunt's best friend's son, Chaka, fresh from Haifa, so when I came to the city for

a business meeting I offered to stay with a friend, but Yonah huffed, *Ridiculous!* He moved to a long, cushioned bench in the café so I could sleep with my sister and I said thank you and tried to ignore the cigarette burns on the sheets. Lucia and I lay awake, propped by pillows, snacking on egg tarts and pineapple buns from our favorite Chinese bakery on Mott Street, watching episode after episode of *Sex and the City* (Lucia had faithfully recorded them for me on videotape). In the morning we watched Chaka chop celery and flirt with Noemie, the busty new Puerto Rican girl on the register who wore tight, cap-sleeved shirts. "Great Dane," said Lucia, pointing to security screen two. "Right," I said, watching Chaka wave a paring knife with his graceful young limbs. "What a heartbreaker," said Lucia. "Look at those eyes." "Watch out, new girl," I said. "*Aiyaaaa*," said Lucia. We laughed.

She asked me to take Yonah to see the doctor. She had an interview with a prominent food critic in Astoria (for which she trotted out a vintage pair of Mary Jane pumps, red suede). Yoni hated doctors, she said. She'd found him a woman doctor who spoke Hebrew with an office only six blocks away. I was touched. I couldn't remember my sister being so thoughtful in the past.

He made me peppermint green tea that morning. "Shakshuka?" he said.

"Oh, no," I said, "that's okay."

He brought me vegan chocolate-orange pound cake. "Lucy's favorite," he said. I tasted it, and it was surprisingly moist. That might have been the first time I was alone with him. We walked quickly, without saying much, though when he spied an old boom box awaiting disposal, he whipped out his pocketknife, pried out the batteries, dropped one onto the sidewalk. "No bounce, you see? This one is good." "You could take the whole thing," I suggested. "Nah," he said. "I got boom box. Better one than this."

At the doctor's office, the secretary handed him a clipboard full

of forms. He handed them to me. "Please," he said (quietly, but without any shame). "Name," I said. "Birthday. Symptoms," I said. "Family medical history, check all that apply." That's when I found out Yonah's father had died of lung cancer at the age of forty-four. Yonah's age.

Our mother had died of lung cancer, too, though she smoked only two months, back when we first emigrated from Shanghai to Tennessee. Lucia never knew how it was, stuck in Third Uncle's house, banished to the basement, Ma gagging because it smelled like feet. My sister was a colicky baby, howling, red-faced—to calm her, I'd aggressively belt out Chinese lullabies, or the Popeye theme song, or one of the old southern spirituals I learned at school, so strange to me as a child:

Ezekiel connected dem dry bones,
Ezekiel connected dem dry bones,
Ezekiel in the Valley of Dry Bones,
Now hear the word of the Lord!

I'd never heard the Lord say a thing, but a girl at school said if I prayed to Him, I might get what I wanted. So I prayed for Him to strike down Third Uncle so he would no longer assail us with profanities, or insult Ma's cooking, or throw dishes down the stairs when the baby cried. These were the years our mother's lips remained pressed into a tight, thin line. Every morning I was called up to Third Uncle's room to wash his feet and rub his bunions with tiger tooth liniment; every afternoon I'd run home from school, study quickly, so I could care for Lucia when our mother left for her night classes. *Ma, why did we have to come to America? Aiya, Nu-er, very complicated. Family matters. Your Ba thought it was good idea.* But our father had died in a car accident six months ago, when we were still back in China. I did not understand family matters. Day after

day, I sat alone in the cafeteria, picking at the grains of rice in my thermos, afraid to look up. Only eighteen months later would I meet a girl in Art Club who shared with me her brand-new Cray-Pas, then her Mallomars, even invited me to her house to show me her Vidal Sassoon hair dryer, and how to blow out my hair and set it with hairspray instead of always wearing it in a single braid down my back. Tess Carter, a true blue-eyed blonde, who would transform those years into something bearable. And on the last day of fifth grade, when Ma announced she'd accepted a job in New Jersey, Tess and I had wailed and sobbed, swore to write every day on the Hello Kitty stationery we picked out together at the Hallmark store—and though the letters dwindled, we would reunite, fortuitously, in New York City, for college at Barnard. My first American friend would last for life.

Yonah was in the examination room a long time. When he came out his face was red and he paid the receptionist quickly from the thick wad of cash he always carried in his pocket. "Is everything okay?" I said.

"Listen," he said. "I'm gonna tell you something. Doctors, they don't do nothing. Never I had a lady tell me to cough and then squeeze my fucking balls!"

I laughed. I thought, Sometimes this Yonah is a funny man.

He came on vacation with us that first summer. Lucia and I liked to rent a cottage on Cape Cod with a few of our friends. I invited Tess, who came from the city with her new boyfriend, the two of them all gushing and googly-eyed. Yonah invited his Uncle Leo, who lived upstairs and kept the books at the store. "*Avocado*," whispered Lucia, and I recognized him instantly when I drove to fetch him from the bus station. Uncle Leo was short and stocky, wide at the bottom instead of up top, and wore round, rimless glasses and a yarmulke that covered most of his hair. He had unfortunately fat feet, I recall.

"So *you* are the sister," he said. He eyed me head to toe. "Where do you live, sister?"

"In Providence," I said.

"Providence?" He laughed out loud.

I found him rude. I did miss New York, but after Ma's third remission, I'd finally left the soulless midtown consulting firm where I'd worked for seven years, moved to Providence to help implement a new strategic plan for an arts foundation. "But what do you *do*?" said Uncle Leo, and I explained I mostly managed their finances. "A-ha," he said. "So you are good with money. Good at math." He nodded at me with new respect.

We went swimming. Yonah and Uncle Leo complained it was too cold. *"Hof Dor!"* said Yonah. "Now that's a real beach!" He spoke loudly about their houses in Haifa and Jerusalem, how they were furnished with antiques, and Uncle Leo spoke about how business was booming and how they could soon buy a new property in Williamsburg and expand the store. "This is America!" said Yonah. "Listen, you know about *air rights*?"

"Air rights?" said Tess.

"Greedy yuppie developers," said Yonah. "They want to build twelve floors of luxury apartments on the corner, where now is that car park. The neighborhood lets each building have six floors; they want more. But I have only four. Sure, they can buy two floors of my air!" He laughed, puffing rings of blue smoke.

"Two million bucks!" said Uncle Leo, slapping us all high fives.

"My wife will never have to work again!" said Yonah, grabbing Lucia's tiny waist.

You think you know my sister, I thought. My sister loves her work. She has no interest in being a rich man's wife. I thought, This Yonah is an arrogant man.

That evening he grilled pounds and pounds of kosher chicken breast and potatoes. "Kosher chicken is the best chicken," he said.

"Lots of paprika," said Uncle Leo, and we all murmured that it was indeed very good and very well spiced. After dinner, we retired to the screened-in porch, where I brought out a large bag full of canvases and tubes of acrylic paints. As a child, this had been my primary entertainment—hours and hours lost in colors and textures on twelve-by-sixteen-inch matte boards layered thick with experiment. Sometimes Lucia and I played crazy eights or Chinese chess. Sometimes I taught Lucia math as our mother had taught me—by sitting her in my lap, asking her to calculate how many chickens, how many pigs, in a barnyard with eighteen feet and six heads.

I pulled out a canvas of sunflowers I'd painted the summer before. "Jie!" said Yonah. "It's beautiful."

"Beauuuutiful," said Lucia. "Jie's always been an artist."

I blushed.

"You must hang your paintings in our gallery," he said.

"What gallery?" I said.

"We make a gallery in the café at the store," he said.

So now you think you also know art, I thought.

"Maybe you should paint something," I said. "Do you want to paint?"

"Yeah!" he said. He was enthusiastic, I admit; Lucia loved that about him.

I watched the two of them squeeze huge gobs of blue and yellow and red onto paper plates. "A duck," said Lucia. "I'm going to paint you, a duck." "A goose!" said Yonah. "Lucy Goosey, I'm going to paint you, a goose." He mashed my squirrel-hair brushes into the goopy plate and I winced. When he was finished, the goose was a yellow blob standing on thin, orange sticks, anchored by triangular-ish green blocks I recognized as similar to Uncle Leo's feet. Lucia's duck was muddy brown, with one orange wing. "Duck and goose!" She glowed. "We are duck and goose!" said Yonah, beaming, and they danced around the cottage and they kissed.

He entertained our friends, smoking late into the night. I coughed in my bed. Through the buzzing of mosquitoes, I could hear Uncle Leo telling stories of childhood in Moscow, eating stale bread and goulash, cold beet soup. They spoke, too, of Israel, their days in the Israeli army. I imagined Yonah dressed in camouflage, learning how to load a gun, disarm a grenade, living in a tin-can hut, rows of concrete bunkers looming on the dusty horizon. I knew nothing about Moscow, or Israel, or the Israeli army.

"Do you remember the tents?" said Uncle Leo. In the desert dark, it was cold. They were allowed their own pillows, and as homesick boys they squeezed them tight, as if to wring out their fear. They joked about Passover, about the matzoh, heavy in their bellies, that kept them awake and constipated all night.

That night I learned Yonah had trained as a marksman, that he'd lost his arm when he tried to remove a Palestinian boy's body from the path of an IDF tank.

In the morning I sat on the front porch in my Adirondack chair, reading a book, while he and Lucia panted and groaned upstairs. I wished to be glad for their happiness.

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One day in the fall, he called. He never called.

It was Lucia who called, usually once every week, to tell me about the poetry slam in the café where they'd served sulfite-free organic wine, or what they'd done for Rosh Hashanah, or the shakshuka she'd cooked for all the workers in the store (*three cartons of eggs!*). And Yonah would yell from the background in his singsong voice: "Jie! Come visit us soon!" Or, "Me and Lucy Goosey, we miss you! Everything here is beautiful!"

This time he whispered. "Listen," he said. "Something is happening." His rough voice wavered. "Lucia, she stops sleeping and she is laughing and laughing in the shower all night. This morning, she is crying. She is telling me I am filming her on the security screens, bad people are making movies of her in our room."

I was in the middle of preparing a chocolate soufflé, having been invited by a bungee-jumping financial analyst to his apartment for a third date. I turned off the oven, boarded the next train to New York, withholding fat tears I hoped our mother could not see from her grave.

"She needs a doctor," I said.

"I hate doctors," said Yonah.

"She needs a doctor," I said. This is how Lucia looked: Empty. Pale. Limp, like old celery.

"Why is this happening?" he said.

☙

It had happened once before, three years earlier, not long after she'd finished graduate school.

One doctor I'd spoken with explained that such episodes could be triggered by stress, or drugs, or trauma, or exhaustion. Or sometimes, nothing at all.

"Can't you *do* something?" I said.

"No," said the doctor.

"What do you mean, *no*?" I said.

No. Simply, no. Not unless her condition worsened significantly, such that she posed an imminent risk of harm to herself or others. Until then, no, we could not help her if she did not wish to be helped. All we could do was wait.

She lost her first real job with a newspaper in Connecticut. Worked as a coat-check girl at a trendy Manhattan bar, lost that job, too. For a while she came to stay with me in Providence, slept on a pullout couch in the living room. One minute she babbled on about serpents and spies, the next she fell mute like a shadow. When we hung out with friends, her tangential interjections turned every gathering tense. One weekend Tess came to visit and we went out to a club to see Lucia's old college friend's indie-pop band.

"How do you like living here?" Tess asked.

"I live on Earth, hello, and it's getting polluted," said Lucia. "Don't bother to breathe the air."

"Oh, pollution is bad," said Tess. "But Providence must be better than New York."

"They must be living in a recession," said Lucia. "Or regression." I could see Tess blink. "It's just math, it's not like everyone there's a genius."

"Have you heard the new Dave Matthews album?" I asked Tess, trying to deflect attention, and we exchanged opinions until our

voices trailed off and Lucia murmured, "Matthew is a liar. He's always been a liar. He's just lying all the time until he wakes up."

Tess glanced at me, alarmed.

Is she okay? everyone whispered.

"No," I said. It was all I could say. She hardly ate, rarely bathed, but in the mornings she marched out carrying her reporter's notebook and in the evenings she returned.

One day she said she wanted to move back to New York. "I don't think that's a good idea," I said, but by evening she was already gone.

That episode lasted nine months.

It was a young jogger who alerted a policewoman, who brought her into the emergency room. She'd been sitting on top of a manhole cover in the middle of the street, cold and disoriented, singing at the top of her lungs. I took the next train into the city, rushed to the hospital, signed the papers for her involuntary commitment. Two psychiatrists signed in agreement; now the hospital could hold her against her will. When I found her the next day in the psychiatric unit, wearing blue scrubs and paper slippers, she shot me a look of blank hatred. "*You*," she said. "*You* put me here." That day after I left the ward, I waited patiently until the elevator doors pinched closed. Then I broke down in tears.

Our mother came from New Jersey, bewildered. *What has happened, Nu-er?* she asked, but when I tried to explain, she shook her head, unable or unwilling to comprehend. In the tiny communal kitchen of the 38th Street Y, she cooked up a storm—fish congee, lion's head meatballs, *char siu* and shrimp fried rice. Twice daily she brought meals into the hospital, where doctors and nurses carrying clipboards came and went, ghostlike and evasive. Ma, brisk, removing Tupperware lids. *Mapo tofu and watercress, your favorites, Xiao-mei*—and if Lucia would eat, Ma would hover, scoop rice or fetch salt or a straw or a paper napkin to wipe the table, and if she did not, Ma would fret and dither, *You need to eat, Xiao-mei. Are you getting enough sleep? You leave this place we go shopping, I buy you proper bed, not*

that . . . that thing—you mean a futon, Ma?—Aiya, futon no good! Too soft no good, bad for your back! Too close to the floor, no good, give you arthritis! And on and on she went, as if a flaccid mattress could be held accountable for Lucia's present condition.

Every other day I commuted to my office in downtown Providence, returned at night to the 38th Street Y, where the skinny window in our room faced a slab of brick wall. One evening I found our mother standing with her face pressed to the glass. From the portable radio that accompanied her wherever she traveled, the classical music station playing *Madama Butterfly*—Luciano Pavarotti, her favorite—and when she saw me, something burst inside. She wept, shoulders stiff, with quick, choppy breaths, and it shocked me; I had not seen her like this since we lived with Third Uncle. *The doctors will figure it out, Ma, it'll be okay.* Ma, inconsolable, and I wondered if I should not have tried so hard to shield her from Lucia's erratic behavior the past several months. But she'd been exhausted from her treatments; I had not wanted to burden her further. *Your sister, always such a happy child. Wild, yes, but so happy.* And then her gasps slowed, and her face went cloudy with that faraway gaze I still could not decode.

For one month we'd stayed in that dreary place. But slowly, my sister returned. Like a miracle. Our Lucia.

It was not my story to tell. But now it was clear, as I'd feared: Lucia had never told her new husband these things. Maybe she was afraid he wouldn't understand. Or maybe she'd wanted to believe, as I did, that nightmares could stay forever in the dark.

Yonah tried to calm her. She scowled. She pushed him away, and it hurt him, I could see. I tried to trick her. I said, "Lucia, you need to sleep."

"I can't sleep, not with them watching me."

I said, "You'll feel better in a place where you can sleep."

Finally Yonah said, "Listen to your sister, Lucy, no cameras there, no nothing, just quiet room for you to sleep."

She said, "Maybe I need sleep." In the emergency room she squirmed and Yonah cradled her head to his chest. When the nurse asked him questions, I answered and filled out her forms.

Yonah's mother's friend's grandson, Amit, was flopped on the twin mattress that night. His essence was a lump of boiled ham. Yonah let me sleep in the bed, and he slept on the long, cushioned bench in the café—though he hardly slept—and in the morning I lay awake by myself and watched security screens two and three, where long-limbed Chaka was kissing Noemie, whose tight pink cap-sleeved shirt now clung to her melon-shaped belly.

Lucia slept for eighteen hours, and when we visited the next day, she was livelier, less irritable, more herself, though her eyes still seemed cloudy, vague. Yonah brought her beet salad and ginseng snacks and her favorite pound cake. "Can she come home now?" he asked. He could not stand to leave her.

"No," I said. "I don't think so. Not yet."

She was stubborn. I did not remember her being so stubborn the last time. She said, "Doctors don't know anything about how I feel." She said, "I want to go home." She cried.

Yonah kissed her. He said, "Don't worry, we're gonna go home soon." That day he tried to feed her the small white pill himself, the one the pale, veiny nurse brought in a plastic cup. "You take this, Lucy Goosey, we go home, I make you shakshuka." When that didn't work he scolded her like a child. "Listen, Lucy, I am serious, no more playing games now." And when that didn't work either the pale, veiny nurse sighed, and when the same thing happened the next day Yonah said, "This is stupid. She sit here in this jail, and the doctors, they don't do nothing." He told the pale nurse and the doctor (a stallion, most definitely a stallion), "I am her husband. I am taking care of her, I am taking her home."

"Please, Yonah," I said. "You can't do that. She's not well."

IN EVERY MOMENT WE ARE STILL ALIVE

A NOVEL

TOM MALMQUIST

It's dark apart from a bright lamp over Livia's incubator. Her face isn't pretty, isn't sweet; it's thin but also swelled up, wrinkled, chapped like an old, sick person. I see no trace of Karin's sanguinity in her. It's as if Karin's blood disease has corroded her. She's got a nappy on, and a pale lemon-yellow hat, and a silicone band across her nose with an oxygen tube curling over her little head into her nose, like a space mask. We'll be feeding your daughter intravenously with PreNAN Discharge, says the nurse. Uh-huh, and what's that? I ask. It's like breastmilk with a bit of extra zing; you should google it if you want to know more. I'm sure it's fine, I don't have the Internet on my phone anyway, I say. Sounds sensible, these days people just sit about fiddling with their phones, she says. I tell her it's mainly because I can't afford it, then, while we're talking, Livia goes quiet and starts moving her head around as if she's looking for something. Did you talk to your daughter while she was in the womb? asks the nurse. I suppose I did, now and then. How did you do it? What do you mean, how? Because she recognises your voice, she points out. No, really? I don't think so, I say. Oh I do think

so, you know I've picked up a few things while I've been working here, which is a long time. Okay, if you say so, I say, keeping my eyes on Livia. She's says Livia's not just reacting to the sound of our voices, she's listening, it's quite clear. The other nurse comes over from an incubator at the other end of the ward, and asks: Did you talk right up against the bump? Yes, but mainly I just sang, it calmed Livia's mother down, I answer. Just imagine, even in the womb we're so receptive, she says. Absolutely incredible, says the other nurse. Excuse me a moment, I say, and hurry into the corridor.

In front of the bathroom mirror I notice I'm still wearing the dark blue scrubs and cap. I throw the entire get-up into the bin and sit on the toilet lid. I check my phone: fifteen missed calls, one from Mum and four from Dad. I read the texts and reply to a couple of them. Livia has fallen asleep by the time I come back. Her right foot has been bandaged. I had to put some dressing on her foot, she kept wanting to kick off the catheter the whole time—a determined little lady. Do you want to hold her? Won't that wake her up? I'm sure she'd like to sleep close to her dad for a while. Okay. She fetches a shirt, which she refers to as a nursing smock. Everything has to be sterile, this is all we've got, she says. Okay, fine. I take off my T-shirt and put on the soft top, which is open down to the navel. She places Livia across my chest. After a while I call the nurse over, she asks how it's going. I'm breathing so fast, I say, do you think it might wake her? Oh no, it's fine, she looks quite happy. Uh-huh, yeah, but isn't it getting a bit hot? I'm so bloody hot. She puts her hand on Livia's throat. No, she's sleeping really

well. Someone's looking for you, says the other nurse, gesturing towards the corridor. It's the anaesthetist from the emergency room. Hello there, hi, he says, just to say Karin's readings are looking a lot better, she's back in CIC for dialysis, I thought you'd want to know. Thanks a lot, I answer. He rubs disinfectant gel into his hands and comes closer. He caresses Livia's back with his finger. Amazing, has she opened her eyes yet? I look at the nurse, who smiles: You're the father, not me. I don't think she's opened her eyes yet, I answer. It's just the best when they do, he says, and gives me a thumbs up on his way out. The nurses give him slightly smitten gazes: That doesn't happen every day, doctors from other wards visiting. Or maybe you know him? No, I answer.

In Room 1, a bag of Karin's blood is suspended in the dialysis machine. Blood is pumped out, blood is pumped in. The doctor in charge of it is as grey as the consultant at Söder Hospital, but bony like me and my father. He becomes animated when I ask him about the machine. It removes the waste products from the blood, it's the same principle as in Laval's separator, you know, the guy who separated the cream from the milk, he says. Uh-huh, okay, I answer. A nurse from Neonatal has taken a photo of Livia, which she's already developed and laminated. In the photo, Livia is lying in the open incubator with the oxygen tube. She has her mother's mouth, the same vermilion colour, the pronounced Cupid's bow, and under the photo is written in marker pen: Livia 20/3-12. I look for a place to put it. The nurse watches me. Here, she says, reaching towards a console and handing

me a roll of surgical tape. She suggests I stick the photo up on a horizontal aluminium beam behind the bed. But then Karin can't see Livia, I point out. No, I suppose that's true, what about here? she suggests, pulling out the adjustable bar of the table lamp. The photo ends up taped slightly wonkily above Karin. I sit on the stool and take her wrist in my hand. Hi, darling, I wanted you to know that Livia is well. In the corner of my eye I can see Persson in his light blue hospital issue shirt. It's good that you're talking to her, I often recommend that, he says, looking at the photo. Congratulations on your daughter, he adds. Thanks, I answer. Tom, can I talk with you for a moment? Has something happened? Stay calm, this is about you, he answers. His hands are folded across his belly, like a vicar, as he squats down. I've been through similar situations, I've sat there just as you're doing now, he says, eyeing me compassionately. Uh-huh, okay, thanks a lot. There are three things you need to remember now, just three things, three important things, he explains and shifts his position, going on in a voice of unrelinquishing gravity: First, sleep, you have to sleep or you won't be able to sustain this, second, food, you mustn't forget to eat, or you won't have the strength, third, get out of the hospital as often as you can or you'll start going round the bend.

I run into David outside the elevators to the Neonatal ward. He's sweaty, puffing, his hands shaking as usual, a sort of congenital nervousness which in some curious way disappears as soon as he meets people he doesn't know, after which he becomes self-confident and talkative. He's brought a teddy bear for Livia, which he takes out of the plastic bag

as if it's some kind of curiosity he found on the way. The nurse puts the teddy on a shelf above the incubator. Thanks, David, that's really nice, I say. He sits there watching me holding Livia in my arms. He asks the nurse a couple of questions. Then she asks: Do you have any children yourself? A daughter, she turned two a couple of weeks ago. Tom is her godfather, he adds. David, sorry, that's so embarrassing, I say. David laughs and replies: If you were the type who remembered your own birthday, then it might be a problem. He turns to the nurse: Tom's going to be thirty-four in a couple of days, he's probably forgotten. Actually, only a few days ago Karin was asking me what present I'd like, I say. David ejects his portion of snuff with his finger and runs his hands over his shaved scalp. When he's sad or serious he looks like a seal.

The Neonatal family room is opposite the lifts. Unlike the family room at CIC it's spacious and generously furnished. A large mint-green settee by an oval table, a flat-screen TV, two rectangular dining tables, a bar counter, dishwasher, freezer, fridge, kitchen sink, several microwave ovens, and masses of toys. The bedroom's next to the kitchen, a bed and locker is all that fits in there; it has a view of the inside courtyard, bushes, trees, and street lights surrounded by high brick walls. David is lying on the sofa, tapping on his laptop. How are things with Karin now? he asks. No change, I answer. Have her parents met Livia? Not yet. They haven't seen Karin either, they're obviously desperate to. I've told them they can visit tomorrow, but it makes me feel disloyal to Karin—she only wanted me to be with her. Okay,

but don't you think it's heavy going for them not to be able to see her? She's not a child, David. We're a family, it would feel pretty weird if they spent their time sitting in there; that bloody room she's lying in has become like a part of our flat. But she's still their daughter, he replies. She's my Karin. Yeah, that's true, he concedes. It has to be my decision and Karin's, I say. I know this is important to her as well; she wanted it to be just me by her side. Tom, I know you, I can understand this is just unbelievably hard, the whole thing is nuts, but I think it would be good if you let them see her. It's not as simple as that, David. What's not so simple? You have a good relationship with them, don't you? Yeah, we do, but David, I can't talk about this any more now, I'm so tired. I think it'd be better if you let them see her, he says. I reckon Karin would have wanted that too. I sit down next to him. He takes off his headphones. Can you stay the night tonight? I ask. If you like, yeah, sure, I'll just let Kristina know. Thanks, David. You remember I snore really badly though, yeah? It doesn't matter, I answer. Tom, go and lie down. I have to work a bit longer, and if I can't stay the night then at least I'll stay until you're asleep. You shouldn't be on your own right now. David has turned onto his side, watching me. Shit, Tom, you're so tired, your eyes are completely bloodshot. Last weekend Karin was painting her toenails and laughing at an episode of the *Sarah Silverman Program*, I tell him. This has gone so bloody fast, I don't get it. Yeah, it's unbelievable. She was laughing, I stress. Does she like Silverman? She was laughing, I tell him again.

At quarter past twelve I wander down to CIC to say goodnight to Karin. The automated female voice in the lift says: Level zero two. And then: Level zero zero, entrance level. I hurry out as soon as the doors open. In F21 I ask the doctor who lets me in if I can't just have the code to the door; it's a nuisance always to have to ring the bell and explain why I'm here. I feel as if I'm disturbing them, I add. I'm not allowed to give the code to next of kin, he answers, but really, you're not disturbing anyone. I get stopped again at the door to Karin's room: We're just changing the sheets, you can come in in a minute, says the nurse. Is everything okay? I ask. We're just washing her, she answers. John said I could be with her as long as she's not in surgery, I say. We won't be a moment, you can come in shortly, she says and closes the door. I stand for a while in the vestibule before returning to the corridor, but then I turn around and hurry back. I knock, open the door, and step inside. Look, sorry, I completely get that you have your work to get on with and your procedures, but I was shut out at Soder Hospital and it's not bloody happening again. I go on: I sat with Karin during her Caesarean, and believe me, it wouldn't be the first time I've seen her taking a shit. I sit on the stool at her bedside and adjust the lamp so that the photo of Livia ends up in front of her. The nurses study me but after a moment get back to their work. They lift one leg at a time, discard a sticky underlay, and wash her with wet wipes. I stroke Karin's fringe as gently as I can.

The Family Room. Lillemor stands in the doorway to the sleeping alcove. She's wearing a faded nightie and says she's

taken a sleeping tablet. She's made her bed in one of the bunks and put Norén's *Diary of a Dramatist* on the pillow. How are you, Lillemor? I tried to read, it didn't work, she answers. I can imagine, I say. Sven and Måns are on Lidingö island, she says. Right, okay, well it's so great that Måns came, it was really good to see him. There's a room called Livia's Room on Gotland, she says, the gallery in Körsbärsgården, maybe that's where Karin got the name from? I don't know, she never actually mentioned the name before. She likes that gallery. Yes, she does. Oscar's wife is called Livia, you know, the actress. Yeah, no, actually I didn't know, Lillemor. It's a lovely name, Livia, Livia Lagerlöf. Yes, that feels right. Lillemor clutches a little grey ball made of suede, no bigger than an egg, it looks like a pincushion. I look down at it. Are you sewing? I ask, trying to smile at her. She glances down at it—Oh, no, apparently it's called an anti-stress ball. Right, okay. It's silly, perhaps, but I've started holding it when I'm walking about, it's nice to squeeze it. It feels a bit like Karin's hand when she was small and I would walk her to school. What primary did she go to? I actually don't know. Bo School, she replies. Oh that's right, okay. Lillemor hides behind the door and says: Goodnight, Tom, call me if you want to, I'll leave my phone on. Same to you, Lillemor, goodnight, I answer, and wait until I hear her lock the door.

I've learnt to like the plastic floor in the corridors at Karolinska, smooth and white as if covered in condensation, like artificial ice. As a child I wanted the whole of Huddinge to be covered in ice. I was fascinated by the Ice Age, I fantasised about a new Ice Age so I could skate everywhere. On

my skates I was strong and even quicker than the birds. I'll avoid lifts from now on. I want to be able to glide away whenever the urge arises. In the lifts I'm locked in with mirrors or people I've never met who somehow remind me of Karin. Only fleetingly, never more than an arm movement or a tone of voice, but there she is, just as always, next to me in the lift, only she doesn't know me, she has no idea who I am.

Livia's incubator is no longer in Room 15. I stop one of the Neonatal nurses I recognise from yesterday. Livia's not here, where is she, what's happened? She answers me in a whisper: She's fine. So where is she then? I burst out. We moved her out of Neo-Iva because she no longer needs breathing assistance, she answers. Okay, but you might have called and let me know, I was only in the room over there. Well in that case we're sorry, I suppose we just thought there was no need. We only moved your daughter a little further down the corridor, we did it early this morning. She's in Monitoring Room 9 now. Where's that? I ask. Just follow the corridor straight ahead to Neonatal, past the entrance, and then it's the room directly on your right. Okay, thanks, I reply, and break into a run.

On the floor inside the door of the Neonatal section big letters proclaim: *Stop!* And then, in smaller letters: *Wash your hands.* Hanging from the ceiling is a large sign written in both Swedish and English: *Please wash your hands.* The assistant nurse, who comes to meet me, walks very slowly and talks in a low voice, her forehead flaming red with acne. All the staff in the section move quietly, a reassuring calmness

about them. Livia's incubator is by the window. There are another two incubators in this part of the room, and four incubators in the adjoining room. In real terms it's one big room divided by an open area and a small reception. A piece of fabric has been draped over Livia's incubator. I was going to feed her in a minute, maybe you'd like to do it. Thanks, but I have to go down to CIC. That's where Livia's mother is, I say, lifting the fabric. How's Livia's mother doing? she asks. I don't know, I mean, things aren't good, I answer. Livia lies there with her arms and legs stretched out; she has a small yellow dummy in her mouth, and is wearing a pink babygrow, and a white hat with sort of teddy bear ears on it. While keeping her eyes on Livia, the nurse says: The doctor is coming by to have a look at her today or tomorrow. Where did you get the clothes from? I ask. We have them here, she says. Livia's mother is a bit allergic to pink, I point out. I just grabbed what was there, you can change them if you like? I wouldn't mind a different hat . . . If you've brought your own clothes you're obviously welcome to use them, she says. Forget it, I only just woke up, I'm talking off the top of my head, it's fine like it is, thanks. She leans her chin over the incubator and inhales through her nostrils. There's a bit of a smell, I think, maybe you'd like to change her? she asks. I don't know, I answer. She lifts Livia's legs and instructs me. I'm so tired that I just do exactly what she tells me. She looks down into the nappy and explains: That's called meconium, poppy juice they used to say in the olden days, it's what's formed in the child's intestines while it's still in the womb. Uh-huh, okay. Was that the first time you changed her? she

asks. I don't want to keep the nappy. She looks back at me, confused, almost scared, then turns and discards the nappy in a refuse bin by the door.

Persson is just coming out of Room 1, he almost bumps into me: Hello, how are things with you and your daughter? We're fine, how's the night been here? The lactate is still rising, which we don't want, so we're working on bringing it down. Okay, I say. It's almost certainly a result of the leukaemia, we're X-raying her today so we can rule out anything else. I get out my writing pad and say: Karin's father is basically a doctor, what should I tell him? I'm not sure I follow, he says, just tell him what I told you, he's welcome to talk directly to me if he prefers. It's Karin's wish that I talk to you direct, I say, but I figured if I tell you my father-in-law is a doctor I might get straighter answers out of you. We're not withholding anything, Tom. No, I'm not accusing you of that, but you're very careful about how you present things, you say the glass is half-full, not half-empty. He considers this thoughtfully then looks away down the corridor. I go on: Only a glass that's being *refilled* can be half-full, if the liquid is about to disappear then it's half-empty, and . . . oh forget it, look, I want you to talk to me using the proper terms. I don't want you to interpret those terms for me, talk to me as if I was a doctor, that's all I'm asking. I think I understand what you're saying, but we can't and we mustn't guess, he says. Which is exactly what I mean, so what can I tell Karin's father? He looks down at the floor and answers: Karin has an extreme and sustained lactic acidosis and a very

high lactate, as we've told you. I can understand it's a lot for you to take in and I'm more than happy to run through it again with you. My view is that her illness has been a complication of acute leukaemia, but it could very well be combined with acute infection. We're starting the cytostatic treatment today, but Tom, your wife is gravely ill, both in the short and the longer term, and all we can do now is help Karin pull through. In passing he also mentions something that sounds like ARDS or it may have been an English pronunciation, as in RDS.

The nurse dabs Karin's lips with a sponge. She scrutinises Karin's face. There, dear, I won't bother you any more, she says, then catches sight of me: Hi, come in, I should tell you right away that Karin is bleeding from her vagina after the C-section, they've been here from Gynae to have a look, just so you know. Okay, I answer. You may notice bleeding, I mean, just so you don't worry. Okay, now I know, thanks. I sit on the stool. She looks at the photo of Livia: I have to say, your daughter is so lovely. Yeah, thanks, I say. Livia, that's a nice name. Yes, it is, thanks, I say. She smiles, I smile back. She puts her hand on Karin's arm. Karin, you have such a lovely daughter, and a fine man who's here with you all the time, she says. Karin's weight must have gone up by forty kilos since I saw her yesterday. I learn that this is because of the copious amounts of blood plasma, sodium bicarbonate, and glucose that the doctors are trying to get into her circulation, although most of it accumulates under her skin. With the thin sheet over her she looks like a gigantic jellyfish. She has a support cushion under her right arm, and a saturation

sensor on her ring finger. Sorry, but does she have to have that gadget on her ring finger? I ask. The nurse looks a bit puzzled, asks what I mean. It's almost a bit symbolic, I tell her. Oh, you mean like a wedding ring? Yes. They're usually worn on the left hand, she says. Oh sod it, it doesn't matter, forget what I said. Karin's belongings are kept locked up in a cupboard, if that's what you meant? Okay, thanks, but she doesn't even have a wedding ring, I say. She smiles at me again. The specialist is sitting by a computer, writing, a dictionary open next to the keyboard. I turn the pages of my writing pad. My notes are careless, sometimes small, squiggly, hardly even legible, sometimes firm and angular. Anders, sorry, I say to him. The specialist turns to me. He seems awkward about my knowing his first name, and then, more as a statement than a question, I blurt out: RDS. He stands up, puts his hands in his pockets, and comes towards me. We generally just have to hope it sorts itself out, he says. 'Just have to hope'? He continues hesitantly: It can only heal itself spontaneously. You should probably talk to John about this, what has he told you? More or less what you just said, I answer. Okay then, if there's anything else just ask, he says before sitting back down and resuming his writing. Anders, again, I'm sorry, I need to hear this over and over, how serious is RDS? He leans his elbows on the table, turns his head towards the window, and answers: It's certainly serious. Most people who develop the condition are already gravely ill with something else, I mean, it's an inflammation of the lung with emission of fluids and deflation of the alveoli; the inflammation causes damage to the body, oedema, fluid in

the lungs. He looks round at me, then goes on: It's especially serious bearing in mind that it's caused by leukaemia. I make a note and say: What's the disease actually called? It's called Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome, ARDS, people used to call it lung shock. I get a feeling the cytostatic treatment is going to be important now, I say. Yes, we want the cytostatic treatment to turn everything around, we're starting it today. It won't cure her ARDS, but hopefully it'll help your wife to recover enough strength to start self-healing.

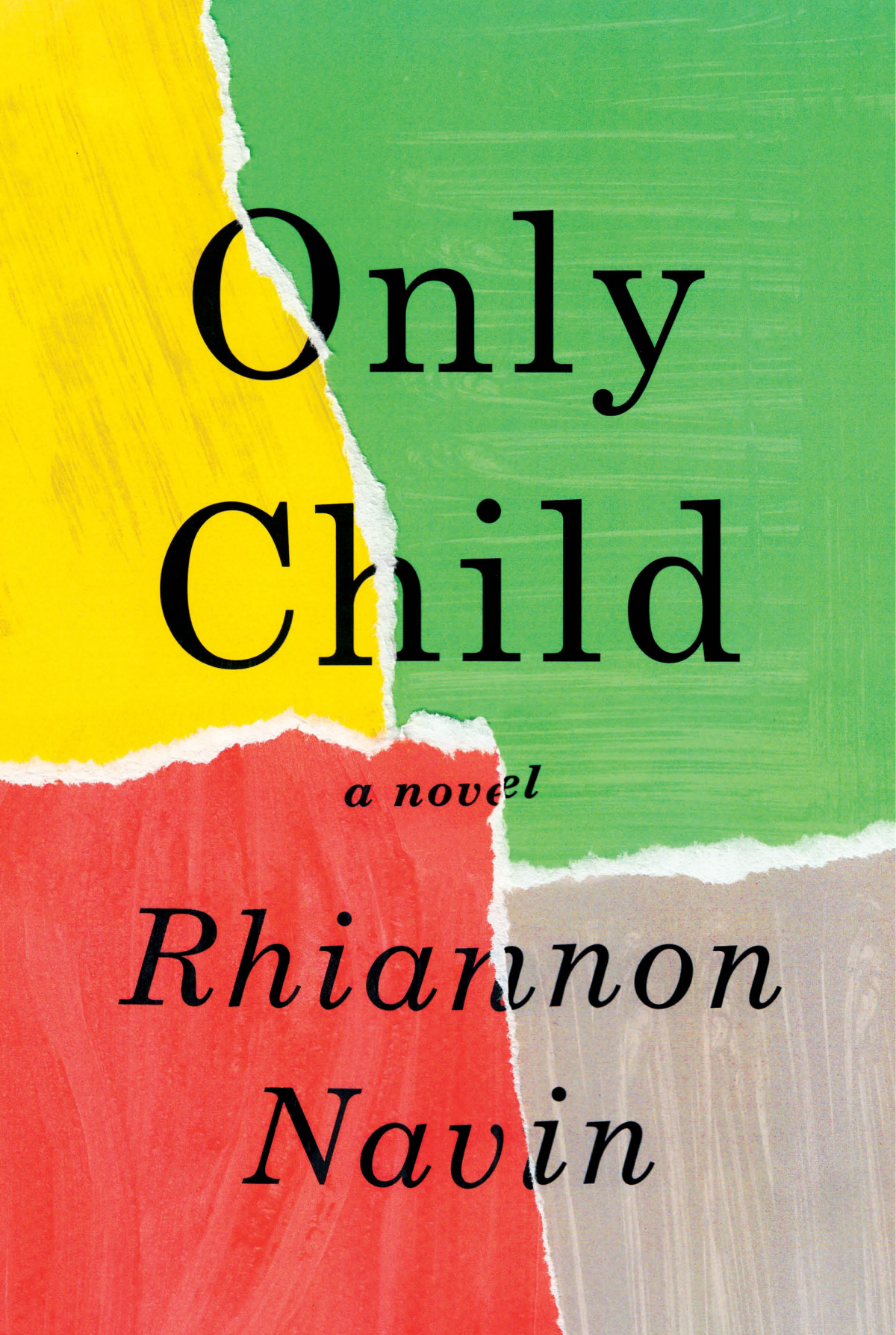
On the way back to Neonatal I stop off at the family room. Sven and Måns are sitting in the sofa, talking. Lillemor is sitting at the kitchen table, leafing through the evening paper. I sink into one of the armchairs and say: I just wanted to update you a bit. Okay, thanks, answers Sven, his hernia brace creaking slightly over his stomach. I more or less start reading out the notes from my writing pad, and try to explain as best as I can. Lillemor stares at the floor, and Sven corrects me a couple of times on my pronunciation of certain medical terms. Måns directs his questions to Sven. He has the same high brow as Karin, but a larger head, the hard cranium of a bull. They check everything on their smartphones and tablets as I talk. I hope you understand me, why I've been uncommunicative, I say. We understand, answers Sven. Karin could hardly have expected this, says Måns. Who knows, maybe she did, I say, either way I was going to suggest that you visit her today, I've told them you're coming, and Måns responds: So let me get this straight,you're saying we can only visit Karin today, just a short one, then that's it? Please, Måns, sorry if I use Lena as

an example, but if she was lying in there and had told you before she was put to sleep, *only you can come in Måns and no one else*, then surely you'd be saying the same thing to Lena's parents? We understand, said Sven. A moment later, Måns calls out after me in the corridor. He embraces me. I don't want us to be on bad terms, he says. I don't feel we're on bad terms, I answer. He hugs me again and says: Tom, if you need anything, anything at all, we're here. Thanks, Måns. I'll take Mum back to Lidingö tonight, she's ready to pass out, you know how she gets, she blames herself for all sorts of things. Yeah, okay, good, do it. I'm just so tired, Måns. Yeah, I understand it's chaotic. Thanks for letting us visit Karin, Mum really needed to. He embraces me again: And when it's a good time for you, Mum and Dad really want to meet Livia, it would be good for them to have something positive to focus on.

The midwife from this morning catches sight of me by the entrance to Neonatal. She waves a key and says: We've got you a room. She seems incredibly nervous so I ask her if something's happened. No, but, I mean the room is really for mothers recovering after giving birth. She leads me to a lavender-blue door with a round window of frosted glass, and a sign: Family Room 1. I look inside, and notice a bare burnt-ochre wall right outside the window. How long can I stay here? I ask. Until further notice, a week or two, until your daughter can go home. Okay, even if Livia's mother is still here? I can't answer that, she says. Okay, thanks. But if someone from Maternity comes along and needs the room we'll have to find you something else, she says. I go inside

and look around. My own shower, toilet, a patient bed with valves overhead for oxygen and air, a fold-out bed against the wall, a refrigerator for fornula and breast milk, a noticeboard, a changing table. She hands over the key and leads me to the monitoring room. Someone has stuck a laminated sheet to Livia's incubator. It says: *Livia Lagerlöf. Mother: Karin. Father: Tom.* The midwife pushes over an armchair with a footrest. I take off my T-shirt and sit down. Have you done this before? she asks. I've got the fact that it has to be sterile, I'm with you that far, but I've never fed her intravenously, I say. She picks up Livia, who's only wearing a nappy, and puts a blanket around us. She fills a syringe with milk replacement and connects it to the tube going into Livia's nose, and says: Press in one black mark's worth per minute; if you do it too quickly she'll only vomit, but if you do it too slow she'll scream, and make sure there aren't any air bubbles in the syringe, or she'll have gas in her tummy. Okay, I think I've got it. My weight has come tumbling down, I was skinny before all this, my ribs stick out, I'm horribly pale, full of veins and blackheads, the sun hasn't touched me in over a year. Livia sniffs at me. Mine can't be a very nice breast to lie against, I whisper to her, but it's all I've got. She puts her ear against me and sleeps for almost an hour before the midwife comes back and asks how it's going. Quite well, I think, but she's still sleeping. She looks at the milk-filled syringe and says: You can keep feeding her even while she's asleep. Oh, okay. She squeezes the syringe and adds: The milk's gone cold, I think we'll have to do this again. Back in Family Room 1, I pull down the folding bed and lie down on it. I look at the

perfectly made patient bed on the other side of the room. I go to the window; obliquely to the right I can see the grey sky between pitch-black metal rooftops, and to the left a gravel terrace jutting out, a work of art on it, large, colourful glass eggs piled up on a pool-like mirror. I can hear the TV from Family Room 2.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[I]

The Day the Gunman Came

THE THING I LATER REMEMBERED the most about the day the gunman came was my teacher Miss Russell's breath. It was hot and smelled like coffee. The closet was dark except for a little light that was coming in through the crack of the door that Miss Russell was holding shut from inside. There was no door handle on the inside, only a loose metal piece, and she pulled it in with her thumb and pointer finger.

"Be completely still, Zach," she whispered. "Don't move."

I didn't. Even though I was sitting on my left foot and it was giving me pins and needles and it hurt a lot.

Miss Russell's coffee breath touched my cheek when she talked, and it bothered me a little. Her fingers were shaking on the metal piece. She had to talk to Evangeline and David and Emma a lot behind me in the closet, because they were crying and were not being completely still.

"I'm here with you guys," Miss Russell said. "I'm protecting you. Shhhhhhh, please be quiet." We kept hearing the POP sounds outside. And screaming.

POP POP POP

It sounded a lot like the sounds from the *Star Wars* game I sometimes play on the Xbox.

POP POP POP

Always three pops and then quiet again. Quiet or screaming. Miss Russell did little jumps when the POP sounds came and her whispering got faster. "Don't make a sound!" Evangeline made hiccupping sounds.

POP Hick POP Hick POP Hick

I think someone peed in their underwear, because it smelled like that in the closet. Like Miss Russell's breath and pee, and like the jackets that were still wet from when it rained at recess. "Not too much to play outside," Mrs. Colaris said. "What, are we made of sugar?" The rain didn't bother us. We played soccer and cops and bad guys, and our hair and jackets got wet. I tried to turn and put my hand up and touch the jackets to see if they were still very wet.

"Don't move," Miss Russell whispered to me. She switched hands to hold the door closed, and her bracelets made jingling sounds. Miss Russell always wears a lot of bracelets on her right arm. Some have little things called charms hanging off them that remind her of special things, and when she goes on vacation she always gets a new charm to remember it. When we started first grade, she showed us all her charms and told us where she got them from. Her new one that she got on the summer break was a boat. It's like a tiny version of the boat she went on to go really close to a huge waterfall called Niagara Falls, and that's in Canada.

My left foot really started to hurt a lot, and I tried to pull it out only a little so Miss Russell wouldn't notice.

We just came in from recess and put our jackets in the closet, then math books out, when the POP sounds started. At first we didn't hear them loud—they were like all the way down the hallway in the front where Charlie's desk is. When parents come to pick you up before dismissal or at the nurse's office, they always stop at Charlie's desk and write down their name and show their driver's license and get a

tag that says VISITOR on a red string, and they have to wear it around their neck.

Charlie is the security guy at McKinley, and he's been here for thirty years. When I was in kindergarten, last year, we had a big party in the auditorium to celebrate his thirty years. Even a lot of parents came because he was the security guy already when they were kids and went to McKinley, like Mommy. Charlie said he didn't need a party. "I already know everyone loves me," he said, and laughed his funny laugh. But he got a party anyway, and I thought he looked happy about it. He put up all the artwork we made for him for the party around his desk and took the rest home to hang it up. My picture for him was right in the middle at the front of his desk because I'm a really good artist.

Pop pop pop

Quiet pop sounds at first. Miss Russell was right in the middle of telling us about what pages in the math book were for classwork and what pages were for homework. The pop sounds made her stop talking, and she made wrinkles on her forehead. She walked over to the classroom door and looked out of the glass window. "What the . . . ," she said.

Pop pop pop

Then she took a big step back away from the door and said, "Fuck." She really did. The F-word, we all heard it and started laughing. "Fuck." Right after she said it, we heard sounds coming from the intercom on the wall, and then a voice said, "Lockdown, lockdown, lockdown!" It wasn't Mrs. Colaris's voice. When we practiced lockdown drill before, Mrs. Colaris said, "Lockdown!" through the intercom, once, but this voice said it a lot of times, fast.

Miss Russell's face got whitish and we stopped laughing because she looked so different and wasn't smiling at all. The way her face

looked all of a sudden made me scared, and my breath got stuck in my throat.

Miss Russell did a couple circles by the door like she didn't know where she should walk. Then she stopped doing circles and locked the door and switched the lights off. No sun was coming in from the windows because of the rain, but Miss Russell went to the windows and pulled the shades down anyway. She started talking very fast and her voice sounded shaky and like squeaky. "Remember what we practiced for the lockdown drill," she said. I remembered that *lockdown* meant don't go outside like for the fire alarm, but stay inside and out of sight.

POP POP POP

Someone outside in the hallway screamed very loud. My legs started shaking around the knees.

"Boys and girls, everyone in the closet," Miss Russell said.

When we practiced lockdown drill before, it was fun. We pretended that we were the bad guys and only sat in the closet for like a minute until we heard how Charlie opened the classroom door from the outside with his special key that can open all the doors in the school, and we heard him say: "It's me, Charlie!" and that was the sign that the drill was over. Now I didn't want to go in the closet because almost everyone else was already in there, and it looked too smushed. But Miss Russell put her hand on my head and pushed me in.

"Hurry, guys, hurry," Miss Russell said. Evangeline especially and David and some other kids started to cry and said they wanted to go home. I felt tears coming in my eyes, too, but I didn't want to let them come out and all my friends were going to see. I did the squeeze-away trick I learned from Grandma: you have to squeeze your nose on the outside with your fingers, the part where it goes from hard to soft, and then your tears don't come out. Grandma taught me the squeeze-away trick at the playground one day when I was about to cry because someone pushed me off the swing and Grandma said, "Don't let them see you cry."

Miss Russell got everyone in the closet and pulled the door shut. The whole time we could hear the POP sounds. I tried to count them in my head.

POP—1 POP—2 POP—3

My throat felt very dry and scratchy. I really wanted a drink of water.

POP—4 POP—5 POP—6

"Please, please, please," Miss Russell whispered. And then she talked to God and she called him "Dear Lord" and I couldn't understand the rest she said because she was whispering so quiet and fast and I think she wanted only God to hear.

POP—7 POP—8 POP—9

Always three POPs and then a break.

Miss Russell all of a sudden looked up and said, "Fuck," again. "My phone!" She opened the door a little and when there weren't any POP sounds for a while she opened it all the way and ran across the classroom to her desk with her head ducked down. Then she ran back to the closet. She pulled the door closed again and told me to hold the metal piece this time. I did, even though it hurt my fingers and the door was heavy to keep closed. I had to use both hands.

Miss Russell's hands were shaking so much they made the phone shake when she swiped and put her password in. She kept doing it wrong, and when you put the wrong password in all the numbers on the screen shake and you have to start over. "Come on, come on, come on," Miss Russell said, and finally she got the password right. I saw it: 1989.

POP—10 POP—11 POP—12

I watched how Miss Russell dialed 9-1-1. When I heard a voice in the phone, she said, "Yes, hi, I'm calling from McKinley Elementary. In Wake Gardens. Rogers Lane." She talked very fast, and in the light that came from her phone I could see that she spit on my leg a little bit. I had to leave the spit there because my hands were holding the door closed. I couldn't wipe it off, but I stared at the spit and it was there on my pants, a spit bubble, and it was gross. "There's a gunman at the school and he's . . . OK, I'll stay on the phone with you then." To us she whispered, "Someone already called." Gunman. That's what she said. And then all I could think about in my head was gunman.

POP—13 Gunman POP—14 Gunman
POP—15 Gunman

I felt like it was hard to breathe now in the closet and very hot, like we used up all the air. I wanted to open the door a little to let some new air in, but I was too scared. I could feel my heart beating at super speed inside my chest and all the way up in my throat. Nicholas next to me had his eyes squeezed shut tight and was making fast breathing sounds. He was using up too much air.

Miss Russell had her eyes closed, too, but her breathing was slow. I could smell the coffee smell when she went "Huuuuuu" to let some long breaths out. Then she opened her eyes and whispered to us again. She said everyone's name: "Nicholas. Jack. Evangeline . . ." It felt good when she said, "Zach, it will be all right." To all of us she said, "The police are outside. They are coming to help. And I am right here." I was glad she was right there, and her talking helped me feel not so scared. The coffee breath didn't bother me so much anymore. I pretended it was Daddy's breath in the morning when he was home for breakfast on the weekends. I tried coffee before and didn't like it. It tastes too hot and old or something. Daddy laughed and said, "Good, stunts your growth anyway." I don't know what that means, but I really wished Daddy could be here right now. But he wasn't, only Miss Russell and my class and the POP sounds—

POP—16 POP—17 POP—18

—sounding really loud now and screams in the hallway and more crying in the closet. Miss Russell stopped talking to us and instead she talked into the phone: "Oh God, he's getting closer. Are you coming? Are you coming?" Twice. Nicholas opened his eyes and said, "Oh!" and then he threw up. All over his shirt, and some throw-up got in Emma's hair and on my shoes in the back. Emma did a loud shrieking sound and Miss Russell put her hands over Emma's mouth. She dropped the phone and it fell in the throw-up on the floor. Through the door I could hear sirens. I'm really good at telling different sirens apart, the ones from fire trucks, police cars, ambulances . . . but now I heard so many outside that I couldn't tell—they were all mixed together.

POP—19 POP—20 POP—21

Everything was hot and wet and smelled bad and I started to feel dizzy from it all and my stomach didn't feel good. Then all of a sudden it was quiet. I couldn't hear any more POPs. Just the crying and hiccupping in the closet.

And THEN there were a TON of POPs that sounded like they were right by us, a lot of them in a row, and loud sounds like stuff crashing and breaking. Miss Russell screamed and covered her ears, and we screamed and covered our ears. The closet door opened because I let go of the metal piece and light came into the closet and it hurt my eyes. I tried to keep counting the POPs, but there were too many. Then they stopped.

Everything was completely still, even us, and no one moved a muscle. It was like we weren't even breathing. We stayed like that for a very long time—still and quiet.

Then someone was at our classroom door. We could hear the door handle, and Miss Russell let out her breath in little puffs, like "huh, huh, huh." There was a knock on the door and a loud man voice said, "Hello, anyone in there?"

[2]

Battle Scars

It's ALL RIGHT. Police are here, it's over," the loud man voice said.

Miss Russell stood up and held on to the closet door for a minute, and then she walked a few steps to the classroom door, very slow like she forgot how to walk and maybe she was having pins and needles like me from sitting on her legs. I stood up, too, and behind me everyone came out of the closet very slow, like we all had to learn how to use our legs again.

Miss Russell unlocked the door, and lots of police came in. I saw more out in the hallway. One policewoman was hugging Miss Russell, who was making loud sounds like choking. I wanted to stay close to Miss Russell and I started to feel cold because now we were all spread out and not close and warm anymore. All the police were making me feel shy and scared, so I held on to Miss Russell's shirt.

"All right, guys, please come to the front of the room," one policeman said. "Can you line up over here?"

Outside our window, I could hear even more sirens now. I couldn't see anything because our windows are high up and we can't look outside except when we climb on a chair or table and we're not supposed to do that. Plus, Miss Russell pulled the shades down when the pop sounds started.

One policeman put his hand on my shoulder and pushed me into

the line. He and the other police had on uniforms with vests, the kind where bullets can't go through, and some had helmets on like in a movie, and they had big guns, not the regular ones from their belts. They looked a little bit scary with the guns and the helmets, but they talked to us in a friendly way: "Hey there, champ, don't worry, it's all over now! You're safe now." And stuff like that.

I didn't know what was "over now," but I didn't want to leave our classroom and Miss Russell was not at the front of the line with the line leader. She was still off to the side with the policewoman, making choking sounds.

Usually when we have to line up to leave the classroom, everyone pushes and shoves and we get in trouble because we're not making a nice line. This time we all stood really still. Evangeline and Emma and some other kids were still crying and shivering and we all stared at Miss Russell and waited to see if she would stop choking.

There were a lot of sounds coming from outside our classroom and shouting from down the hallway. I thought it sounded like Charlie's voice shouting, "NO, NO, NO!" over and over again. I wondered why Charlie was shouting like that. Maybe he got hurt from the gunman? To be the security guy in a school when a gunman comes in is a very dangerous job.

There were other crying and calling sounds, all different kinds—"Ooh, ooooh, ooooh," "Head wound DRT!" "Femoral bleed. Get me a pressure dressing and a tourniquet!" The walkie-talkies on the police's belts were beeping and beeping, and a lot of talking was coming out of them that was fast, and it was hard to understand it.

The walkie-talkie from the policeman at the front of the line beeped and said, "Get ready to move!" and the policeman turned around and said, "Moving out!" The other police started to push the line from the back, and we all started walking, but very slow. No one wanted to go out in the hallway where all the crying and calling sounds were still happening. The policeman in the front was high-fiving the kids that walked past him, and it was like he was making a joke. I didn't give him a high five, and he kind of did a pat on my head instead.

We had to walk down the hallway to the back door where the cafeteria is. We saw the other first-grade classes and the second- and third-grade classes walking in lines like us, with police as the line leaders. Everyone looked cold and scared. "Don't turn around," the police were saying. "Don't look behind you." But I wanted to see if I was right and if it was Charlie shouting "NO, NO, NO!" earlier and if he was OK. I wanted to see who was screaming.

I couldn't see much because Ryder was right behind me, he's really tall, and more kids were walking behind Ryder. But in between the kids and the police walking I saw some things: people lying on the floor in the hallway with ambulance people and police around them and bending over them. And blood. At least I thought it was blood. It was very dark red or black puddles, like paint that spilled, all around on the floor of the hallway and some on the walls. And I saw the older kids from fourth and fifth grade walking behind Ryder, with very white faces like ghosts and some of them were crying and had blood on them. On their faces and clothes.

"Turn around!" a policeman said behind me, and this time it was not friendly. I turned around fast and my heart was beating hard because of all the blood. I saw real blood before, but just a little bit like when I fall down and my knee bleeds or something, never a lot like now.

More kids were turning around, and the police started shouting, "Look ahead! No turning around!" But the more they said it, the more everyone turned around, because other kids were doing it. People started screaming and walking faster and bumping into each other and shoving. When we got to the back door, someone bumped into me from the side and I bumped my shoulder into the door, which is metal, and it hurt a lot.

It was still raining outside, pretty hard now, and we didn't have our jackets. Everything was still in the school—our jackets and backpacks and book baggies and stuff—but we kept walking without anything over to the playground and through the back gate that's always closed when we have recess, so no one can run outside and strangers can't come in.

I was starting to feel better when I walked outside. My heart didn't beat so hard anymore, and the rain felt good on my face. It was cold, but I liked it. Everyone slowed down, and there wasn't so much screaming and crying and shoving anymore. It was like the rain calmed everyone down, like me.

We walked across the intersection that was full of ambulances and fire trucks and police cars. All their lights were flashing. I tried to step on the flashing lights in the puddles, making blue and red and white circles in the water, and some of the water went into my sneakers in the part that has little holes on the top and my socks got wet. Mommy was going to be mad that my sneakers were wet, but I kept splashing and making more circles anyway. The blue, red, and white lights together in the puddles looked like the American flag colors.

The roads were blocked by trucks and cars. Other cars were driving up behind them and I saw parents jumping out. I looked for Mommy, but I didn't see her. The police made a line on both sides of the intersection so that we could keep walking, and the parents had to stay behind the lines. They were calling out names like questions: "Eva? Jonas? Jimmy?" Some kids yelled back: "Mom! Mommy? Dad!"

I pretended like I was in a movie with all the lights and the police with their big guns and helmets. It gave me an excited feeling. I pretended like I was a soldier who was coming back from a battle and I was a hero now and people were here to see me. My shoulder hurt, but that's what happens when you fight in a battle. Battle scars. That's what Daddy always says when I get hurt at lacrosse or soccer or playing outside: "Battle scars. Every man has to have some. Shows you're not a wimp."

[3]

Jesus and Real-Life Dead People

Our police line leaders walked us into the little church on the road behind the school. When we went inside, I started to not feel like a tough hero anymore. All the exciting feelings stayed outside with the fire trucks and police cars. Inside the church it was dark and quiet and cold, especially because we were really wet now from the rain.

We don't go to churches a lot, only to a wedding one time, and last year we went to one for Uncle Chip's funeral. It wasn't this church, but a bigger one in New Jersey where Uncle Chip lived. That was really sad when Uncle Chip died because he wasn't even that old. He was Daddy's brother, and only a little bit older than him, but he still died because he had cancer. That's a sickness a lot of people get, and you can have it in different parts of your body. Sometimes it gets everywhere in your body, and that's what happened to Uncle Chip and the doctor couldn't make him feel better anymore, so he went to a special hospital where people go who don't get better anymore, and then they die there.

We went to visit him there. I thought he must be so scared because he probably knew he was going to die and he wouldn't be together with his family anymore. But when we saw him he didn't look scared, he was just sleeping the whole time. He didn't wake up anymore after we saw him. He went straight from sleeping to dead, so I didn't think he even noticed that he died. Sometimes at bedtime I think about that

and I get scared to go to sleep, because what if I die when I'm sleeping and don't even notice?

I cried a lot at Uncle Chip's funeral, mostly because Uncle Chip was going to be gone forever and I wouldn't see him anymore. Also all the other people cried, especially Mommy and Grandma and Aunt Mary, Uncle Chip's wife. Well, not really his wife because they weren't married, but we still call her Aunt Mary because they were boyfriend and girlfriend for a really long time, since before I was born. And I cried because Uncle Chip was in the box called a casket in the front of the church. It must have been really tight in there and I never wanted to be in a box like that, ever. Only Daddy didn't cry.

When the police told us to sit down on the benches in the church, I thought about Uncle Chip and how sad it was at his funeral. We all had to fit on the benches, and the police shouted: "Slide all the way in. Make room for everyone. Keep sliding in," and we kept sliding in until we were all smushed together again like in the closet. There was a walkway in the middle in between the benches on the left and the benches on the right, and some police were lining up next to the benches.

My feet felt freezing cold. And I had to pee. I tried to ask the policeman next to the bench I was on if I could please go to the bathroom, but he said, "Everyone stays seated for now, champ," so I tried to hold it and not think about how badly I had to go. But when you try to not think about something, it turns into the only thing you think about the whole time.

Nicholas was sitting close to me on my right side and still smelled like throw-up. I saw Miss Russell was sitting with some other teachers on a bench in the back, and I wished that I could sit with her. The older kids with the blood on them were in the back, too, and a lot of them were still crying. I wondered why, because even the younger kids weren't crying anymore. Some teachers and police and the man from the church—I could tell he was from the church from the black shirt and white collar he was wearing—were talking to them and hugging them and wiping the blood off their faces with tissues.

In the front of the church was a big table and it's a special table,

called an altar. Over it was a big cross with Jesus hanging on it, like in the church where Uncle Chip's funeral was. I tried not to look at Jesus, who had his eyes closed. I knew he was dead with nails in his hands and feet, because people actually did that to him a long time ago to kill him, even though he was a good guy and God's son. Mommy told me that story, but I don't remember why they did that to Jesus, and I wished he wasn't right there in the front. It made me think of the people in the hallway and all the blood and I was starting to think maybe they were dead, too, so that means I saw dead people in real life!

Mostly everyone was quiet, and in all that quietness the POP sounds were back in my ears, like an echo coming back around from the walls of the church. I shook my head to make them go away, but they kept coming back.

POP POP POP

I waited to see what was going to happen next. Nicholas's nose looked red and had a snot drop hanging off it, which was gross. He kept pulling up the snot with a sniff sound, and then it came back down. Nicholas was rubbing his hands on his legs, up and down, like he was trying to dry them off, but his pants were really wet. He didn't talk, and that was different because in school we sit across from each other at the blue table and talk all the time about stuff like Skylanders, and the FIFA soccer World Cup, and which sticker cards we want to trade at recess and on the bus later.

We started collecting the sticker cards even before the World Cup started in the summer. Our sticker books have all the players from all the teams that play in the World Cup, so we knew all about the teams by the time the games started, and it was more fun to watch like that. Nicholas only needed twenty-four more sticker cards for his book, and I needed thirty-two and we both have a super-high stack of doubles.

I whispered to Nicholas, "Did you see all the blood in the hallway? It looked real, didn't it look like a lot?" Nicholas shook his head yes,

but still he didn't say anything. It was like he forgot his voice at school with his jacket and his backpack. He's weird sometimes. Just pulling up the snot drop and wiping his hands on the wet pants, so I stopped trying to talk to him and I tried not to look at the snot drop. But when I looked away, my eyes went straight to Jesus, dead on the cross, and those were the only two things my eyes kept looking at, the snot drop and Jesus. Snot drop, Jesus, snot drop, Jesus. My sticker cards and FIFA book were in my backpack still at the school, and I started to worry someone would take them.

The big door in the back of the church kept opening and closing with loud swish-squeak, swish-squeak sounds, and people kept walking in and out, mostly police and some teachers. I didn't see Mrs. Colaris anywhere or Charlie, so they probably stayed at the school. Then parents started to come in the church, and it got busy and loud. The parents weren't quiet like us, they were calling out names like questions again. They cried and yelled when they found their kids and tried to get to them on the benches, which was hard to do because everyone was sitting so close together. Some kids tried to climb out and started crying again when they saw their mom or dad.

Every time I heard a swish-squeak sound, I turned my head to see if it was Mommy or Daddy. I was really hoping they would come to pick me up and take me home so I could put new clothes and socks on and feel warm again.

Nicholas's dad came. Nicholas climbed over me, and his dad lifted him over the other kids on our bench. Then he hugged him for a long time, even though that probably made the throw-up get on his shirt, too.

Finally, the door opened again with another swish-squeak and Mommy walked in. I stood up so she could see me, and then I got embarrassed because Mommy came running over and called me "my baby" in front of all the kids. I climbed over the other kids to get to her, and she grabbed me and rocked me and she was cold and wet from the rain outside.

Then Mommy started to look around and said, "Zach, where's your brother?"


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BONFIRE
A NOVEL

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First Edition

Prologue

My last year of high school, when Kaycee Mitchell and her friends got sick, my father had a bunch of theories.

"Those girls are bad news," he said. "Nothing but trouble." He took it as a matter of faith that they were being punished. To him, they deserved what they got.

Kaycee was the first. This made sense. She was the first to do everything: lose her virginity, try a cigarette, throw a party.

Kaycee walked in front of her friends, like an alpha wolf leading the pack. In the cafeteria, she decided where to sit and the others followed; if she ate her lunch, the rest did, too; if she pushed her food around on her tray or just ate a bag of Swedish Fish, her friends did the same.

Misha was the meanest and the loudest one.

But Kaycee was the leader.

So when she got sick, we, the senior girls of Barrens High, weren't horrified or disturbed or worried.

We were jealous.

We all secretly hoped we'd be next.

The first time it happened was in fourth-period debate. Everyone had to participate in mock elections. Kaycee made her way through three rounds of primary elections. She was easy to believe

in the role of politician, convincing and quick-witted, a talented liar; I'm not even sure Kaycee knew when she was telling the truth and when she wasn't.

She was standing at the front of the room delivering a practiced stump speech when suddenly it was as though the tether connecting her voice to her throat was cut. Her mouth kept moving, but the volume had been turned off. No words came out.

For a few seconds, I thought there was something wrong with *me*.

Then her hands seized the podium and her jaw froze, locked open, as if she were stuck, silently screaming. I was sitting in the first row—no one else ever wanted those seats, so they were mine to take—and she was only a few feet away from me. I'll never forget how her eyes looked: like they'd transformed suddenly into tunnels.

Derrick Ellis shouted something, but Kaycee ignored him. I could see her tongue behind her teeth, a wad of white gum sitting there. Some people laughed—they must have thought it was a joke—but I didn't.

I'd been friends with Kaycee, best friends, back when we were young. It was only the second time in my life I'd ever seen her look afraid.

Her hands began to shake, and that's when all the laughter stopped. Everyone went quiet. For a long time, there was no sound in the room but a silver ring she always wore clacking loudly against the podium.

Then the shaking traveled up her arms. Her eyes rolled back and she fell, taking the podium down with her.

I remember being on my feet. I remember people shouting. I remember Mrs. Cunningham on her knees, lifting Kaycee's head, and someone screaming about keeping her from swallowing her tongue. Someone ran for the nurse. Someone else was crying; I don't remember who, just the sound of it, a desperate whimpering. Weirdly, the only thing I could think to do was pick up her notes, which had fallen, and reshuffle them in order, making sure the corners aligned.

Then, all of a sudden, it passed. The spasm apparently left her body, like an ebbing tide. Her eyes opened. She blinked and sat up, looking vaguely confused, but not displeased, to find us all gathered around her. By the time the nurse came, she seemed normal again. She insisted it was just a weak spell, because she hadn't eaten. The nurse led Kaycee out of the classroom, and the whole time she was glancing back at us over her shoulder as if to be sure we were all watching her go. And we were—of course we were. She was the kind of person you couldn't help but watch.

We all forgot about it. Or pretended to.

Then, three days later, it happened again.

Chapter One

State Highway 59 becomes Plantation Road two miles after the exit for Barrens. The old wooden sign is easy to miss, even among the colorless surroundings. For years now, on road trips from Chicago to New York, I've been able to pass on by without any anxiety. Hold my breath, count to five. Exhale. Leave Barrens safely behind, no old shadows running out of the dark woods to strangle me.

That's a game I used to play as a kid. Whenever I would get scared or have to go down to the old backyard shed in the dark, as long as I held my breath, no monsters or ax murderers or deformed figures from horror movies would be able to get me. I would hold my breath and run full speed until my lungs were bursting and I was safe in the house with the door closed behind me. I even taught Kaycee this game back when we were kids, before we started hating each other.

It's embarrassing, but I still do it. And the thing is, it works.

Most of the time.

Alone, locked in a gas station bathroom, I scrub my hands until the skin cracks and a tiny trickle of blood runs down the drain. It's the third time I've washed my hands since I crossed the border into Indiana. In the dinged mirror over the sink, my face looks pale

and warped, and the memories of Barrens bloom again like toxic flowers.

This was a bad idea.

I shove open the bathroom door and squint into the early sunlight as I get back into my car.

At the turnoff I pass a deer carcass buzzing with flies, its head still improbably intact and almost pretty-looking, mouth open in a final sigh. Impossible to say whether it was hit by a car or struck by a passing bullet. Typically fresh roadkill gets scooped up by a good ol' boy, loaded into a smoker, and made into venison jerky. I hit a deer in my old Ford Echo when I was seventeen; it was picked up even before I was. But this deer is, for some reason, undisturbed.

Hunting game is a main activity in Barrens—*the* main activity, actually. It's built into the culture. If you can call it that. Hunting season isn't officially until winter but every year kids sneak out with a six-pack, a spotlight, and their fathers' guns to scout for a big buck or watch a few fawns and a doe grazing. And after a few beers, they take shots at whatever they can aim for.

My dad used to take me with him to hunt; our father-daughter bonding activities usually involved an outing to the taxidermist. Deer, coyote, and bear heads adorn the walls of our house like trophies. He taught me to step on the bodies of the pheasants he took down while he snapped their necks in one hand. I remember how annoyed he was when I cried over the first deer I watched him kill, how he made me place my hands on its still-warm body and the blood pulsing out of the hole that had ripped its life away. "Death is beautiful," he said.

My mother was beautiful once, too, until bone cancer did its work. Chewed off her hair, carved her body into a shell of muscle and bone, took her cell by cell. After she died, my father told me it was the ultimate blessing and that we should be thankful, because the Lord had chosen her to be part of his flock in heaven.

I turn from Plantation Road onto Route 205, which eventually becomes Main Street, struck hard by the smell of cow manure in the heat. It's mid-June, end of the school year, but it feels like high summer. Fields brown beneath the sun. Another mile on, I pass a

brand-new sign: *Welcome to Barrens, population 5,027.* The last time I was here, ten years ago, the population was barely half that. Main Street is in fact the main street, but even on a nine-mile stretch, passing three cars is high traffic.

I count telephone poles. I count crows swaying on the wires. I count silos in the distance, arranged like fists. I turn my life into numbers, into accounting. For ten years I've lived in Chicago. I've been a lawyer for three. After six months in private practice, I landed a job at CEAW, the Center for Environmental Advocacy Work.

I have a future, a life, a clean and bright condo in Lincoln Park with dozens of bookshelves and not a single Bible. I meet friends in downtown Chicago bars and clubs and speakeasies where the cocktails have ingredients like lilac and egg white. I *have* friends now, period—and boyfriends, if you can call them that. As many as I want, nameless and indistinguishable, rotating in and out of my bed and life and on my own terms.

Most nights, I don't even have nightmares anymore.

I swore, many times, that I would never go home. But now I know better. Any self-help book in the world will tell you that you can't just run your past away.

Barrens has its roots in me. If I want it gone forever, I'll have to cut them out myself.

MAIN STREET. WHAT used to be the chapel—a one-story concrete building with no windows where we used to go on Sundays, until my dad decided that the pastor was interpreting scripture as he pleased, infuriated particularly that he seemed too lax on "the gays"—is now a White Castle. The library where my mother used to take me to story hour as a kid now touts a sign for Johnny Chow's Oriental Buffet. When I was growing up, we had practically no sit-down restaurants at all.

But so much is the same: the neon light from the VFW bar still flickers, and Mel's Pizza, where I would ride my bike sometimes

to get a slice after school, is still churning out pies. So much might have tumbled out of memory intact—the Jiffy Lube Pit Stop, Jimmy's Auto Parts Supply, the run-down porn shop Kaycee Mitchell's father used to own. Might still own, for all I know. Temptations has a new roof, though, and a new electric sign. So business has been booming.

I spot a crow on a telephone wire and another one nesting farther along. *One crow for sorrow, two crows for mirth . . .*

Past Main Street nothing looks the same: brand-new condos, a Jennifer Convertibles, a sit-down Italian place advertising a salad bar in the window. Everything is unfamiliar except for the salvage yard and, just beyond it, the drive-in movie theater. Site of many birthday parties with kids from Sunday school and even a depressing Thanksgiving right after my mom was buried. Our claim to fame, prior to the arrival of Optimal Plastics.

More crows perched on a pylon. *Three, four, five, six. Seven for a secret, never to be told.* A murder of crows.

Being back is giving me that tight-chest, lumpy-throat feeling. I grip the steering wheel tighter. At the first red light—the *only* red light in Barrens—I hold my breath and close my eyes. *I am in control now.*

The guy behind me lays on his horn: the light has turned green. I press the gas pedal just a little too hard and shoot forward into the intersection. When a familiar orange sign flashes in my peripheral vision, I signal to turn without thinking and swerve into the parking lot of the Donut Hole—this, like the drive-in movie theater, is totally unchanged.

I turn off the ignition. Sit in silence. After just a few seconds of no air-conditioning, it's painfully hot. It must be eighty degrees—much warmer than it was in Chicago. The air is chokingly heavy with moisture. I wrestle off my leather jacket and grab my purse from the floor of the passenger seat. I could use a water.

As I'm opening the car door, a blue Subaru pulls up next to me, jamming its brakes at the last second and making me jump. The driver honks twice.

I slide out of the car, annoyed by how close the other driver has

parked, and then notice the woman in the car is smiling at me and giving a frenzied, two-handed wave. She motions toward the Donut Hole and I have a split second to decide if I should turn back toward Chicago and forget this whole thing. But suddenly I am paralyzed. Somewhere along the line, my fight-or-flight instinct turned into *freeze, turn invisible, wait for it to pass*.

Misha Dale. Blonder, heavier, still beautiful, in her small-town way. *Smiling*. I used to dream of her smile—the way, I imagine, bottom-feeding fish must dream of the long dark funnel of a shark's throat.

Misha at twelve: getting all her friends to pelt me with stale lunch rolls when I walked through the cafeteria. Misha at fourteen: planting an animal femur in my locker, claiming it was one of my mother's bones, whispering that I kept body parts in my freezer, a rumor that achieved such aggressive popularity that Sheriff Kahn came over to check. At fifteen, she organized a campaign to raise money for the treatment of my acne. At sixteen, she circulated an online petition to have me suspended from school.

A sadist with a beautiful smile. She, Cora Allen, Annie Baum, and Kaycee Mitchell fed on me for years, grew fat and strong on my misery, ecstatic when junior year I tried to swallow half a bottle of Advil and had to spend a week at Mercy mental hospital—something my father refused to ever acknowledge and of which we have never spoken.

Next time, I'll help, Misha whispered to me in the hall when I finally got back to school.

Terrible girls. Demonic.

And yet, I'd envied them.

"I DON'T *BELIEVE* it. I heard you might be coming back." Her eyes have softened but her smile is the same—sharp, and slightly crooked. "And your car! Lord knows *you've* done well." She folds me briefly into a one-armed hug. She smells like cigarettes—menthol—and the heavy perfume used to mask them. "Don't you remember me?

It's Misha Jennings. Dale," she corrects herself, shaking her head. "You'd know me as Dale. My Lord, it's been a long time."

"I remember you," I say. Panic flashes in me, quick as the baring of teeth. She heard I was coming back—but how? And from whom?

"You coming in?" She gestures toward the Donut Hole. "They've added about a million varieties in the past year. All thanks to Optimal, I guess. We've had something of a population boom around here, at least by Indiana standards."

The mention of Optimal is bait—it must be. But this time she's not the one who gets to stand on dry land and cast.

"Yeah," I say. "Yeah, I'm coming in."

"The jelly is still my favorite." Her voice has softened, too. She genuinely appears happy to see me. "Do you keep in touch with any of the old group?"

I hesitate, suspecting a trap. But she doesn't seem to notice my confusion. There is no "old group." At least not that I was a part of. I just shake my head and follow her inside. I notice that when she yanks open the door, she makes sure to step ahead of me.

The Donut Hole is home to its namesake, the donut, as well as a truly random assortment of drugstore supplies and our historical society "museum," a corner display with pamphlets for the taking. There's even a small, unofficial free library in the Donut Hole—you leave one, you take one. The particular odor of artificial air freshener, musty old travel guides, and baked goods is like the barrel of a gun, shooting me into the past.

"Must be fun coming back after so long." Misha bypasses the donut counter and heads instead for a wall of pharmaceutical products, where a handwritten sign blandly announces *No Pharmacist/No Suboxone/No Sudafed Sold.*

Misha picks out antacid, baby shampoo, lilac-scented body lotion, a box of Kleenex: all so normal, so domestic, and so at odds with the vicious girl who preyed on me for years.

"*Fun* isn't the word I would choose." *Mistake* is closer to it, especially now as I'm standing in front of Misha at the Donut Hole. "I'm here for work."

When she doesn't ask me what kind, I know for sure she's heard.

"Well, *I* think it's fun to have you back," she says. Her tone is warm, but I can't help but feel a current of anxiety. Misha's fun was always the kind that drew blood. "Your dad must be glad to have you home after all this time. He worked on our fence for us just last summer, after that big tornado came through. Did a great job, too."

I don't want to talk about my dad. I definitely don't want to talk about my dad with Misha. I clear my throat. "So you married Jonah Jennings?" I ask, with a kind of politeness I hope she'll interpret, correctly, as fake.

Misha only laughs. "His brother, Peter."

The new Misha is unpredictable. It's as if the rules to the past have been rewritten, and I'm still learning the game. All I know of Peter Jennings is something I saw in the *Tribune*, a year or two into college—that he'd been arrested for dealing heroin.

Misha fiddles with the magazine rack. "Held out for as long as I could, but he was persistent." She hesitates for just a fraction of a second. "We have a baby, too. Kayla's out in the car. We'll say hi on the way out."

Even inside, with the air-conditioning going, it feels like standing inside a closed mouth. "It's so hot," I say. Misha's not my business. Misha's baby's not my business. But still, I can't help it. "You sure she'll be okay?"

"Oh, she's just napping. She'll scream like anything if I try to wake her. God. Listen to me. Can you believe it? I swear, you blink and ten years go by and it looks nothing like you thought it would." She eyes me as if we're sharing a secret. "You know I work over at Barrens High School now? I've been vice principal for a few years now."

This shocks me. Misha hated school almost as much as I did, though for different reasons. She found class to be an inconvenience, and the mandatory homework a distraction from getting felt up by random guys on the football team.

"I had no idea," I say, although what I really want to ask is:

How? Then again, Barrens High, a tiny school with a graduating class of about sixty, probably isn't attracting the best and the brightest in the education system. "Congratulations."

She waves a hand, but she looks pleased—pleased, and proud. "We make plans and God laughs. Isn't that what they say?"

I can't tell if she's kidding. "I didn't think you believed in all that religious stuff. In high school, you hated the Jesus freaks."

But of course she didn't: she only hated me.

Misha's smile drops. "I was young then. We all were." She lowers her chin and looks up at me through lashes thick with mascara. "It's all water under the bridge now. Besides, you're our big star around here. The girl who got out."

Of course it's bullshit. It has to be. She tortured me, tortured my family, got pleasure out of making me cry. I didn't make that up. I can't have made it up. She left a razorblade taped to my homeroom desk with a note saying, "*Just do it*." That's not water under any bridge I know. She spread rumors, humiliated me, and why? I had no friends anyway. I wasn't a threat. Back then I was barely even a *person*.

Still, when she takes my arm, I don't pull away. "I could use an iced coffee. How about you?"

"Nah," I say. I swing open the cooler door and stare at the rows of bottled water, gripping the handle to steady myself. Six bottles, side by side. Three in each row, except the last, which has only one. That's the one I grab. "Just this."

Even though I really want to say, *Stop touching me. I've always hated you.* But maybe this is Misha's ultimate power, like the witch in *The Little Mermaid*: she steals your voice.

I watch her fill up an iced coffee. I'm trying to figure out how to excuse myself, how to say, *Good-bye, have a very mediocre life, hope I never see you again as long as I live*, when she suddenly blurts, "You know, Brent still asks about you sometimes."

I freeze. "Brent O'Connell?"

"Who else? He's a big shot at Optimal now. Regional sales manager. Followed in his father's footsteps and worked his way up."

Brent was from one of the richest families in town, which for

Barrens means a basketball hoop, aboveground pool, and separate bedrooms for Brent, his older sister, and their parents. Brent's father wore a tie to work, and his mother was like Carol Brady: big smile, blond hair, very clean-looking. Brent was hired at Optimal straight out of high school. Whereas the other guys had after-school jobs pumping gas or stocking shelves at the grocery store or even sweeping stables at one of the local farms, Brent had an internship at Optimal.

"He's still single. A shame, isn't it?" She stirs her coffee slowly, like it's a chemistry experiment and the wrong blend of sugar and cream will make the whole place blow up. One sugar. Stir. Two sugars. Stir. Three. Then, suddenly: "He always had a crush on you, you know."

"Brent's with Kaycee," I say quickly. I have no idea where the present tense came from: five minutes back in town and the past is invading me. "I mean, he was."

"He was with Kaycee, but he liked *you*. Everybody knew that."

Brent O'Connell was one of the most popular guys in Barrens. What she's saying makes no sense.

Except . . .

Except for the kiss, the one kiss, the night of graduation. A first kiss almost exactly like I'd always dreamed it: an unseasonably warm June day, swimming weather, almost; the smell of smoke turning the air sharp; Brent coming through the trees, lifting a hand to his eyes against the dazzle of my flashlight. How many nights had I walked the woods behind my house to the edge of the reservoir, hoping to run into him just that way, hoping he would notice me?

It was so perfect I could never be sure I hadn't made it up, like I did Sonya, a dark-skinned colt-legged girl who lived in the attic of our old house when I was a kid and used to play games with me in exchange for leaves, twigs, and branches I brought her from outside; she had once been a fairy, I explained, when my mother found the attic nesting with rotten leaves and beetles. Like the games I made up after my mom died, to bring her back. Skipping over the sidewalk cracks, of course, but other ones, too. If I could hold my

breath until five cars had passed . . . if I could swim down to the bottom of the reservoir and plunge a finger in the silt . . . if there were an even number of crows on the telephone pole, any number but ten.

Misha carefully seals a top on her iced coffee, pressing with a thumb around the edges. "Why?" she asks—so casually, so sweetly, I nearly miss it.

"Excuse me?" For a second, I really don't understand.

Finally, she looks up. Her eyes are the clear blue of the summer sky. "Why do you think Brent liked you so much?"

I clutch my water bottle so hard the plastic takes on the imprint of my fingers. "I—I don't know," I stutter. Then: "He didn't."

She just keeps smiling. "All that long hair, maybe."

And then, unexpectedly, she reaches out to tug my ponytail lightly. When I jerk away, Misha laughs as if embarrassed.

"Maybe that's where all that BS came from, Kaycee wanting us to hurt your feelings," Misha goes on. "She was cuckoo, that one."

"She was your best friend," I point out, struggling to keep up with the conversation, to haul myself out of the muck of memory.

"She was yours, too, for a little while," she says. "You remember how it was. She scared me to death."

Could it be true? Whenever I remember that time, it's usually Misha's face I picture, her crowded teeth and those big blue eyes, the look of pleasure whenever she saw me cry. Misha was the vicious one, the pit bull, the one who made the decisions. Cora and Annie, the followers: they trailed after Misha and Kaycee like worshipful little sisters.

Kaycee was the prettiest one, the one everyone adored. No one could ever say no to Kaycee. Kaycee was the sun: there was no choice but to swing into orbit around her.

Now, ten years older and ten years free of her best friend, Misha seems to be at ease. "Brent will be so happy you're back, even if you're on opposite sides now. Well," she adds, seeing my face, "it's true, isn't it? You're here to shut Optimal down?"

"We're here to make sure the water is safe," I say. "No more, no

less. We're not against Optimal." But to the people of Barrens, the distinction will make little difference.

"But you *are* with that agency group, right?"

"The Center for Environmental Advocacy Work, yeah," I say. "News travels fast."

Misha leans a little closer. "Gallagher said they're going to shut off the water to our taps."

I shake my head. "Gallagher has his signals crossed. Anything like that would be way down the line. We're just here to check out the waste disposal systems." Law school teaches you one thing above all: how to speak while saying absolutely nothing.

She laughs. "And here I was, thinking you were a fancy lawyer. Turns out you're a plumber instead!" She shakes her head. "I'm glad to hear it, though. Optimal's been such a blessing, you have no idea. For a while we thought this town was turning to dust."

"I remember," I say. "Believe me."

A look of sudden pain tightens her forehead and pinches her mouth together. And for a long second she appears to be working something out of the back of her throat.

Then she grabs my hand again. I'm surprised when she steps closer to me, so close I can see the constellations of her pores.

"You know we were only kidding, right? All those things we did. All those things we said."

I guess she takes my silence for assent. She gives my hand a short, quick pulse. "I used to worry sometimes about you coming home. I used to fear it. I thought you might come back looking for—" She breaks off suddenly, and I feel a cold touch on the back of my neck, as if someone has leaned forward to whisper to me.

Kaycee. I'm sure she was about to say Kaycee.

"For what?" I ask her, deliberately trying to sound casual, spinning a rack full of cheap sunglasses and watching the sun get sucked into their polarized lenses.

Now her smile is narrow and tight. "For revenge," she says simply. This time, she holds the door open and allows me to pass through it first.

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MISHA'S BABY IS fussing in the car seat. As soon as she spots Misha, she begins to wail. I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding when Misha reaches in to unbuckle her.

"This is Kayla," she says, as Kayla begins to cry.

"She's cute," I say, which is true. She has Misha's eyes, but her hair, surprisingly thick, is so blond it's nearly white.

"She is, isn't she? Thank God she didn't get Peter's coloring. The Ginger Ninja, they call him at work." Misha jogs Kayla in her arms to quiet her. I somehow can't square an image of Peter Jennings—blunt-jawed and stupid-looking—with this child. But that's always true of babies, I guess: it's not until later that they inherit their parents' ugliness. "You're helping put us on the map, you know, living all the way out in Chicago with your big job." It's half-compliment, half-command. Subtext: *Don't fuck with us.*

"You'll have to come by the house for supper. *Please*. You at your dad's? I still have the number." She turns and fastens Kayla into the back seat again. "And let me know if you need anything while you get settled in. Anything at all."

She slips into the car before I can say don't bother, and there's no way in hell I'd be staying at the old house anyway. As soon as she's gone, it's like a hand has released my vocal cords.

I will never need a thing from you.

I will never ask you for anything.

I've always hated you.

But it's too late. She's gone, leaving only a veil of exhaust that hangs in the thick summer air, distorting everything before it, too, vanishes.

THE SKY IS YOURS

CHANDLER KLANG SMITH

A NOVEL

1

THE FALL

This is a story of what it is to be young in a very old world.

Even before the dragons came, our city was crumbling. It was as though this place was a dream we'd dreamed together, a dream gone to tatters in the morning light. Dull-eyed humans drifted past boarded storefronts, walking all kinds of animals on leashes. Vultures perched on sick trees in the park. A man clad in garbage bags sang his song in the middle of a bleak avenue as a single taxi sputtered past. Young girls dressed as if for the grave in Sunday dresses and secondhand shoes. Couches appeared on the curbs, were joined there by beds and rugs and tables; whole rooms assembled piece by piece, and the shadows of people occupied these rooms. It became the fashion to speak of oneself in the past tense. Wine flowed from dusty casks into dusty glasses. Chaw regained its popularity; dream-candy, some called it, mutant psychotropic moss mashed up with molasses and additives whose names we'd never know. We chewed it up and spat it out. Neon words went dark, leaving orphaned letters behind. Sometimes we heard laughter in our unfinished apartment complexes, though no one else was renting the units on our floor. We lived in a ruin.

The dragons were old when they were born, or else always had been. In the fall of 301970 AF, they rose out of the waters at Nereid Bay.* The first to see them was a little girl who sat in a clanking basket at the top of the Wonder Wheel. The motor had stalled, and

* AF, meaning the current era—after the human discovery of fire.

she, the only rider, waited patiently for the firemen to raise their ladder. The sky, gray with thunderheads, hung low as a blanket over the world. Out past where old men with metal detectors prowled the shore, an island breached the sea's frothy waters. An island with a pair of eyes. She pointed, but no one turned to look.

There are two dragons, the yellow and the green. One would be an aberration, a hundred would be a proliferation, but two: two is a species, either dying off or just getting started. Two is a threat. Some think they hatched from moon rocks or nuclear waste the government dumped into Nereid Bay, or that the hands of God shaped them from the bountiful putty of our sins. These explanations are as good as any. The fact is, we know little more about them now than that day, fifty years ago, when they rose from the silver waves with dripping wings. Here is what scientists have learned:

1. The dragons never land.
2. The dragons never eat.
3. The dragons never sleep.
4. Ballistics, rockets, stun guns, paratroopers, lassos, toxic sprays, nets, high-pitched sounds, mass hysteria, and prayer do nothing to deter the dragons.
5. The dragons will not let us be.

We cannot name them. We cannot grow accustomed to them. Even those who cannot remember a time before they filled our skies cannot look at them with anything like calm. They are very large and very wild. When they pass overhead, they cast our skyscraper canyons into dusk. Eclipses confuse animals, and the animals of the city are deeply confused. Most of those animals are us.

Sometimes the dragons quarrel with each other. At those times, they seem like a single creature, a snake biting its tail, the helix of DNA. They twist together in a mass, tooth and eye and claw. At other times, they work together, moving over the city in parallel lines, a destruction patrol. They've torched the billboard that said KEEP SHOPPING. They've torched the building shaped like a lip-gloss

tube. They've torched every bridge at least once, and Torchtown, the prison colony in the hardest-hit reaches of the lower city, has been en flambé in one place or another fifty years solid, to the day. Dragon fires start at the roof and work their way down. Often they fizzle out of their own accord. Sometimes they catch and spread. But for the most part, the fires are little love bites on the city's face, not too big to extinguish but too frequent, too persistent, to ignore. We've developed slang for all the different kinds: a sparkler, a smoker, a powder keg, a belch—that's when the gas tank blows. We make light when we can. It's not in us to think the worst. Even that little girl said the island winked.

Empire Island is a winking island too, an island full of eyes. We used to watch one another through its windows, to catch glimpses of ourselves in the mirrored windows as we strolled past. Those windows, cracked or hollow, watch us now, slogging through the cinders on the streets. They watch the skies for more bad news.

It's late afternoon in the death of summer. The dragons are flying low today, churning the air over Torchtown. A cloud front's rolling in, gray and muddlesome. High in the vacant blue stretches a thin white line, a crack in the dome over everything: a teenager in a HowFly, trailing out exhaust.

Duncan Humphrey Ripple V. Heir to the Ripple fortune. The dying city's final prince, in everything but name: his grandcestors never bothered to pony up for a title. But Ripple's got princely looks anyhow, even tousle-haired today in a hooded sweatshirt, pinkened from a deep-pore acne scrub. It's something around the eyes, too long-lashed and dopey for a boy's. Something dreamy, destined. *Late Capitalism's Royalty*, that was the name of his Toob series, printed in bling at the start of each episode. The recappers thought it was all scripted, but nope: Ripple played himself, enacting the most intimate details of his own life, from ages six to eighteen, for an omnipresent camera crew he called the Fourth Wall and spoke straight

at on occasion during shooting. It was like imaginary friends. They couldn't talk back or else they'd have to join the actors' union.

Then, three months ago, Ripple flunked underschool and his dad had to contribute the place into graduating him. It was then Ripple's parents decided he didn't get to be a celebrity anymore. In fact, his whole life changed, and not so much for the better. Ripple was pretty fucking jarred. He doesn't understand delayed gratification or compromise, he's never seen the point. He doesn't want to want; he's never wanted for anything. It's not in his nature. He's been spoiled to perfection. He has foie gras for brains.

Ripple rubs condensation from the driver's-side window with his sleeve and squints down at the dragons. The two creatures move in tandem. The green one spews out unending ropes of cursive flame, the yellow one shorter blasts, as if punctuating. *Printed in bling.* Down there in the streets, the fires seem random—unnatural disasters, crap luck. But from way up here, the fires look like graffiti.

Ripple cranes his neck, moves his lips to sound out the words. Who do these poon loogies think they are anyway? They can't even spell. He twists the knob of the HowFly's stereo. Thrumming bass fills the cabin of the air car. He'll show them how a man leaves his mark.

BOOM. BOOM. Wicca wicca whoo. BOOM. BOOM. Wicca wicca whoo.

Ripple pumps his fist. His knuckles graze the HowFly's padded roof as his song pounds out of the speakers.

The name is Ripple—fuck with me, I'll fuck you up triple
Any torchy lookin' twice end up cripple
Think I don't own you?—Yo' girlfriend showed me her nipples
Nasty-ass slag that she is with her pimples
Cock pocket, you think I'm just drunk
Drunk, yeah with power—that's why they call me the Dunk
Fuck with me, you end up in the trunk, punk

This city is mine, that's one test you can't flunk

When the female vocalists come in for the chorus, he sings along.

Ohh I'll lick you up and down
Cuz I'm the Dunk
Ohh I'll lick you up and down
Cuz I'm the Dunk
Ohh . . .

His parents commissioned it from his favorite artist, DJ S-Carggo, almost three years ago for his sixteenth birthday, and he's never gotten tired of it. Now he pulls up on the throttle. The music is giving him an idea. He toggles the steering, presses the gas. A bag of bacon crisps tips over onto the HowFly's floor mat; his LookyGlass slides off the dashboard. Ripple ignores it, checks the rearview scope, the pale exhaust streaming in his wake. Nobody can stop him from being famous. He'll write his own name in the sky.

Ohh I'll lick you up and down
Cuz I'm the Dunk
Ohh . . . AAAH!

Ripple shrieks, still in falsetto. He desperately slaps at the various levers surrounding the steering column as first one pigeon, then another, then a third, splatters against his windscreen: a red, feathery Rorschach blot he can barely see past. He finally flips a switch marked VIB, and the glass rumbles, shaking the bigger chunks loose. Ripple peers through the bloodstained glass, the light in the HowFly strangely rosy now. The left engine gulps and belches black clouds, tail feathers.

"Rut-row," Ripple wheezes. The cabin fills with the fumes: it's a smell somewhere between burnt hair and roast turkey. He paws at the ignition switches, finds the knob, and kicks the left engine off. It blows a prolonged metallic raspberry. The HowFly lists to the right,

but stays in the air. Next time he takes this rattletrap up, he's bringing the manual.

The HowFly is a recent purchase, an early wedding present from his parents, and maybe a consolation prize of sorts. Ripple is still working out the kinks. One thing for sure: the commercials get it wrong. Since he was a kid, he's been watching the gleaming images of candy-colored HowFlys zooming up, past the deserted cranes, the sooty streets, the cracked and blackened windows of skyscrapers, and then into a clear blue, oddly dragonless sky. As the ad-world HowFly emits its trail of exhaust in a clean white line, CGI clouds shape a heavenly city around the vehicle, one with intact bridges and a puffy amusement park in the place of Torchtown. The view cuts to a close-up of the windscreen: "Rise above," whispers a throaty blonde, her head sliding down into the lap of the contented driver, a handsome youth about the age Ripple is now. He's seen it all a million times on the Toob, enough times to make it seem as real as his own heavily edited life.

But what the ads don't say, and what Ripple now knows, is that a HowFly can only go so far in taking him away from it all. There's nobody up here to come pounding on his door, demanding that he turn down the woofers, but there's also bug guts on the windscreen and crunched-up Carbon8 cans on the floor and the constant bleeps and whirs of the control system where something's always flashing EMPTY. And worst of all there's a notable lack of anybody to blow him; he's probably even farther from the nearest damsel here than back in his room. It's a sweet ride, but he'd rather be parking.

What the commercials also don't say, but what everyone knows, is that only the very rich even bother with HowFlys anymore. Their slogan—"The Sky Is Yours"—got outdated at least two decades ago, when it became apparent that the dragons actually owned the shit out of the available airspace. Since then the brand has acquired an air of willful disregard, of proprietary eccentricity, as during the celestial registry boom a few years back, when it became chic to buy up the stars. Ripple usually takes his wealth and privilege for granted—he saves the bragging for his fame. But taking off in his

HowFly from the mansion's sixth-floor battlements, his parents below waving goodbye, he felt, for the first time, something suspiciously like family pride. It occurred to him then that everything—the city, the sky—belonged to the rich, not just because they were born powerful but because they'd die before they'd give it up.

Of course, technically the Ripples don't stake a claim on the city itself. They live to the north of Empire Island, just out of the danger zone, on a cliff overlooking the city's trashed splendor. The best views, Ripple learned early on, are from the greatest Heights.

He pulls up on the throttle again, feels his ears pop as the HowFly zooms above the clouds. When he's gained altitude, he shifts to HOV and gropes around on the cabin floor, tossing aside empty Voltage bottles, a muscle pump, and a pair of Hotfoot thermal protection sneakers before he finds it: his LookyGlass. He tilts it against the steering column impatiently as the images scroll past: Hooligan, his German apehound, napping on the treadwheel; twelve pictures of doorknobs from the first night he smoked loam with his uncle; an action shot of his friend Kelvin taking a lance to the teeth at the Power Jousting tournament. And then, the Pic, with its box of text over to the side:

> Dear Monsieur & Madame Ripple:
>
> I hope this won't seem too forward at this stage of our negotiations, but I've taken the liberty of attaching here a pertinent "Skin Pic," taken by my mother on the occasion of my Legal Endowment to the rights and privileges of my title (18 yrs). I humbly urge you to see the merits of our offer, and to execute the contracts with the due haste I know you know they require.
>
> At your service always,
> The Baroness Swan Lenore Dahlberg

She's a little chunky, there's no getting around that, and the outfit she chose—black bustier, ruffled half-apron, white knee socks,

black patent-leather shoes, feather duster—brings to mind a corseted penguin more than a chambermaid, sexy or otherwise. But she's half-naked, and the contracts are signed. What choice does he have? Ripple slides a hand down his pants—he still has on his pajama bottoms—and gives himself a tug.

"Rise above," he mutters.

Just beyond the splintered skyline of Empire Island, the sprawling outer burghs of Kings and Crookbridge, there lies another place, a land of twisted oaks and wild rabbits and haunted sounds in the rafters. Wonland County. The Baroness Swan Lenore Dahlberg, now betrothed to the heir to the Ripple fortune, spent her girlhood here, lying on her shingled roof, blowing the fluffy seeds off dandelions that had grown in the gutters, and snagging her petticoats on nails. Her roof was a ship in a green ocean of treetops. There were no other houses for miles. Sometimes she sat on the chimney and watched the dragons through her spyglass. Their leathery wings, their roiling claws, spoke to her of city lights, glamour, and communion with like souls.

"They're flying low today, Cyril," she would intone, warming an imaginary snifter of brandy in one hand. "Love me while you can." She'd never seen another child.

In those days, Swanny lived with her mother in a house of thirty rooms. In wintertime, they warmed the space in phases, followed the rattle of the radiators from parlor to hall. Some rooms stayed locked for insulation. They had two hireds, the dentist and the maid. The dentist was for Swanny, mostly. His job largely consisted of tying long threads to certain of her teeth and then attaching those threads to the manor's various doors, which he gleefully slammed. Over the years, as her tooth roots gripped deeper, he moved on to pliers. For the longest time, Swanny saw nothing odd about this.

The maid, Corona, was a sad-eyed muttering woman who called Swanny's mother "*La Diabla*" and skinned rabbits in the kitchen.

She carried a rolling pin at all times. Swanny had, on more than one occasion, seen her unscrew the handle of this rolling pin and take a hearty swig, but she said nothing to her mother about it. When Swanny took ill, Corona always came to her room to sew and read stories and sometimes to cry about her son, whose incinerated remains she kept in a ceramic cookie jar in her little room under the eaves.

"The sickness devoured his body, but his eyes—his eyes were still alive. *Esos ojos, esos ojos* . . . It is a mother's duty to remember, a duty and a curse," she would whisper to Swanny, furtively wiping her mouth as she lowered the rolling pin. "Our sins are visited upon our children. Your mother knows this. This is why she turns away."

"Corona, get me a fresh Carbon8." Swanny would tap her glass with a swizzle stick. "This one's gone flat."

It was true that Pippi Dahlberg, Swanny's mother, never even came upstairs when Swanny was sick. She said she could not bear it. To Swanny, this was understandable. Swanny could still vaguely remember the days when her father was dying: the dim, furry light that crept past the velvet curtains in the master bedroom, the bags of fluid, red and yellow and yellow-green, that seeped into his body and then seeped back out. "Your father is not himself," Pippi had told her, as the twisted figure amid those pillows contorted itself unnaturally, like a hand shaping shadows. Pippi had tended him through his sickness, and now she had no nursing left for Swanny. Besides, they were together the rest of the time.

The first time Swanny saw her mother without makeup, she did not recognize her. Pippi was a petite woman, trim and active but not slender, with the grasping look of someone who has always strained against the natural tides of metabolism and hair color. Her fingers tapered to lacquered talons; a stenciled mole marked a spot just above her upper lip. Her skin pressed too tightly against the bones of her cheeks, as if her inner self longed to break through the thin barrier of flesh and at last breathe air. Her shoulders, always padded beneath her rainbow of suits, were square and hunched forward slightly. She seemed as though she might pounce.

Pippi was an Old Mom and an active member of the Old Mom Movement. When Swanny was small, Pippi chaired the local chapter of the organization. The Gray Ladies of Wonland County, as the members called themselves, met each month in the house's ballroom, around a massive mahogany table still battered and gouged from the days of the Siege. The other Gray Ladies, like Pippi, were anything but gray. Their hair came in shades of Burnt Umber, Sienna, Hayseed, Ebony, Dusty Rose, even Robin's Egg—Swanny named the colors from the fan deck of paint samples in her Junior Decorator's Kit. The Gray Ladies wore ostrich plumes and leopard print, patterned tights and fractal hats. Their high heels rang against the ballroom tiles. Though they were Old Moms, not one of them would tell Swanny her age.

According to Pippi, Old Moms were the target of discrimination by prejudiced individuals who believed women should not bear children after menopause. Corona was one of those prejudiced individuals, though she tenderized meat for their luncheons just the same. Swanny didn't know what the dentist thought of them; sometimes she noticed him leering through the ballroom French doors, or leaving his business cards on the table for them to find.

Little Swanny found their meetings dull. She sat beneath the mahogany table, staring at the pointy toes of lizard-skin shoes, and snacked on pinwheels of rabbit prosciutto and cream cheese that Corona had assembled. The other Old Moms did not bring their children. They spoke about the perils of inbreeding (though "Who could blame a person for wanting to keep good genetics in the family?"), thieving servants, seepage, and the declining condition of their various estates, where vines choked hand-quarried stone, and copper monuments crumbled to green dust. Sometimes in their excitement they dropped pamphlets to the floor, with titles like "A Childless Life, Then a Childish Life: Priorities, Motherhood, and the Federal Constitution" or "You Can Have It All, Just Not All at the Same Time." Sometimes their faces were bandaged; soft neck wattles vanished, noses changed.

As the years passed, one by one the Gray Ladies stopped coming.

First it was Vidalia, with her antique wigs and her eternal scent of apricots, which lingered for days after the meetings she attended. Her disappearance was the source of endless, hushed consternation in the group, which Swanny strained to hear because she sensed she was not supposed to. But all she could decipher were a handful of troubling phrases: "listened to the rumors," "no time to sell," and "soil testing here—imagine." The next to go was Nanette, who according to Pippi had not worn the same pair of earrings twice in twenty years; later, Swanny would struggle to recall her face, but only an unbroken parade of pearl clusters, teardrop diamonds, and tasteful emerald studs would present themselves. Her departure was met with more sympathy, and with speculation about whether it would be appropriate for the group to attend her son's funeral. It was around this time that Pippi and Swanny began bathing in bottled spring water, heated by Corona in enormous kettles on the stove, rather than in the faintly metallic well water that poured from the house's taps.

By Swanny's ninth birthday, there were no more meetings of the Gray Ladies of Wonland County. There was only Pippi, paying stacks of bills at the immense mahogany table, and Swanny taking tea with her dolls beneath it. Once, Swanny asked why the other Old Moms had gone.

"I wouldn't hazard a guess. They sold in a buyers' market." Pippi rapped more numbers into her adding machine. "Do you know what estates like ours once cost? To buy outright, then restore? One doesn't simply abandon such investments in a panic. The market has a way of correcting itself, you know."

The dentist tuned up Pippi's face from time to time: he used that phrase, "tune up," because the fixes were minor. She'd had her Major Work done the year before Swanny was born, the year she'd retired, the year that she and "Chet" (as she called Swanny's father) had moved out here to "the boonies." Once, and only once, with an air of decided confidentiality, she told Swanny that this had all happened the year she turned fifty-five. Because of this secrecy, the number took on talismanic significance for Swanny. She took to

writing it in the soot on the chimney ledge while she watched the dragons. It seemed unlikely to her, at age six or nine or eleven, that anyone could ever be so old. It seemed even more incredible, however, that her mother had once been young.

Before she relocated to Wonland, Pippi Dahlberg had been Prime Mover of McGuffin-Stork, one of the city's leading content firms. Sometimes she told Swanny stories of those days: the time one messenger, scorched and roughed-up but still alive, had glided up to her window on his HowScoot with the necessary contracts, just barely in time for an important meeting; the afternoon she recalibrated the projection settings on a competitor's LookyGlass so that all the models in the other woman's presentation appeared to have sickly green skin and gowns the hue of toxic waste; the diamond brooch her mentor had made for her when she was finally promoted above him that spelled out the words EAT SHIT & DIE.

"The city was glam in those days, glam and dangerous. The dragons separated out the wheat from the chaff. Either you were in it to win it, or poof, off you went! I was just an assistant then: what a time to be starting out. But now I'm dating myself." Pippi, scrutinizing the mirror, deftly swabbed lipstick off her teeth with a handkerchief. "I remember the Strike Ums account. Selling lighters to a city on fire, can you imagine? But we did it. We had content for any product, any day—and subliminals every night. Always onward, always, 'What's next?' Powdered Zip to keep you going—I never ate. Well, you're only young once, darling. Besides, the world has changed."

Pippi's stories made little or no sense, but Swanny just liked to hear her mother talk. It was far better than going through the old purse of foreign coins, or sketching pictures by herself. Pippi's voice echoed through the empty house in a kind of song.

"What career will I have, Mother?" Swanny asked one afternoon, obediently holding out her nails for Pippi to paint. Pippi frowned at the cerise polish she'd just applied to her daughter's tiny fingers.

"Go, go, go, it's no life for a little girl," she said at last. "Now, don't blow on them, that makes ripples."

"But I won't always be a little girl. I'll be a Prime Mover and then an Old Mom like you."

Pippi shook her head slightly. Swanny looked at the little seam by her mother's ear, where the dentist sewed the skin back during "tune-ups."

"The better firms have all shut down, dear," Pippi said. "Too many people have gotten burnt, in every sense of the word. Now it's all shilling on the streets. Tawdry."

"So I won't have a career?"

"Stop crying."

"I'm not crying."

"Well, you mustn't, because there's no reason to. There's investing in your future, and that's nearly the same thing as a career."

"Can I wear the diamond brooch?"

"Yes. When I'm dead."

Now, a decade later, the baroness, age eighteen, is packing her hope chest, pausing, every now and then, to visit her vanity mirror and fret about her chins. This morning, over brunch, Pippi commented on those chins, on their plurality, and though Swanny's usual response would involve the defiant consumption of bon bons, today she feels apprehensive. It's begun to occur to her that her meeting with her fiancé, in the flesh (oh the troubling carnal frisson of that phrase!) is no longer a distant hypothetical, but a reckoning soon due. And though she hardly doubts her own beauty, the thought of her body so near his fills her with uncertainties.

Meanwhile, up in the sky above Empire Island, Duncan Ripple might as well be a world away. He wipes jizz from the steering wheel with the elbow of his hoodie. He yawns. Stroking off reminds him of deleting the junk file on his ThinkTank. It clears the memory, sure, but you have to reboot right after. Otherwise you crash.

Ripple zips up, shifts back into DESC, eases the HowFly down a few hundred feet. He wishes he'd thought to bring a few brewskis.

The camera crew used to keep a cooler of them under the craft service table and looked the other way when he and his friends helped themselves. It made for better footage. Now, having a brewski at home usually requires chugging it in the walk-in fridge so his parents don't notice, and he fucking hates shivering. Of course, he could always take the elevator up to the library to see his uncle, who keeps his old-timey icebox full of Bog Peat Stout or Lantern Oil Bock or some other bitter sludge in jugs he calls growlers. But that means having to deal with his uncle, who re-learned English as a second language so he could talk with a British accent whenever he wanted, and who's lately taken to wearing caftans with tassels that snag in the gears of his wheelchair. Ripple really just needs to get a glove compartment chill bin installed, like his friend Kelvin did.

Ripple flips on the left engine, just to try it. More grinding, a hint of fumes—he shuts it down in a hurry. To the shop it goes. He's hungry. He wonders what Hooligan's been up to, if he's eaten any more of that unicorn hide rug Ripple's mom just put down in the third floor den. Probably did, little stink goblin. Next time the pooch stays in his cage.

It's gotten kind of foggy, Ripple's noticing now; he squints, shifts from DESC to FLY and clicks on the beams. Outside, it's almost like that commercial, only instead of forming a city, these clouds are more like a cave—a gray one, closing him in. He's going to be late to dinner. He hates having to eat with the kitchen staff. The beams are showing him nothing but dense vapor. Ditto the brights.

The first time Ripple took his new HowFly up, his father rode along. Ripple had already taken driving lessons from his impulse-control coach, a squirrelly little guy with an annoying habit of wresting the glide-thrust lever out of his hands, but this was worse. The smell of Humphrey Ripple's toupee glue filled the air car as he pointedly strapped himself in. What kind of butt nugget doesn't trust his own son?

"Dad, I got this," Ripple said, bringing it up nice and easy, just like he'd learned.

"This isn't one of your immersive simulations." Humphrey de-

pressed a phantom brake pedal with his shoe. "You have to take into account variables that run counter to your expectations. There's no foreshadowing in reality."

"I understand reality. I star in reality."

"Starred, past tense. And you don't understand it, Duncan. You understand narrative constructs, virtual realms. I'm talking about cause and effect here, harsh and brutal. The kind without a laugh track."

Ripple wished his dad would stop bringing up laugh tracks; the Toob series hadn't used one since Ripple was in the fifth grade. Which Humphrey would know if he ever watched it at all.

"Why did you even buy me a dragon wagon if you don't want me to drive it?"

"I want you to drive it *cautiously*. And referring to the vehicle in those terms doesn't do much to set my mind at ease. If I ever get an inkling you've been using it to taunt these monstrosities, or—"

"Relax, I'm not stupid."

"Wiser men than you have made worse mistakes." Humphrey's LookyGlass pinged with a stock update; to Ripple's surprise, he ignored it. "Listen, Duncan. I was sixteen once too."

"I'm *eighteen*."

"I'm speaking developmentally here. I know you feel invincible, especially behind the wheel. But you're not. None of us are. Even if you're not seeking out the dragons, you aren't completely safe. Stay attuned. It's best to keep them in your sight. You may find it hard to believe, huge as they are, but they can have a way of sneaking up on you."

But now, Ripple isn't attuned. And that's why he's fiddling with the buttons on the dash when he glances up to see the dragon tail whipping toward him in the fog. He has time to notice the spikes protruding from it—knobby, bone-colored, like exposed vertebrae—the puffy scars amid the dull green scales, the dried starfish and anemones that cling on still, despite the many years that have passed since the creature rose from the seas. It's as though he's never seen anything so clearly in his life. It blocks out all view of the

sky, and it's still swinging nearer.

It'll stop.

It'll stop.

It smashes through the windscreen.

Ripple closes his eyes. Pellets of glass hail into his face and hair; the wind gusts around him. He has a sudden sensation, not of falling but of weightlessness, suspension, as though he's been thrown loose of gravity's pull. The breath leaves his lungs; he lets it go. He doesn't need it anymore. A new city, beyond the sky, opens its gate and bathes him in radiance.

Warm radiance.

The HowFly is on fire.

And falling fast.

Every light on the dash is flashing. The hood's popped up, the engine's blazing, and the heat of it pours in through the glass-fanged hole where the windscreen used to be. Ripple slaps every button, twists every dial, yanks up and down on the throttle to no avail. Alarms sound. A cheerful female voice chirps, "Flyby assistance has been contacted. Please be patient. Flyby assistance . . ."

Ripple wheezes. The world's rushing up to meet him. He gropes the floor mats for his inhaler. He feels Sin Bun wrappers, currency, a pebble beneath his hand. He knocks a lever with his wrist. A new light starts flashing.

"Flyby assistance has been contacted. Please be . . ."

Ripple coughs. Dark, gritty smoke tears his eyes. He can't breathe. He sees the light flashing EJEC, EJEC, EJEC, sees the moon roof pop up. Then he passes out.