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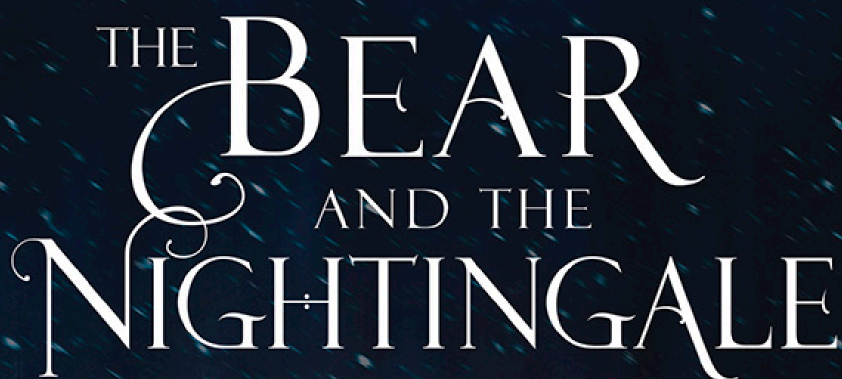
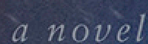


KATHERINE ARDEN



The Bear and the Nightingale

A NOVEL

Katherine Arden

DEL REY • NEW YORK

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

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Part One

I.

FROST

IT WAS LATE WINTER IN NORTHERN RUS', THE AIR SULLEN WITH wet that was neither rain nor snow. The brilliant February landscape had given way to the dreary gray of March, and the household of Pyotr Vladimirovich were all sniffling from the damp and thin from six weeks' fasting on black bread and fermented cabbage. But no one was thinking of chilblains or runny noses, or even, wistfully, of porridge and roast meats, for Dunya was to tell a story.

That evening, the old lady sat in the best place for talking: in the kitchen, on the wooden bench beside the oven. This oven was a massive affair built of fired clay, taller than a man and large enough that all four of Pyotr Vladimirovich's children could have fit easily inside. The flat top served as a sleeping platform; its innards cooked their food, heated their kitchen, and made steam-baths for the sick.

"What tale will you have tonight?" Dunya inquired, enjoying the fire at her back. Pyotr's children sat before her, perched on stools. They all loved stories, even the second son, Sasha, who was a self-consciously devout child, and would have insisted—had anyone asked him—that he preferred to pass the evening in prayer. But the church was cold, the sleet outside unrelenting. Sasha had thrust his head out-of-doors, gotten a faceful of wet, and retired, vanquished, to a stool a little apart

from the others, where he sat affecting an expression of pious indifference.

The others set up a clamor on hearing Dunya's question:

"Finist the Falcon!"

"Ivan and the Gray Wolf!"

"Firebird! Firebird!"

Little Alyosha stood on his stool and waved his arms, the better to be heard over his bigger siblings, and Pyotr's boarhound raised its big, scarred head at the commotion.

But before Dunya could answer, the outer door clattered open and there came a roar from the storm without. A woman appeared in the doorway, shaking the wet from her long hair. Her face glowed with the chill, but she was thinner than even her children; the fire cast shadows in the hollows of cheek and throat and temple. Her deep-set eyes threw back the firelight. She stooped and seized Alyosha in her arms.

The child squealed in delight. "Mother!" he cried. "Matyushka!"

Marina Ivanovna sank onto her stool, drawing it nearer the blaze. Alyosha, still clasped in her arms, wound both fists around her braid. She trembled, though it was not obvious under her heavy clothes. "Pray the wretched ewe delivers tonight," she said. "Otherwise I fear we shall never see your father again. Are you telling stories, Dunya?"

"If we might have quiet," said the old lady tartly. She had been Marina's nurse, too, long ago.

"I'll have a story," said Marina at once. Her tone was light, but her eyes were dark. Dunya gave her a sharp glance. The wind sobbed outside. "Tell the story of Frost, Dunyashka. Tell us of the frost-demon, the winter-king Karachun. He is abroad tonight, and angry at the thaw."

Dunya hesitated. The elder children looked at each other. In Russian, Frost was called Morozko, the demon of winter. But long ago, the people called him Karachun, the death-god. Under that name, he was king of black midwinter who came for bad children and froze them in the night. It was an ill-omened word, and unlucky to speak it while he

still held the land in his grip. Marina was holding her son very tightly. Alyosha squirmed and tugged his mother's braid.

"Very well," said Dunya after a moment's hesitation. "I shall tell the story of Morozko, of his kindness and his cruelty." She put a slight emphasis on this name: the safe name that could not bring them ill luck. Marina smiled sardonically and untangled her son's hands. None of the others made any protest, though the story of Frost was an old tale, and they had all heard it many times before. In Dunya's rich, precise voice it could not fail to delight.

"In a certain princedom—" began Dunya. She paused and fixed a quelling eye upon Alyosha, who was squealing like a bat and bouncing in his mother's arms.

"Hush," said Marina, and handed him the end of her braid again to play with.

"In a certain princedom," the old lady repeated, with dignity, "there lived a peasant who had a beautiful daughter."

"Whasser name?" mumbled Alyosha. He was old enough to test the authenticity of fairy tales by seeking precise details from the tellers.

"Her name was Marfa," said the old lady. "Little Marfa. And she was beautiful as sunshine in June, and brave and good-hearted besides. But Marfa had no mother; her own had died when she was an infant. Although her father had remarried, Marfa was still as motherless as any orphan could be. For while Marfa's stepmother was quite a handsome woman, they say, and she made delicious cakes, wove fine cloth, and brewed rich kvas, her heart was cold and cruel. She hated Marfa for the girl's beauty and goodness, favoring instead her own ugly, lazy daughter in all things. First the woman tried to make Marfa ugly in turn by giving her all the hardest work in the house, so that her hands would be twisted, her back bent, and her face lined. But Marfa was a strong girl, and perhaps possessed a bit of magic, for she did all her work uncomplainingly and went on growing lovelier and lovelier as the years passed.

"So the stepmother—" seeing Alyosha's open mouth, Dunya

added, "—Darya Nikolaevna was her name—finding she could not make Marfa hard or ugly, schemed to rid herself of the girl once and for all. Thus, one day at midwinter, Darya turned to her husband and said, 'Husband, I believe it is time for our Marfa to be wed.'

"Marfa was in the izba cooking pancakes. She looked at her stepmother with astonished joy, for the lady had never taken an interest in her, except to find fault. But her delight quickly turned to dismay.

" '—And I have just the husband for her. Load her into the sledge and take her into the forest. We shall wed her to Morozko, the lord of winter. Can any maiden ask for a finer or richer bridegroom? Why, he is master of the white snow, the black firs, and the silver frost!'

"The husband—his name was Boris Borisovich—stared in horror at his wife. Boris loved his daughter, after all, and the cold embrace of the winter god is not for mortal maidens. But perhaps Darya had a bit of magic of her own, for her husband could refuse her nothing. Weeping, he loaded his daughter into the sledge, drove her deep into the forest, and left her at the foot of a fir tree.

"Long the girl sat alone, and she shivered and shook and grew colder and colder. At length, she heard a great clattering and snapping. She looked up to behold Frost himself coming toward her, leaping among the trees and snapping his fingers."

"But what did he look like?" Olga demanded.

Dunya shrugged. "As to that, no two tellers agree. Some say he is naught but a cold, crackling breeze whispering among the firs. Others say he is an old man in a sledge, with bright eyes and cold hands. Others say he is like a warrior in his prime, but robed all in white, with weapons of ice. No one knows. But something came to Marfa as she sat there; an icy blast whipped around her face, and she grew colder than ever. And then Frost spoke to her, in the voice of the winter wind and the falling snow:

" 'Are you quite warm, my beauty?'

"Marfa was a well-brought-up girl who bore her troubles uncomplainingly, so she replied, 'Quite warm, thank you, dear Lord Frost.' At

this, the demon laughed, and as he did, the wind blew harder than ever. All the trees groaned above their heads. Frost asked again, 'And now? Warm enough, sweetheart?' Marfa, though she could barely speak from the cold, again replied, 'Warm, I am warm, thank you.' Now it was a storm that raged overhead; the wind howled and gnashed its teeth until poor Marfa was certain it would tear the skin from her bones. But Frost was not laughing now, and when he asked a third time: 'Warm, my darling?' she answered, forcing the words between frozen lips as blackness danced before her eyes, 'Yes . . . warm. I am warm, my Lord Frost.'

"Then he was filled with admiration for her courage and took pity on her plight. He wrapped her in his own robe of blue brocade and laid her in his sledge. When he drove out of the forest and left the girl by her own front door, she was still wrapped in the magnificent robe and bore also a chest of gems and gold and silver ornaments. Marfa's father wept with joy to see the girl once more, but Darya and her daughter were furious to see Marfa so richly clad and radiant, with a prince's ransom at her side. So Darya turned to her husband and said, 'Husband, quickly! Take my daughter Liza up in your sledge. The gifts that Frost has given Marfa are nothing to what he will give *my* girl!'

"Though in his heart Boris protested all this folly, he took Liza up in his sledge. The girl was wearing her finest gown and wrapped in heavy fur robes. Her father took her deep into the woods and left her beneath the same fir tree. Liza in turn sat a long time. She had begun to grow very cold, despite her furs, when at last Frost came through the trees, cracking his fingers and laughing to himself. He danced right up to Liza and breathed into her face, and his breath was the wind out of the north that freezes skin to bone. He smiled and asked, 'Warm enough, darling?' Liza, shuddering, answered, 'Of course not, you fool! Can you not see that I am near perished with cold?'

"The wind blew harder than ever, howling about them in great, tearing gusts. Over the din he asked, 'And now? Quite warm?' The girl shrieked back, 'But no, idiot! I am frozen! I have never been colder in

my life! I am waiting for my bridegroom Frost, but the oaf hasn't come.' Hearing this, Frost's eyes grew hard as adamant; he laid his fingers on her throat, leaned forward, and whispered into the girl's ear, 'Warm now, my pigeon?' But the girl could not answer, for she had died when he touched her and lay frozen in the snow.

"At home, Darya waited, pacing back and forth. 'Two chests of gold at least,' she said, rubbing her hands. 'A wedding-dress of silk velvet and bridal-blankets of the finest wool.' Her husband said nothing. The shadows began to lengthen and there was still no sign of her daughter. At length, Darya sent her husband out to retrieve the girl, admonishing him to have care with the chests of treasure. But when Boris reached the tree where he had left his daughter that morning, there was no treasure at all: only the girl herself, lying dead in the snow.

"With a heavy heart, the man lifted her in his arms and bore her back home. The mother ran out to meet them. 'Liza,' she called. 'My love!'

"Then she saw the corpse of her child, huddled up in the bottom of the sledge. At that moment, the finger of Frost touched Darya's heart, too, and she fell dead on the spot."

There was a small, appreciative silence.

Then Olga spoke up plaintively. "But what happened to Marfa? Did she marry him? King Frost?"

"Cold embrace, indeed," Kolya muttered to no one in particular, grinning.

Dunya gave him an austere look, but did not deign to reply.

"Well, no, Olya," she said to the girl. "I shouldn't think so. What use does Winter have for a mortal maiden? More likely she married a rich peasant, and brought him the largest dowry in all Rus'."

Olga looked ready to protest this unromantic conclusion, but Dunya had already risen with a creaking of bones, eager to retire. The top of the oven was large as a great bed, and the old and the young and the sick slept upon it. Dunya made her bed there with Alyosha.

The others kissed their mother and slipped away. At last Marina

herself rose. Despite her winter clothes, Dunya saw anew how thin she had grown, and it smote the old lady's heart. *It will soon be spring,* she comforted herself. *The woods will turn green and the beasts give rich milk. I will make her pie with eggs and curds and pheasant, and the sun will make her well again.*

But the look in Marina's eyes filled the old nurse with foreboding.

2.

THE WITCH-WOMAN'S GRANDDAUGHTER

THE LAMB CAME FORTH AT LAST, DRAGGLED AND SPINDLY, BLACK as a dead tree in the rain. The ewe began licking the little thing in a peremptory way, and before long the tiny creature stood, swaying on minute hooves. "Molodets," said Pyotr Vladimirovich to the ewe, and stood up himself. His aching back protested when he drew it straight. "But you could have chosen a better night." The wind outside ground its teeth. The sheep flapped her tail nonchalantly. Pyotr grinned and left them. A fine ram, born in the jaws of a late-winter storm. It was a good omen.

Pyotr Vladimirovich was a great lord: a boyar, with rich lands and many men to do his bidding. It was only by choice that he passed his nights with his laboring stock. But always he was present when a new creature came to enrich his herds, and often he drew it to the light with his own bloody hands.

The sleet had stopped and the night was clearing. A few valiant stars showed between the clouds when Pyotr came into the dooryard and pulled the barn door shut behind him. Despite the wet, his house was buried nearly to the eaves in a winter's worth of snow. Only the pitched roof and chimneys had escaped, and the space around the door, which the men of Pyotr's household laboriously kept clear.

The summer half of the great house had wide windows and an open hearth. But that wing was shut when winter came, and it had a deserted look now, entombed in snow and sealed up in frost. The winter half of the house boasted huge ovens and small, high windows. A perpetual smoke trickled from its chimneys, and at the first hard freeze, Pyotr fitted its window-frames with slabs of ice, to block the cold but let in the light. Now firelight from his wife's room threw a flickering bar of gold onto the snow.

Pyotr thought of his wife and hurried on. Marina would be pleased about the lamb.

The walks between the outbuildings were roofed and floored with logs, defense against rain and snow and mud. But the sleet had come with the dawn, and the slanting wet had soaked the wood and frozen solid. The footing was treacherous, and the damp drifts loomed head-high, pockmarked with sleet. But Pyotr's felt-and-fur boots were sure on the ice. He paused in the drowsing kitchen to ladle water over his slimy hands. Atop the oven, Alyosha turned over and whimpered in his sleep.

His wife's room was small—in deference to the frost—but it was bright, and by the standards of the north, luxurious. Swaths of woven fabric covered the wooden walls. The beautiful carpet—part of Marina's dowry—had come by long and circuitous roads from Tsargrad itself. Fantastic carving adorned the wooden stools, and blankets of wolf and rabbit skin lay scattered in downy heaps.

The small stove in the corner threw off a fiery glow. Marina had not gone to bed; she sat near the fire, wrapped in a robe of white wool, combing her hair. Even after four children, her hair was still thick and dark and fell nearly to her knee. In the forgiving firelight, she looked very like the bride that Pyotr had brought to his house so long ago.

"Is it done?" asked Marina. She laid her comb aside and began to plait her hair. Her eyes never left the oven.

"Yes," said Pyotr, distractedly. He was stripping off his kaftan in the grateful warmth. "A handsome ram. And its mother is well, too—a good omen."

Marina smiled.

"I am glad of it, for we shall need one," she said. "I am with child."

Pyotr started, caught with his shirt half off. He opened his mouth and closed it again. It was, of course, possible. She was old for it, though, and she had grown so thin that winter . . .

"Another one?" he asked. He straightened up and put his shirt aside.

Marina heard the distress in his tone, and a sad smile touched her mouth. She bound the end of her hair with a leather cord before replying. "Yes," she said, flicking the plait over her shoulder. "A girl. She will be born in the autumn."

"Marina . . ."

His wife heard the silent question. "I wanted her," she said. "I want her still." And then, lower: "I want a daughter like my mother was."

Pyotr frowned. Marina never spoke of her mother. Dunya, who had been with Marina in Moscow, referred to her only rarely.

In the reign of Ivan I, or so said the stories, a ragged girl rode through the kremlin-gates, alone except for her tall gray horse. Despite filth and hunger and weariness, rumors dogged her footsteps. She had such grace, the people said, and eyes like the swan-maiden in a fairy tale. At length, the rumors reached the ear of the Grand Prince. "Bring her to me," Ivan said, thinly amused. "I have never seen a swan-maiden."

Ivan Kalita was a hard prince, eaten with ambition, cold and clever and grasping. He would not have survived otherwise: Moscow killed her princes quickly. And yet, the boyars said afterward, when Ivan first saw this girl, he sat unmoving for a full ten minutes. Some of the more fanciful swore that his eyes were wet when he went to her and took her hand.

Ivan was twice widowed by then, his eldest son older than his young lover, and yet a year later he married the mysterious girl. However, even the Grand Prince of Moscow could not silence the whispers. The princess would not say where she had come from: not then and not

ever. The serving-women muttered that she could tame animals, dream the future, and summon rain.

Pyotr collected his outer clothes and hung them near the oven. A practical man, he had always shrugged at rumors. But his wife sat so very still, looking into the fire. Only the flames moved, gilding her hand and throat. She made Pyotr uneasy. He paced the wooden floor.

Rus' had been Christian ever since Vladimir baptized all of Kiev in the Dneiper and dragged the old gods through the streets. Still, the land was vast and changed slowly. Five hundred years after the monks came to Kiev, Rus' still teemed with unknown powers, and some of them had lain reflected in the strange princess's knowing eyes. The Church did not like it. At the bishops' insistence, Marina, her only child, was married off to a boyar in the howling wilderness, many days' travel from Moscow.

Pyotr often blessed his good fortune. His wife was wise as she was beautiful; he loved her and she him. But Marina never talked about her mother. Pyotr never asked. Their daughter, Olga, was an ordinary girl, pretty and obliging. They had no need for another, certainly not an heir to the rumored powers of a strange grandmother.

"You are sure you have the strength for it?" Pyotr said finally. "Even Alyosha was a surprise, and that was three years ago."

"Yes," said Marina, turning to look at him. Her hand clenched slowly into a fist, but he did not see. "I will see her born."

There was a pause.

"Marina, what your mother was . . ."

His wife took his hand and stood. He wound an arm around her waist and felt her stiff under his touch.

"I do not know," said Marina. "She had gifts that I have not; I remember how in Moscow the noblewomen whispered. But power is a

birthright to the women of her bloodline. Olga is your daughter more than mine, but this one"—Marina's free hand slipped up, shaping a cradle to hold a baby—"this one will be different."

Pyotr drew his wife closer. She clung to him, suddenly fierce. Her heart beat against his breast. She was warm in his arms. He smelled the scent of her hair, washed clean in the bathhouse. *It is late,* Pyotr thought. *Why borrow trouble?* The work of women was to bear children. His wife had already given him four, but surely she would manage another. If the infant proved strange in some way—well, that bridge could be crossed when necessary.

"Bear her in good health, then, Marina Ivanovna," he said. His wife smiled. Her back was to the fire, so he did not see her eyelashes wet. He tilted her chin up and kissed her. Her pulse beat in her throat. But she was so thin, fragile as a bird beneath her heavy robe. "Come to bed," he said. "There will be milk tomorrow; the ewe can spare a little. Dunya will bake it for you. You must think of the babe."

Marina pressed her body to his. He picked her up as in the days of their courting and spun her around. She laughed and wound her arms around his neck. But her eyes looked an instant past him, staring into the fire as though she could read the future in the flames.

"GET RID OF IT," said Dunya the next day. "I don't care if you're carrying a girl or a prince or a prophet of old." The sleet had crept back with the dawn and thundered again without. The two women huddled near the oven, for warmth and for its light on their mending. Dunya stabbed her needle home with particular vehemence. "The sooner the better. You've neither the weight nor the strength to carry a child, and if by a miracle you did, the bearing would kill you. You've given three sons to your husband, and you have your girl—what need of another?" Dunya had been Marina's nurse in Moscow, had followed her to her husband's house and nursed all of her four children in turn. She spoke as she pleased.

Marina smiled with a hint of mockery. "Such talk, Dunyashka," she said. "What would Father Semyon say?"

"Father Semyon is not likely to die in childbed, is he? Whereas you, Marushka . . ."

Marina looked down at her work and said nothing. But when she met her nurse's narrowed eyes, her face was pale as water, so that Dunya fancied she could see the blood creeping down her throat. Dunya felt a chill. "Child, what have you seen?"

"It doesn't matter," said Marina.

"Get rid of it," said Dunya, almost pleading.

"Dunya, I must have this one; she will be like my mother."

"Your mother! The ragged maiden who rode alone out of the forest? Who faded to a dim shadow of herself because she could not bear to live her life behind Byzantine screens? Have you forgotten that gray crone she became? Stumbling veiled to church? Hiding in her rooms, eating until she was round and greasy with her eyes all blank? Your mother. Would you wish that on any child of yours?"

Dunya's voice creaked like a calling raven, for she remembered, to her grief, the girl who had come to Ivan Kalita's halls, lost and frail and achingly beautiful, trailing miracles behind her. Ivan was besotted. The princess—well, perhaps she had found peace with him, at least for a little. But they housed her in the women's quarters, dressed her in heavy brocades, gave her icons and servants and rich meats. Little by little that fiery glow, the light to take one's breath, had faded. Dunya had mourned her passing long before they put her in the ground.

Marina smiled bitterly and shook her head. "No. But remember before? You used to tell me stories."

"A lot of good magic or miracles did her," growled Dunya.

"I have only a little of her gift," Marina went on, ignoring her old nurse. Dunya knew her lady well enough to hear the regret. "But my daughter will have more."

"And that is reason enough to leave the other four motherless?"

Marina looked at her lap. "I—no. Yes. If need be." Her voice was

barely audible. "But I might live." She raised her head. "You will give me your word to care for them, will you not?"

"Marushka, I am old. I can give my promise, but when I die . . ."

"They will be all right. They—they will have to be. Dunya, I cannot see the future, but I will live to see her born."

Dunya crossed herself and said no more.

THE MOTHERS

A NOVEL

BRIT BENNETT

ONE

We didn't believe when we first heard because you know how church folk can gossip.

Like the time we all thought First John, our head usher, was messing around on his wife because Betty, the pastor's secretary, caught him cozying up at brunch with another woman. A young, fashionable woman at that, one who switched her hips when she walked even though she had no business switching anything in front of a man married forty years. You could forgive a man for stepping out on his wife once, but to romance that young woman over buttered croissants at a sidewalk café? Now that was a whole other thing. But before we could correct First John, he showed up at Upper Room Chapel that Sunday with his wife and the young, hip-switching woman—a great-niece visiting from Fort Worth—and that was that.

When we first heard, we thought it might be that type of secret, although, we have to admit, it had felt different. Tasted different, too.

All good secrets have a taste before you tell them, and if we'd taken a moment to swish this one around our mouths, we might have noticed the sourness of an unripe secret, plucked too soon, stolen and passed around before its season. But we didn't. We shared this sour secret, a secret that began the summer Nadia Turner got knocked up by the pastor's son and went to the abortion clinic downtown to take care of it.

She was seventeen then. She lived with her father, a Marine, and without her mother, who had killed herself six months earlier. Since then, the girl had earned a wild reputation—she was young and scared and trying to hide her scared in her prettiness. And she was pretty, beautiful even, with amber skin, silky long hair, and eyes swirled brown and gray and gold. Like most girls, she'd already learned that pretty exposes you and pretty hides you and like most girls, she hadn't yet learned how to navigate the difference. So we heard all about her sojourns across the border to dance clubs in Tijuana, the water bottle she carried around Oceanside High filled with vodka, the Saturdays she spent on base playing pool with Marines, nights that ended with her heels pressed against some man's foggy window. Just tales, maybe, except for one we now know is true: she spent her senior year of high school rolling around in bed with Luke Sheppard and come springtime, his baby was growing inside her.

Luke Sheppard waited tables at Fat Charlie's Seafood Shack, a restaurant off the pier known for its fresh food, live music, and family-friendly atmosphere. At least that's what the ad in the *San Diego Union-Tribune* said, if you were fool enough to believe it. If you'd been around Oceanside long enough, you'd know that the

promised fresh food was day-old fish and chips stewing under heat lamps, and the live music, when delivered, usually consisted of ragtag teenagers in ripped jeans with safety pins poking through their lips. Nadia Turner also knew things about Fat Charlie's that didn't fit on a newspaper ad, like the fact that a platter of Charlie's Cheesy Nachos was the perfect drunk snack or that the head cook sold the best weed north of the border. She knew that inside, yellow life preservers hung above the bar and kelp, dark and crispy, dripped from the ceiling, so after long shifts, the three black waiters called it a slave ship. She knew secret things about Fat Charlie's because Luke had told her.

"What about the fish sticks?" she would ask.

"Soggy as shit."

"The seafood pasta?"

"Don't fuck with that."

"What could be so bad about pasta?"

"You know how they make that shit? Take some fish that's been sitting around and stuff it in ravioli."

"Fine, the bread then."

"If you don't finish your bread, we just give it to another table. You about to touch the same bread as some dude that's been digging in his nuts all day."

The winter her mother killed herself, Luke saved Nadia from ordering the crab bites. (Imitation crab deep-fried in lard.) She'd begun disappearing after school, riding buses and hopping off wherever they took her. Sometimes she rode east to Camp Pendleton, where she watched a movie or bowled at Stars and Strikes or played pool with Marines. The young ones were the loneliest, so she always found a pack of privates, awkward with their shorn heads and big boots, and by

the end of the night, she usually ended up kissing one of them until kissing made her feel like crying. Other days she rode north, past Upper Room Chapel, where the coast became frontier. South, and she hit more beach, better beaches, beaches with sand as white as the people who lay on it, beaches with boardwalks and roller coasters, beaches behind gates. She couldn't ride west. West was the ocean.

She rode buses away from her old life, where after school, she'd lingered with her friends in the parking lot before driver's ed or climbed the bleachers to watch the football team practice or caravanned to In-N-Out. She'd goofed around at Jojo's Juicery with her coworkers and danced at bonfires and climbed the jetty when dared because she always pretended to be unafraid. She was startled by how rarely she had been alone back then. Her days felt like being handed from person to person like a baton, her calculus teacher passing her to her Spanish teacher to her chemistry teacher to her friends and back home to her parents. Then one day, her mother's hand was gone and she'd fallen, clattering to the floor.

She couldn't stand to be around anyone now—her teachers, who excused her late work with patient smiles; her friends, who stopped joking when she sat down at lunch, as if their happiness were offensive to her. In AP Government, when Mr. Thomas assigned partner work, her friends quickly paired off with each other, and she was left to work with the other quiet, friendless girl in the class: Aubrey Evans, who skirted off to Christian Club meetings at lunch, not to pad her college resume (she hadn't raised her hand when Mr. Thomas asked who had turned in applications) but because she thought God cared if she spent her free period inside a classroom planning canned food drives. Aubrey Evans, who wore a plain gold purity ring that she twisted around her finger when she talked, who always attended

service at Upper Room by herself, probably the poor holy child of devout atheists who was working hard to lead them into the light. After their first time working together, Aubrey had leaned closer to her, dropping her voice.

"I just wanted to say I'm sorry," she said. "We've all been praying for you."

She seemed sincere, but what did that matter? Nadia hadn't been to church since her mother's funeral. Instead, she rode buses. One afternoon, she climbed off downtown in front of the Hanky Panky. She was certain someone would stop her—she even looked like a kid with her backpack—but the bouncer perched on a stool near the door barely glanced up from his phone when she ducked inside. At three on a Tuesday, the strip club was dead, empty silver tables dulled under the stage lights. Black shades pulled in front of the windows blocked the plastic sunlight; in the man-made darkness, fat white men with baseball caps pulled low slouched in chairs facing the stage. Under the spotlight, a flabby white girl danced, her breasts swinging like pendulums.

In the darkness of the club, you could be alone with your grief. Her father had flung himself into Upper Room. He went to both services on Sunday mornings, to Wednesday night Bible study, to Thursday night choir practice although he did not sing, although practices were closed but nobody had the heart to turn him away. Her father propped his sadness on a pew, but she put her sad in places no one could see. The bartender shrugged at her fake ID and mixed her a drink and she sat in dark corners, sipping rum-and-Cokes and watching women with beat bodies spin onstage. Never the skinny, young girls—the club saved them for weekends or nights—just older women thinking about grocery lists and child care, their bodies

stretched and pitted from age. Her mother would've been horrified at the thought—her in a strip club, in the light of day—but Nadia stayed, sipping the watery drinks slowly. Her third time in the club, an old black man pulled up a chair beside her. He wore a red plaid shirt under suspenders, gray tufts peeking out from under his Pacific Coast Bait & Tackle cap.

"What you drinkin'?" he asked.

"What're *you* drinking?" she said.

He laughed. "Naw. This a grown man drink. Not for a little thing like you. I'll get you somethin' sweet. You like that, honey? You look like you got a sweet tooth."

He smiled and slid a hand onto her thigh. His fingernails curled dark and long against her jeans. Before she could move, a black woman in her forties wearing a glittery magenta bra and thong appeared at the table. Light brown streaked across her stomach like tiger stripes.

"You leave her be, Lester," the woman said. Then to Nadia. "Come on, I'll freshen you up."

"Aw, Cici, I was just talkin' to her," the old man said.

"Please," Cici said. "That child ain't even as old as your watch."

She led Nadia back to the bar and tossed what was left of her drink down the drain. Then she slipped into a white coat and beckoned for Nadia to follow her outside. Against the slate gray sky, the flat outline of the Hanky Panky seemed even more depressing. Further along the building, two white girls were smoking and they each threw up a hand when Cici and Nadia stepped outside. Cici returned the lazy greeting and lit a cigarette.

"You got a nice face," Cici said. "Those your real eyes? You mixed?"

"No," she said. "I mean, they're my eyes but I'm not mixed."

"Look mixed to me." Cici blew a sideways stream of smoke. "You

a runaway? Oh, don't look at me like that. I won't report you. I see you girls come through here all the time, looking to make a little money. Ain't legal but Bernie don't mind. Bernie'll give you a little stage time, see what you can do. Don't expect no warm welcome though. Hard enough fighting those blonde bitches for tips—wait till the girls see your light-bright ass."

"I don't want to dance," Nadia said.

"Well, I don't know what you're looking for but you ain't gonna find it here." Cici leaned in closer. "You know you got see-through eyes? Feels like I can see right through them. Nothin' but sad on the other side." She dug into her pocket and pulled out a handful of crumpled ones. "This ain't no place for you. Go on down to Fat Charlie's and get you something to eat. Go on."

Nadia hesitated, but Cici dropped the bills into Nadia's palm and curled her fingers into a fist. Maybe she could do this, pretend she was a runaway, or maybe in a way, she was. Her father never asked where she'd been. She returned home at night and found him in his recliner, watching television in a darkened living room. He always looked surprised when she unlocked the front door, like he hadn't even noticed that she'd been gone.

In Fat Charlie's, Nadia had been sitting in the booth toward the back, flipping through a menu, when Luke Sheppard stepped out of the kitchen, white apron slung across his hips, black Fat Charlie's T-shirt stretched across his muscular chest. He looked as handsome as she'd remembered from Sunday School, except he was a man now, bronzed and broad-shouldered, his hard jaw covered in stubble. And he was limping now, slightly favoring his left leg, but the gimpiness

of his walk, its uneven pace and tenderness, only made her want him more. Her mother had died a month ago and she was drawn to anyone who wore their pain outwardly, the way she couldn't. She hadn't even cried at the funeral. At the repast, a parade of guests had told her how well she'd done and her father placed an arm around her shoulder. He'd hunched over the pew during the service, his shoulders quietly shaking, manly crying but crying still, and for the first time, she'd wondered if she might be stronger than him.

An inside hurt was supposed to stay inside. How strange it must be to hurt in an outside way you couldn't hide. She played with the menu flap as Luke limped his way over to her booth. She, and everyone at Upper Room, had watched his promising junior season end last fall. A routine kick return, a bad tackle, and his leg broke, the bone cutting clear through the skin. The commentators had said he'd be lucky if he walked normal again, let alone played another down, so no one had been surprised when San Diego State pulled his scholarship. But she hadn't seen Luke since he'd gotten out of the hospital. In her mind, he was still in a cot, surrounded by doting nurses, his bandaged leg propped toward the ceiling.

"What're you doing here?" she asked.

"I work here," he said, then laughed, but his laugh sounded hard, like a chair suddenly scraped against the floor. "How you been?"

He didn't look at her, shuffling through his notepad, so she knew he'd heard about her mother.

"I'm hungry," she said.

"That's how you been? Hungry?"

"Can I get the crab bites?"

"You better not." He guided her finger down the laminated menu to the nachos. "There. Try that."

His hand curved soft over hers like he was teaching her to read, moving her finger under unfamiliar words. He always made her feel impossibly young, like two days later, when she returned to his section and tried to order a margarita. He laughed, tilting her fake ID toward him.

"Come on," he said. "Aren't you, like, twelve?"

She narrowed her eyes. "Oh fuck you," she said, "I'm seventeen."

But she'd said it a little too proudly and Luke laughed again. Even eighteen—which she wouldn't turn until late August—would seem young to him. She was still in high school. He was twenty-one and had already gone to college, a real university, not the community college where everyone loafed around a few months after graduation before finding jobs. She had applied to five universities and while she waited to hear back, she asked Luke questions about college life, like were dorm showers as gross as she imagined or did people actually stick socks on door handles when they wanted privacy? He told her about undie runs and foam parties, how to maximize your meal plan, how to get extra time on tests by pretending you had a learning problem. He knew things and he knew girls, college girls, girls who wore high heels to class, not sneakers, and carried satchels instead of backpacks, and spent their summers interning at Qualcomm or California Bank & Trust, not making juice at the pier. She imagined herself in college, one of those sophisticated girls, Luke driving to see her, or if she went out of state, flying to visit her over spring break. He would laugh if he knew how she imagined him in her life. He teased her often, like when she began doing her homework in Fat Charlie's.

"Shit," he said, flipping through her calculus book. "You a nerd."

She wasn't, really, but learning came easily to her. (Her mother used to tease her about that—must be nice, she'd say, when Nadia

brought home an aced test she only studied for the night before.) She thought her advanced classes might scare Luke off, but he liked that she was smart. See this girl right here, he'd tell a passing waiter, first black lady president, just watch. Every black girl who was even slightly gifted was told this. But she liked listening to Luke brag and she liked it even more when he teased her for studying. He didn't treat her like everyone at school, who either sidestepped her or spoke to her like she was some fragile thing one harsh word away from breaking.

One February night, Luke drove her home and she invited him inside. Her father was gone for the weekend at the Men's Advance, so the house was dark and silent when they arrived. She wanted to offer Luke a drink—that's what women did in the movies, handed a man a boxy glass, filled with something dark and masculine—but moonlight glinted off glass cabinets emptied of liquor and Luke pressed her against the wall and kissed her. She hadn't told him it was her first time but he knew. In her bed, he asked three times if she wanted to stop. Each time she told him no. Sex would hurt and she wanted it to. She wanted Luke to be her outside hurt.

By spring, she knew what time Luke got off work, when to meet him in the deserted corner of the parking lot, where two people could be alone. She knew which nights he had off, nights she listened for his car crawling up her street and tiptoed past her father's shut bedroom. She knew the days he went to work late, days she slipped him inside the house before her father came home from work. How Luke wore his Fat Charlie's T-shirt a size too small because it helped him earn more tips. How when he dropped to the edge of her bed without saying much, he was dreading a long shift so she didn't say much either, tugging his too-tight shirt over his head and running her hands over the expanse of his shoulders. She knew that being on his

feet all day hurt his leg more than he ever admitted and sometimes, while he slept, she stared at the thin scar climbing toward his knee. Bones, like anything else, strong until they weren't.

She also knew that Fat Charlie's was dead between lunch and happy hour, so after her pregnancy test returned positive, she rode the bus over to tell Luke.

NINTH CITY BURNING

J. PATRICK BLACK

PART ONE

MULTIPLICATION OF IMPOSSIBILITIES

ONE

JAX

We're only a few minutes into our quiz when the sirens start, and the first thing I feel is relief, even though I know that's totally wrong, totally not how I should feel. I can still remember the panic, the terror that used to come over me when I heard the atmospheric-incursion siren, the signal that our city is under attack. And I know that's how all the kids around me must be feeling this very second. But it's different for me now. Once the first shock of the wailing siren passes, it's true I'm afraid, too, but it isn't the same kind of fear I used to feel. It's more like fear of letting everyone down, and even that's not so bad yet, though I know it's going to get worse. But for a moment, just a moment, there was that relief because I'm totally not prepared for this quiz, which I know is crazy because what kind of person is like, *Oh great, I won't have to take a quiz because everybody is going to die.*

I'm not a bad student, really. Even in biology, which is the subject of this quiz, which is about photosynthesis, which is how plants turn sunlight into energy. The trouble is, whenever I sit down to study, I end up picking up the Academy Handbook. It isn't a long book, but each time I finish I just flip back to the beginning, like maybe if I read it one more time, I'll find the answer I need. Like maybe I just missed it the other hundred million times. But even though the Handbook has all the rules for life at the Academy, it doesn't tell me the one thing I really need to know. Oh, and there's nothing about photosynthesis, either.

"Pencils down, Cadets." That's Danyee, our rhetor. Everyone in Sixth Class Section E has her for biology, physics, and irrational mechanics. She had been pacing the rows of desks, looking over our shoulders one by one, but at the sound of the siren, she walked to the front of the room. "In line

by the door, please," she says, her voice calm, almost cheerful, like this is just another lesson.

All around, there is the sound of chairs creaking from beneath desks. Near the back of the room, a girl gives a little squeal of panic: Her pencil is still scribbling away. She smacks it down like someone swatting a fly, then glances up to see if anyone's noticed. We all have, including Rhetor Danyee, who takes the girl by the hand and leads her to the line of cadets forming by the door. Using an artificed pencil during any kind of test is totally against the rules, as anyone who'd even picked up the Academy Handbook would know. On a normal day, this girl would be in for some big-time trouble, but not today. Rhetor Danyee, who is usually pretty tough, gives the girl's hand a reassuring squeeze before ushering her into line. If they're still alive tomorrow, they can talk about punishment then.

I'm cadet 6-E-12, meaning Sixth Class Section E Seat Twelve, so I take my place twelfth from the door. As I walk down the line, I can feel the other cadets watching me—not staring because you're supposed to be face forward when you're in formation, but from the corners of their eyes. My uniform is the same gray as any other cadet's, and on my collar I have the same six black pips as everyone in Sixth Class, but there isn't a person in this city who would mistake me for a normal kid. The symbol I wear at my neck, a golden circle with a second circle inside, is just a reminder. During school hours, everyone is expected to pretend like I'm just another student at the Academy, but that's all they can really do: pretend.

Over the past few months, I've gotten used to everyone's looking at me differently, gotten used to setting off whispers everywhere I go. It isn't like people are mean to me. If anything, they're extra, extra nice. Actual officers will stop and salute me, or congratulate me, or ask to shake my hand. I've made a lot of friends since starting at the School of Rhetoric, and my friends from before are still my friends. The kids in Section E seem proud to have me, usually. But not today. Today, things are different. Today, everyone's nervous. They know that in a little while, their lives could depend on me.

Of all the eleven- and twelve-year-olds who came back from Sequester, I'm the only one who turned out to be fontani, and as the youngest fontanus in the city, it's my job to stand for all of us during an attack. The last line of defense. In ten minutes, all of Ninth City could be gone, and I will have to fight, to protect whoever is left. And that's the look the other cadets

are giving me now: They're wondering if they can trust me with their lives, this kid with his long nose and curly dirt-brown hair, who's somehow skinny and a little pudgy at the same time, who's in the bottom half of his class in chin-ups and push-ups, and don't even ask about the five-kilometer run. Who's never been really, really good at anything. They're seeing the same Jax they've known for twelve years, only now I'm somehow supposed to protect them from complete destruction. Even Rhetor Danyee seems tense. I don't blame them: I wish they didn't have to depend on me, either.

When all the cadets of Section E are in line, Danyee opens the door, and we file out of the classroom, forming two columns of ten, everyone moving smoothly in time. Each of us has been doing atmospheric-incursion drills practically since we learned to walk. As a section, our best time is classroom to shelter in three minutes and forty-two seconds. It's all so familiar, I almost forget this is the real thing. But only almost.

The hall of East Wing is filled with sections just like ours, kids walking calmly two by two with a rhetor at the front. The rhetors stand out by their black legionary's uniforms and because they're older, most around twenty years old, like Danyee. Some of the rhetors for the upper classes are even older than that, but not for the Dodos, which is the general Academy term for sixth-classers. The rumor is that rhetors aren't allowed to teach the younger kids anymore once they've been on their first tour.

No one speaks or looks anywhere but straight ahead; the only sound is the rhythmic clacking of our Academy dress shoes and the wail of the attack siren. The siren is an artifice, designed so that it's nearly impossible to ignore, a sound that seems to come right out of the air, like water gathering on the side of a glass. I wonder sometimes whether it could be an actual wail—like someone really screaming. That's how artifices are: No matter how precisely they're designed, you can never really be sure what they'll do.

We follow the flow of cadets down the wide stone stairway of East Wing as far as the ground floor, but where everyone else continues on to the lower levels, Danyee leads us to the main foyer. She brings us to a halt in front of the tall stone arch, like the threshold of a huge door but blocked with a massive slab of white stone, its translucent surface faintly glowing with the light outside. "Section E adjutant," she says, turning to face us. "Report."

Elessa leaves her place in the column to stand up front. "Cadet Adjutant

Elessa reporting, ma'am," she says. "Sixth Class Section E all present and in good condition." On our first day at the School of Rhetoric, when Danyee told us to elect a section adjutant, everyone was sure it would be Bomar. On the School's entrance evaluations, Bomar scored higher than anyone in our section in leadership. "Ninety-seventh percentile," he would say about ten times a day, just in case anyone forgot. Bomar decided his high score meant anything he wanted to do was automatically good leadership; at lunch, he liked to order people to give him their dessert rations "for the good of the section." Elessa was the first one to say what we all already knew: that school would be miserable with Bomar as adjutant. After that, the choice was obvious. Elessa is smart and organized, and she can do an insane number of chin-ups. When the vote came in, she won 19–1. Elessa always seems to know what to do—she would have made a good fontana, I bet. Instead, Ninth City got me.

"Section E is yours," Danyee tells Elessa. "Take your cadets to East Wing Shelter and report to your Centurio Aspirant."

"Yes, ma'am." Elessa turns on her heel to face us. "Cadets, with me," she says, and sets off. The other cadets of Section E follow, until only I am left.

Danyee gives me a small nod and an even smaller smile, then approaches the arch with its huge wall of stone. As she does, a dark shape appears in the white surface: the outline of a man, like the shadow of someone standing on the other side. It holds up one arm, waving at us to stop, and a voice comes out of the wall. "An atmospheric-incursion alert is in effect," it says, deep and booming and sort of echoing in the same way as the siren still wailing through the air. "The Academy of Ninth City is closed until further notice. All personnel are to report to their designated shelters. This is not a drill."

The voice pauses a moment, then begins its message again, but stops when Danyee places her palm against the white stone. "Rhetor Danyee of the Academy," she says, "escorting Fontanus Jaxten to the Forum."

The voice stops, then, after a moment, it says, "Pass."

All at once, the wall of white vanishes like clearing mist, and we're looking out onto a courtyard of stone paths and wide lawns, empty and bright beneath a cloudy sky. The door reappears behind us as soon as we're outside; I don't hear it happen, but when I look back, it's there.

Danyee has taken a small metal disk from her pocket. It's a storage device, I know, made to hold artifices, and given to her for the sole purpose

of bringing me to the Forum during an attack. I could get there just as fast by myself, but the Academy can be very strict—and sometimes kind of unreasonable—when it comes to what cadets are and aren't allowed to do on their own. I actually kind of like it better this way.

"Ready, Cadet?" Danyee asks.

I think she might actually be nervous, but I can't tell for sure. "Ready, ma'am," I say.

Danyee passes two fingers over the surface of the disk, and suddenly everything is a blur, the ground rushing beneath us like wind, walkways and stairways and hallways whirling around us with the speed of a cyclone.

When the world settles back again, Danyee and I are standing in front of another stone archway, easily twice as tall as the last one, opening onto a wide stone plaza. I feel Danyee's hand settle onto my shoulder. We pass beneath the arch, and she steps back and salutes. "This is as far as I go, sir," she says. This whole procedure is in my Handbook, part of a special appendix added just for me. It always feels weird when adults address me as "sir," but now that we're off Academy grounds, I outrank Danyee by quite a bit.

"Yes, ma'am," I say, returning her salute. "I'll take it from here."

But instead of leaving, Danyee kneels and hugs me hard. "Good luck, sir," she whispers. "We're all rooting for you."

The hug takes me completely by surprise. Nowhere in the Handbook—not even in the special appendix—does it mention hugging, let alone hugging a superior officer. As far as I know, hugging is completely nonregulation. I mumble something that sounds like, "Thanks," and Danyee lets me go, smiling sadly. She salutes once more, then she's gone in a gust of wind.

TWO

JAX

It's only then that I hear the quiet. The siren is silenced here, and the Forum, usually so crowded you can hardly breathe, is completely empty. The stone plaza seems to go on forever, the huge buildings bordering each side like distant mountains on the horizon.

I take a long breath, close my eyes, and for a moment the gray light of the Forum is gone, and I'm standing in a field of green grass under a clear blue sky. The sun is warm on my face, the air fresh. Distantly, I can hear people cheering—they might even be chanting my name. If I have to fight, this is where I'll do it.

Feeling a bit more confident, I open my eyes and make for the monstrous fountain in the center of the plaza. The first assignment any cadet gets at the School of Rhetoric is writing an essay about this fountain and how it represents the history and ideals of our city. The fountain has five levels, all swirling with people carrying swords and rifles and flags, some of them supposed to be real historical people, some whole groups of people, some abstract things like Honor and Duty and Courage, who stand out because they're usually not wearing clothes. The essay has become sort of a joke at the Academy because the rhetors basically just tell you what to write. The fountain's official name is the Font of the Principate, but most people just call it Old Fife.

Molded into one edge of the fountain is a gigantic chair, known as Macduff among Academy cadets, who spend a lot of time trying to fit as many people as possible onto it at once. The most I've ever seen was twenty-five, kids all stacked on each other's shoulders into this teetering tower. But the real name is the Seat of the Champion. "Champion" is an old title, from before the Legion started, but it still has symbolic meaning, which I guess

is what the fountain is all about. And, at least for now, the Champion of Ninth City is me.

I'm able to stay on the Seat of the Champion for about ten seconds before I start to completely freak out. At first, it's not so bad. The stone is cold and a little damp from one of the sprinkling showers that have been passing over the city, but I don't mind. I lean back, looking up at the sky, then I hear Bomar saying, "I can't believe that kid Jax ended up being the one. Out of everybody. He can barely finish a five-K, and we're supposed to trust him to defend the city? It's like a sick joke."

It was our first day at Rhetoric. I'd been just outside the door to the classroom when I heard people talking inside. What Bomar said didn't surprise me—he hadn't really been keeping his opinion a secret. The surprise was what happened next.

"Shut up, Bomar. You're just jealous." That was Elessa. She isn't an overly nice person, but she's fair, and I was glad we'd elected her section adjutant. But then she said, "And anyway, it won't really be Jax. Fontani have another personality or something that does the fighting."

"It's gotta be some tough personality *or something* to make up for Jax," Bomar said. "Otherwise, we might as well just kill ourselves now, save Romeo the trouble."

Elessa didn't disagree. Other voices joined in, and I realized most of the section was in there. No one wanted me fighting for them.

I think of Danyee hugging me and saying, "We're all rooting for you." I bet she wishes she had someone else instead, though. I know I do.

The Academy Handbook talks a lot about courage. It says it's OK to be afraid, that fear is just part of bravery. It says you'll know what to do when the time comes, you just have to trust your training. But it doesn't tell you what to do while you're waiting, alone under an open sky, sure everyone you've ever met is going to die because you're not strong enough to save them.

When the people at Sequester told me I might be fontani, I was sure there'd been a mistake somewhere. Fontani are supposed to be the best of the best, and I'm about as close to average as you can get. But they were right. I thought I'd feel different after I shaded that first time, like maybe I'd just *know* what to do, but I didn't, and I still don't. At night sometimes when I can't sleep, I'll get up and look at myself in the mirror, to see if there's any proof I've really changed, but it's always the same me.

All of a sudden, it's like I can't breathe, like the air has turned to rock. My heart feels like it's rolling full speed down a hill, bumping all the way, and I get the serious feeling that I'm about to throw up.

I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and try to summon up that big green sunny field the way Charles, my special-sessions instructor, taught me. I see the grass spreading out all around, but this time there's no sun anywhere. The sky is deep gray, almost black, and it's raining balls of slush like icy spit. The grass begins to wilt and turn brown, and suddenly there are bare patches everywhere, and I'm sinking into the cold mud, first to my ankles, then my knees . . .

I snap my eyes open and scramble off the fountain, determined not to leave a pile of throwup beneath the Seat of the Champion. Once I'm up and sure I'm back in Ninth City, I feel a bit better but still not good. I hobble around the edge of the Forum, totally out of breath, passing the buildings that make up the four sides of the plaza one by one: the Academy, the Basilica of the Legion, the Praetorium, the Hall of the Principate.

I'm on my third lap and still feeling like I'm three Ks into the worst five-K of all time when I hear something strange echoing down one of the tall passageways that run through the Hall of the Principate—pretty much the most unlikely sound in the world: laughter. Not even thinking about why, I follow the sound through the passage to the opposite side of the building, out onto a wide terrace. Ninth City spreads out below, Old Town, with its spiraling streets, the serious-looking stone towers of the newer districts, the battle spires rising like claws, and the hulking City Guns—huge cannons the size of buildings, some over two hundred meters tall. Charles calls them "literal skyscrapers."

At first I think the laughter must have been some trick of the wind, then I see them: legionaries, three of them, two men and a woman. For a couple of seconds, I just stare, trying to figure out what they're doing here. They should be at their posts, getting ready to fight. And then I see the insignia on their collars, the peaked symbol marking them as Officers Aspirant from the School of Philosophy. They're younger than I thought, maybe around Rhetor Danyee's age, which I guess makes sense because she's an OA, too. But that still doesn't explain why they're *here*.

"You're supposed to be at the shelters." I just blurt it out. All three turn to look at me, clearly taken by surprise.

The first to recover himself is one of the boys, the tallest of the three,

lanky, with dark skin and a lean, handsome face. He has dark hair, longer than male cadets usually choose to wear it. "Well, look who it is," he says, showing off an easy smile. "Fontanus Jaxten. Seat of the Champion a little soggy for you?"

"You were supposed to go to the shelters," I repeat, sounding idiotic. It's only after I've opened my mouth that I think how close he was to the truth.

The other boy is tall, too, and kind of bronze-colored all over, with muscles that seem to bulge straight through his uniform. "Jaxten, really?" he asks, adjusting a pair of silver-rimmed glasses like he's trying to bring me into focus. "Fantastic. Get over here, champ. Have a drink with us."

I notice the little silver cup each is holding, and the pair of glass bottles, both mostly full of a pale amber liquid, on the stone by their feet. "Is that Fizz?" Fizz is a drink cadets make using aquavee and flavor packets. The Handbook says it's sometimes called Gurgle or Foamy, and lists it as a Category Four Restricted Substance.

"Now, let's remember our manners," says the first boy. "I think we ought to introduce ourselves to young Jaxten before we go offering him any Category Four Restricted Substances."

"I know who you are," I say, because I do. "You're Vinneas. And you"—I turn to the other boy—"you're Imway." Imway looks surprised and impressed, but Vinneas only grins as if I've just given the correct answer to a math problem. "You're in the Handbook," I explain, "in the section for Executive OAs."

Vinneas is Procurator of the Academy, which is like the rhetor of all rhetors, basically in charge of every cadet here. Imway is the top-ranked OA in the Equites Aspirant, the most elite fighting unit at the Academy. Every cadet in Ninth City knows these two.

"Sounds like we're famous, Way," Vinneas says, still grinning. "The Handbook! It doesn't get much better than that."

The girl, meanwhile, is watching me with something between impatience and sarcasm. She's a lot smaller than the other two, with bright blue eyes, wavy black hair pinned up at odd angles, and a way-more-than-regulation number of earrings. "Um," I say, squirming a bit under her gaze, "I don't know who you are."

Imway and Vinneas start laughing, like this is the funniest thing they've ever heard.

"Now that you mention it," Imway says between laughs, "I don't recognize her, either—Vinneas, who is this girl?"

"I don't know—I thought you invited her!"

The girl watches them with obvious annoyance. "Nice to meet you," she says to me. "I'm Kizabel, but my friends call me Kiz." She glances at the boys, now leaning on one another like they're about to fall over laughing. "None of them are here right now."

"Aw, Kiz, we didn't mean it," Vinneas says, wrapping an arm playfully around her. "I'll have you know, Jaxten, that our girl here has a vast number of remarkable talents." Imway snorts at this; Kizabel tries to kick him, but Vinneas holds her back.

"For example," he says pointedly, "she is undoubtedly the most sought-after artifex at the Academy, arguably in the entire city. I'll bet you've used some of her artifices without even knowing it. A lot of philosophers around here would kill to work with her."

"If only she didn't keep failing her general exams," Imway concludes, still smirking. Something metallic bounces off his arm, and I see Kizabel has thrown her cup at him. She's trying to pull herself loose from Vinneas, snarling like she's going to rip Imway's head off.

"Did you finish that already?" Imway says, picking up the cup and examining it. "I'm not giving this back, you know. You're too much of an angry drunk."

"I'm not drunk, you stupid oaf," Kiz growls. She jabs Vinneas in the ribs, making him loosen his grip, then ducks past him and charges straight at Imway. It doesn't seem like a very good plan. He's twice her size at least, and he holds her off with one arm, not flinching even when she starts punching and kicking him and calling him things that would have gotten her a whole lot of disciplinary work hours if any of her supervising officers were here.

"Pay attention, Jaxten," Vinneas says, rubbing his side but grinning, too. "This is how grown-ups settle their differences."

"Shut up, Vinn," Kizabel yells. "You're next!"

Vinneas raises his hands in surrender. "Forget I said anything." While Kizabel goes on punching Imway, Vinneas leans toward me and kind of half whispers, "Kizabel's sense of honor demands a token show of force. Nothing to worry about so long as nobody breaks into their repertoire of artifices."

Just then there's a kind of buzzing-popping sound, and Imway's glasses go flying into the air. He stumbles back, blinking and looking between Kizabel and his glasses, which have landed at the other end of the balcony. "Oh, so it's going to be like that, is it?" he says.

Kizabel is taking off her earrings and putting them in her pocket. "Yup."

"Now's about when we might want to take cover," Vinneas says.

"You have to get to the shelters!" I shout. I'd actually almost forgotten where I was until Vinneas mentioned taking cover. We're in the middle of an attack. "If the city is hit—"

"We're not worried," Imway says casually. I'd looked away from him and Kizabel for maybe half a second when I thought about the shelters, and now he's somehow gotten her in a headlock. Her face is bright red from trying to squeeze out, but Imway is acting like there's nothing strange going on. "We've got you to protect us, right, champ? Nothing's getting past Fontanus Jaxten. You're gonna—"

"Will you *shut up*?" Kizabel breaks in. Even though she's been yelling at Imway pretty much since I got here, this is the first time she's sounded really, actually mad. Imway lets go of her immediately, and she stands up, using her fingers to comb back her hair, which is pretty messed up from the headlock. "Come on. Look at the kid."

That sick, airless feeling is back, and I feel hot, sort of quivery, like my legs are going to melt. It shouldn't be me out here. The Seat of the Champion is made for people like Imway and Vinneas, and Kizabel, too, people who are smart and brave and amazing. Not some random kid.

"Hey, Jaxten," Kizabel says, coming over to me. "It's OK."

I'm afraid I'll start crying, which in front of these three would be even worse than throwing up.

"We're all scared," Kizabel is saying. "That's why we're up here."

"Definitely," Imway agrees.

"I don't get it," I say, shaking my head. Is it that, with me as Champion, they're so sure they're going to die that they might as well not bother with the shelters—save Romeo the trouble, like Bomar said?

"If the city is hit, it won't matter whether we're in the shelters or not," Vinneas says.

"What do you mean?" I look up at him, confused, but all he does is calmly finish his drink.

"Vinn." There's a warning in Kizabel's voice.

"He's been told he has to protect the city, Kiz. He should at least know what he's defending." He looks at me. "What do you think, Jax? Can I call you Jax?"

I'm not sure how to answer, but I say, "OK."

"Excellent," he says, setting down his cup. "So here's the thing, Jax. Those shelters were built a long time ago, before we knew quite what kind of firepower Romeo had at his disposal. As it turns out, nothing we can build would be strong enough to survive what he's throwing at us. Down there, up here, we're all cooked either way. Except for you, of course," he adds with a grin. "You're about the most indestructible thing this side of a black hole."

"But if that's true, why—"

"Why stick you in the Forum, when you could be off with the rest of the defense force?" he says. "To keep the city running, mostly, and the City Guns firing. After you, those guns are our best chance of coming out of this with all our atoms still attached. And I suppose it doesn't hurt to let people imagine they're safe. The prospect of imminent certain death can have a soggying effect on morale."

For some reason, hearing this makes me feel better. I don't know why. I mean, it's awful if all those people think they're safe when they're not. But if they do die, at least it won't be because I did something wrong. "But how do you know?" I ask. "About the shelters, I mean."

"One of the drawbacks to being good with numbers," Vinneas says.

"One of the drawbacks to having friends who are good with numbers," Imway adds, giving Kiz a light shove that still almost knocks her over.

"We're not the only ones, of course," Kizabel says, after shoving Imway back, then kicking him in the shins. "All the city officials know, more or less."

"And now you." Vinneas leans over the railing. "The three of us figure no one needs us at the shelters, and anyway, we all work in different parts of the city, so it's pretty unlikely we'd end up in the same place during an attack. We decided we'd rather be together."

"And since there's no one around," Imway says, refilling his and Vinneas's cups, "we thought we'd make a little party of it."

"The view from here definitely beats the shelters, too," Kizabel adds. "Those places creep me out."

"What my friend here means to say is that in confined spaces, people are more likely to notice you're drunk," Imway clarifies.

"I am not *drunk*!" Kizabel snarls, punching him with each word.

"Beats the Seat of the Champion, too," I say, because it's true.

"I can't believe they make you just sit there by yourself and wait." Kizabel sounds really disgusted at the idea.

"It's tradition. It's in the Handbook."

"Oh, right, the *Handbook*. The sum of all the world's truth and knowledge."

"Sure is." Imway laughs, raising his cup so he and Vinneas can toast.

Kizabel ignores them. "Let's make this the new tradition. Anytime that siren goes off, you meet us here. We'll even bring something for you that isn't a Category Four Restricted Substance."

"I always said Kiz comes up without our best ideas," Vinneas says. "What about it, Jax?"

"OK," I say. "It's a deal." And it's strange, but for the first time since the attack began, I feel like I really could fight.

Eventually, Kizabel convinces Imway to return her cup. They offer me a drink, too, but I don't take it—I've never had aquavee before, and I'm not sure what it'll do to me. If I do have to meet Romeo today, I want to make him pay. For a while we're all quiet, looking out over Ninth City, weirdly peaceful in the gray light. It's always pretty impressive, especially when you're way up in the Forum, with the tall stone buildings spreading out below, but I'd never really thought of it as beautiful until now. The air is warm but clear, washed clean from the rain, with little wisps of mist floating past, and with the whole city silent like this, I can almost imagine I'm high in the mountains somewhere, far away from everything.

And then the City Guns begin to move. The ground shakes as all around they turn and point their massive barrels into the sky.

Vinneas has taken a small watch from his pocket. He glances at the numbers, then up at the clouds. "Here we go," he says.

"Something else we've figured out, Jax," Imway says. "If Romeo doesn't get us within twenty minutes of the incursion, he won't get us at all."

All across Ninth City, the guns begin to fire, each one burning with a blinding flash, slashing upward with pillars of light that leave wide holes in the clouds where they cut through, enough to see blue sky and shafts of sunlight.

Suddenly, Kizabel winds up and throws her cup into the air over the city. “Come and get us, Romeo, you asshole!” she screams. “What are you waiting for? We’re right here!”

“Imway was right,” Vinneas says to me. “She’s a complete lightweight.”

But Imway is shouting, too. “Yeah, let’s go! What’s wrong, Romeo—you scared?”

And before I know it, I’m shouting with them. “You just try it! I’ll break your stupid face!” I decide if we make it out of this, I’ll need to think of something better to yell next time.

“Show us what you’ve got!”

“Our boy Jax is gonna tear you a new one!”

We keep yelling, and the ground rumbles with each shot of the City Guns, faster and faster, like a gigantic drum, until they’re coming so fast and so loud, we can’t hear our own shouts.

Beside me, Vinneas is still watching the time.

There are lessons you never forget.

The Education of Dixie Dupree

DONNA EVERHART

The EDUCATION OF DIXIE DUPREE

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Chapter 1

My diary was my best friend until I gave it up as key evidence against Uncle Ray. Mr. Evans, the prosecuting lawyer who would go to court on my behalf, showed up on our doorstep here in Alabama all the way from New Hampshire just to get it. I had no idea it was so important, but he told Mama it was, even though everyone already knew what had happened. He said it would be helpful in getting the facts, since I was still too embarrassed to talk about certain things. Being as I like words, I had looked up *prosecute* to find out why Mr. Evans was called that, and according to the definition, if I were in jail like Uncle Ray, I'd be worried.

Mama stood in the kitchen chatting with him while I went to my bedroom to get it. Reaching under my mattress like I'd done a thousand times before, I realized this would be the last time I would do that. I hesitated. Could I give it up? If I did, who would I "talk" to once it was gone? Who would I tell my deepest secrets and fears to?

Mama came down the hall, calling my name, "Dixie?",

and I snatched it from its hiding place, hurrying to pull the pink chenille bedspread back in place.

I came out of my room, the familiar feel of it in my hand more pronounced than usual, the weight of my words and private thoughts sitting heavy in the palm of my hand.

"I have it," but I held on to it tight while we walked back into the kitchen, where Mr. Evans stood waiting, looking like he was in no big hurry. He was tall, with gray hair and glasses. I liked his blue eyes, they were friendly and they didn't seem to hold any judgment of me. Just as I lifted my hand to give him the diary, my fingers tightened and there we stood, me clutching it and him ready to take it, yet I couldn't turn it loose. He dropped his hand and waited patiently. I think he knew I was trying to be brave about giving it to him, but it was a big decision and I understood what it meant. After a few seconds, I took a breath, and let it go. He nodded, as if in approval.

It's 1969, the Age of Aquarius, at least according to The 5th Dimension on the radio. Being one of my favorite songs, I'm always listening for it so I can turn the volume up, flip my hair over my shoulders like Cher, and sway to the music while hoping Mama won't yell at me to turn it back down. The 5th Dimension's song said that when Jupiter aligned with Mars, peace would fill the planets. I figured if that could happen, there was a chance things could be perfect here, as well. Nineteen sixty-nine has been hard, a year when everything in my life and those around me got forever turned upside down. I've been smack-dab in the middle of it, well, me, and now my diary.

It was one of the few presents I ever got that was exactly what I wanted. Mama gave it to me three years ago, a present for my eighth birthday, and when I removed the pale pink paper she'd wrapped it in, saw the blue and green cover with the gold latch and special little key, I was thrilled. I wore the tiny key around my neck all the time, only taking it off to bathe,

so having to part ways with it was going to be like losing a hand or something equally important.

From the beginning, I'd written about all kinds of things, although now, at the ripe old age of eleven, I realized some of those earlier entries were childish. I'd written about certain foods I hated, but Mama still made me eat. I wrote how my best friend, Barbara Pittman, loved the color orange. I even wrote about her stinky brother, Bryan, who was always trying to show his whatchamacallit to the girls in my class, in other words, mostly non-important stuff.

I'd written about Mama, too. In some ways, she was a mystery, an enigma I'd yet to figure out. There were many facets to her, like a diamond under a microscope; depending on which way it was turned, there was something else to see. Her unhappiness and that sporadic temper that would burst out of her were puzzling. I didn't understand her, and I thought she certainly didn't understand me. Sometimes she would say, "You're too much like me for your own good," which in turn made me study her, trying to find the parts of her that were me.

For a time, I'd thought our family was happy, but my naïveté was only a safeguard from reality. As things fell apart between Mama and Daddy, I blamed myself, feeling responsible for how it started. But it was what Daddy did that sealed our fate. And when Uncle Ray showed up appearing to be full of good intentions about helping us out, he ended up causing more than his own share of trouble.

Uncle Ray. I always shiver when thinking about him, and Granny Dupree said when you shiver and its ninety-some degrees outside, that's someone walking over your future grave. It was hard writing about what he did, and I couldn't go back and reread those entries like I did some of the other ones. You could say what was on those pages about him was akin to a coming storm, like dark clouds gathered on a horizon, persis-

tent in their approach. If someone else had read those words, they might have wondered: Would they bring rain or something worse, something destructive? But the only one reading them was me, and I was too close to it all, too young to see how twisted up it was, too innocent to consider the danger and heartbreak.

Intent on Mr. Evans's every move, I watched as he put my diary in his briefcase, and only when it was out of sight could I look at him again.

He said, "Dixie, you understand, you might not get it back."

I had suspected this, but knowing it was another thing.

Still, all I said was, "That's okay."

Really, it wasn't, and my eyes felt like they consumed my entire face as I kept staring at him, the implications of it all too big for me to handle right then. I supposed the only reason to give it up was knowing it held the truth, the truth I wouldn't have to tell to a room full of strangers. At the time, I hadn't worried it was going to be exposed for all to read and then dissect. I mean, who cares about a young girl's diary except her? When I'd told Mama I had everything written down about what happened, she acted surprised.

"What do you mean you have it written down?"

"In my diary. I wrote about what happened with Daddy, and about Uncle Ray, too."

"You wrote about what happened with *him . . . ?*"

"Yes, ma'am, most of it."

I noticed how she wouldn't say Uncle Ray's name anymore. I didn't see what the big deal was, but she went to the phone and called Mr. Evans. Next thing I knew, he was here, taking the diary and explaining to Mama and me why it was so important. It was *key evidence.*

He said, "Well, with what happened, not much more

needs to be known, but it certainly won't hurt. You are a smart young lady, Dixie."

That was all fine and good, but I didn't like the way people's faces changed once they had the facts, because I sure didn't want their god-awful pity. Before we left New Hampshire, I'd already been subjected to it all from the police, the doctors, and the nurses. They had looked at me with that "*bless her heart*" look. When we got back here, Daddy's folks acted different toward me too, like they were embarrassed, even my cousin, Debra, Uncle Elroy and Aunt Margie's daughter. I didn't think she could ever be embarrassed about anything, she was too damn mean. I tried to ignore the looks, but when I caught people unaware, their faces were open and revealing. That's when I got uncomfortable. I knew *they knew, and they were thinking about it*.

Mr. Evans asked me how I'd been so good about writing almost every day.

I told him, "Well, Mama said I'm stubborn, about as stubborn as Alabama dirt."

I thought of a good comparison.

"Do you know how hard it is to grow grass, Mr. Evans?"

We were now standing out in the front yard, and I scratched my toe through a patch of the red dirt I loved, but Mama hated with the wrath of someone who thinks it's out to get her. I stared down at the line and realized it was just like I'd issued a dare to Mr. Evans to step over it.

He glanced down at the dirt, and with a slight smile on his face, he said, "Sometimes soil just needs a little bit of TLC, right?"

I'd learned stubborn worked two ways; it could help you or hurt you. For me, it usually meant trouble, particularly when Mama was in the mood to conform me to her idea of respectful.

If things weren't going good with me, she'd say, "Well, I guess when life hands you lemons, you make lemonade."

Most of the time I'd felt like a fly in her glass of lemonade and just when she went to take a big swallow, there I was, ruining her attempt at making the best of things. Our relationship might have gone a bit more smoothly in the earlier days if she'd considered me as being tenacious. It was AJ who'd told me that word, AJ, who never caused her any grief. Once I overheard Mama telling Aunt Margie it was like having birthed an angel, then a small she devil.

AJ's two years older than me, and for the most part, he's the typical big brother, doing things like purposefully tripping me when I walk by him, or eating the last chocolate chip cookie when he knew I wanted it. But sometimes, he did nice, non-brotherly things, like trying to help me with homework, or letting me talk when I needed to talk, as well as giving big brotherly advice.

One day after Mama had got on me for persisting in talking to her when she was concentrating on her grocery list, he said, "Tell her you're not being stubborn, you're just being tenacious."

Maybe AJ was right, so next time, I was quick to let Mama know I wasn't stubborn.

I said, "I'm just tenacious, Mama, not stubborn."

Her hand connected to my cheek before I had a chance to take my next breath. AJ didn't mean to get me into trouble. We both knew there were times when you could say something like that and she'd laugh, or she'd unexpectedly snap, and neither of us could figure out when it would be one or the other.

Mr. Evans looked down at the bare patch I'd scraped my toe through and said, "You've got to give something to the soil before it will return the favor and give something back."

His smile broadened and the crinkles around his eyes showed he smiled a lot. I liked his explanation of TLC, and I made a decision right there; I would take him for his word from that point on.

He said, "I'll be in touch, Mrs. Dupree. And young lady, you don't need to worry, this will be over with before you know it."

I nodded my head, all the while wishing he'd tell me how that was going to happen. Mama watched as Mr. Evans got into the waiting taxi and left for the airport. I watched him, too, thinking, *He's taking my best friend, the one way I've been able to cope.* The knowledge my beloved diary was no longer under my mattress left a hole that couldn't be filled. I was sorry and blaming myself for everything, including opening my big mouth about it.

Mama turned without a word and walked into the house, and I thought, *She's probably sick and tired of it all by now.* I stood until I saw the last of the taxi's taillights disappear in the curve of the road and then I turned to follow Mama inside. Before I got to the screen door, it opened and she came toward me, her hand outstretched, something small and black held in it.

Her voice was quiet, "I want you to have this."

It looked like what Mr. Evans had just put into his briefcase, only it was bound in black leather. I stared at it and at Mama, puzzled.

"What is it?"

Her expression became detached, with a hint of sorrow.

She sighed and said, "It's my diary. I got it when I bought yours. I want you to read it."

I stared at its dog-eared appearance, and I could tell she'd been as intent on writing in it as I'd been in mine.

She turned to go back inside, and hesitated, "Dixie?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"You know, none of this was your fault. I hope you'll understand things after you read it, if not today, then someday. It's going to get better, I promise."

I could only nod, mouth hanging open, dumbstruck by what I held. I walked into the house, finding it hard to stay behind her. I was anxious to be in my room and reading, and I had to fight the urge to push her out of the way so I could get there quicker. Mama went to the kitchen and picked up the phone, probably to call Aunt Margie while I hustled down the hall to my room.

I sure was glad AJ was down at the creek catching crawdads to go fishing so he wouldn't be pestering me to go outside with him. I sat on the edge of my bed and flipped it open, staring at the first entry. It was dated 1966, and what she wrote sent a shiver down my back and my heart to thumping.

It said, *She lied. Just like I asked her to, but, what kind of life do I have when I have to ask my own child to lie for me?*

She was writing about me. I'd been eight years old and I'd gone and got her in trouble with Daddy and Granny Dupree. It occurred to me this was when it had started, when we'd all begun to lose our way with each other. It happened so gradually, none of us saw it coming, until there was nothing left but empty conversations and useless arguments inside a house that had anticipated love, but had only seen sadness.

Chapter 2

1966

When I went and got Mama in that mess with Daddy and Granny Dupree, my way of making up for it was to help cover up what she'd done. She told me what to say and I said it. She said, "Don't tell," and I didn't. That was when I first noticed Mama and Daddy had a problem and I became fixated on them. Like a cat stalking a bird, I watched, wondering just when they'd started to come apart. Their trouble took such a hold of them it was like they'd got caught in a riptide, tossed and turned, neither one seeming to know which way to go to get free. The day it happened was like most days around our house. Mama didn't like chaos, she liked things in their place, meaning me and AJ, too, and it would start like this.

After Daddy went to work, Mama would throw open the doors to our rooms saying, "Get up! Get up!" while throwing the covers back on our beds while we were still huddled in them. Then, she'd throw the curtains open so the sun hit you right in the eyeballs.

Her next sentence was, "Come on, the sun's shining and I've got a million things to do!"

I'd often speculated how someone could have a million things to do every day if they'd just done a million the day before. Half-awake, we'd stumble out to the kitchen, where she'd shove a sausage biscuit in one hand, a glass of milk in the other, and we'd go sit on the back steps and eat. Most days AJ and I didn't mind eating outside if it was warm, and we'd sit out there stuffing buttery biscuits in our mouths, grease running down our chins. We'd drink our glasses of cold milk and feel full and happy. What did we care if we were in our pajamas playing in the yard at seven o'clock in the morning? If we did as she said, things were fine. Later on we'd go back inside and go about the rest of our day, Mama talking to us about this and that, or we'd play games until Daddy came home.

On that particular day, I resented her getting us up so early. It was a Saturday, and after being in school all week, I had decided we ought to be able to sleep in. All my friends talked about how their mamas let them do that, and then get up to eat a leisurely breakfast while sitting at the kitchen table. I stood defiantly by the screen door and Mama's frenzied vacuuming came to a stop. It was too late by the time I realized I'd made a mistake, too late to head for the back door. She grabbed me, shaking me so hard, my head snapped back and forth, turning everything blurry and causing me to drop my sausage biscuit on the floor.

"Look what you've done to my clean floors! You'll get nothing else, do you hear me?"

"But . . . you made me drop it!"

Mama froze for a split second, and then, like I'd seen before, something took over, an anger that could come and go as fast as a summer storm. She drew back her hand and smacked me in the face so hard my ears rang. The blood from my busted lip tasted strange, a tinny flavor I found nasty. I wiped what trickled down my chin with my hand while Mama watched me, her expression calculating to see if I was sorry enough.

No longer defiant, I crept out and sat beside AJ, sniffling, as I tried to clean my hand by scraping it against the edge of the porch. I sat, staring at the ground, letting my lip drip blood onto the cement step.

He hadn't seen anything, sitting there, oblivious, and happily cramming the rest of his biscuit in his mouth. He turned to me, his hand held out expecting me to give him mine since I didn't always eat it. He gawked at my red-stained mouth and my cheek, already starting to bruise.

"How'd that happen?"

Without turning around, I pointed over my shoulder at Mama. He looked at her through the screen door cleaning up biscuit crumbs off the floor. Without a word he jumped off the back steps, went to the swings, and started swinging, staring at me, shaking his head. He figured I'd done something wrong. I went down the back steps to the far end of the yard where the sandbox was, sucking on my swollen lip and touching my throbbing cheek. For the rest of the day, I stayed in the yard swatting at flies that seemed attracted to my mouth and feeling miserable. I refused to go in to get a drink or eat, and Mama didn't make me.

When Daddy came home, I ran up to his car. He got out and I gazed up at him, knowing by the way my face felt, how it must look. He squatted down and grabbed my shoulders, looking in alarm from my cheek to my lip.

"Dixie, what in the hell happened to you?"

"Mama socked me in the face."

"She did *what?*" he asked, disbelief in his voice.

I looked over at the kitchen door and my heart skipped a beat. She stood there staring, and I could see she was still not herself. Her eyes jumped out at me through the screen door like they were going to burn me. I could hear her voice in my head saying *shut your mouth,* while her fingers fluttered against her leg in a strange manner I'd never seen, tapping to

a rhythm only she could hear. I tore my gaze away, looking anywhere but at that screen door. Daddy looked at Mama, a vein pulsing in his forehead.

He said in a tone that wouldn't stand any arguing, "Go play with your brother."

AJ was digging in the dirt beside the sandbox and I ran over to him. When I looked back, Daddy was walking fast toward the house, arms swinging, fists clenched.

I worried, *What's he gonna do?*

He went inside, slamming the screen door and yelling, "Evie!" even though she stood right there.

She backed up and then he blocked her from view. The anger in his voice as he yelled made me feel vindicated, yet afraid. There was a *thump,* an unpredicted sound that made me stare toward the house. I heard it again, and then again. It was bad enough knowing what it was, but the silence while that beating went on was the worst. What would Mama think of me now? She would hate me, I was sure of it. I turned and ran toward the back of the yard again, away from the dull sound of his fists on her body. I put my hands over my ears and waited. The thought of him beating on Mama on account of me made me sorry I'd said anything, and I wondered when those blows would stop.

She crept 'round us the rest of that evening, refusing to look at anyone. Her face was like mine, like Daddy wanted her to know how it felt. She put supper on the table, but when she sat down, she only pushed the food around on her plate and didn't eat. I ate because I was starving, despite my lip splitting all over again soon as I took a bite. I had to keep dabbing it with a napkin, but it didn't stop me from cramming food in. Daddy sat at the table, head in his hands, perhaps sorry he'd done it, but then he'd see me dab at my mouth and he'd look at Mama, angry all over again. She refused to meet that look.

After we went to bed I heard them arguing.

Mama cried, "Why did you call and tell your mother, for God's sake? There is no need to involve your family!"

"She's just a kid, and if you didn't do it, how'd it happen?"

"I don't know how it happened!"

I was sitting up in bed, about to write in my diary, and I caught my breath at Mama's out-and-out lie. Why would she lie? What she said made me more nervous than when Daddy hit her. It grew quiet and after a minute, I wrote: *Mama lyed about what she did. Is she scared of Daddy?*

A couple days later I stood in front of her, stiff and uncomfortable. It felt cramped in the small bathroom, being she was in such a foul temper. She wielded a brush in her hand like it was a weapon; her rough strokes through my waist-length hair were a measure of her aggravation about a visit to go see Granny Dupree. She acted even more annoyed, if that was possible, as she stared at the bruise on my face, which had turned all sorts of interesting colors. Continuing to tug on my hair to straighten out the tangles, she began telling me what not to say.

Like a record with a scratch on it, she repeated, "Don't you tell your Granny I hit you, do you understand me?" as she worked out the snarls, my quiet "ouches" disregarded.

Sounding exasperated, as if I was responsible for the green and purple spots on my cheek and mouth, she went on, "Hell, I can't help it if you're so damn clumsy! You're always falling down when you and AJ are playing," providing me a reason without coming right out and saying it.

I nodded my head, obliging her by agreeing. All I wanted was to be back in her favor, to make sure the other mama wasn't going to show up. When she was herself, she'd tell us stories about growing up in New Hampshire, she'd hug me like she couldn't let go, and she'd let me stand close to her while she cooked. I'd get to twirl my fingers through her dark

brown hair while she put on her makeup. She always said it felt good and eased her headaches. Her hand smoothed down stray hairs, taking a moment to rest over my bruised cheek, like she wanted to keep it there to cover it up.

She mumbled, "It pisses me off. I shouldn't have to go down there and explain jack shit to anyone. Sometimes I wish I could just go home and get away from this place."

Anger simmered off of her, baking me in its heat like sun in the summertime and I stood there in it, unable to escape, hoping she was almost done. While I waited, I pictured Mama's "home," wondering what was so different about it there. I wanted to ask, but not while she held the brush. She finished and then fastened in a barrette to hold the hair back off my face. In the next instant, she took it back out. She didn't know what to do about my appearance, and she knew there was no way she could hide what had been done.

"Damn it all to hell."

Her anger, wadded up in those words and tossed out in the tiny bathroom, reverberated around the both of us. She gave a sigh, a sound of defeat. Spinning me around toward the door, she shook her finger as a warning to go along with her words, "Go wait in the car and remember what I told you, do you hear me, Dixie LuAnn Dupree?"

I nodded, "Yes, ma'am."

I barely had time to clear the door before she slammed it behind me, staying in the bathroom. I stood for a moment listening, and when I heard the medicine cabinet door shut, I turned and ran to the car.

We didn't live far from Granny Dupree's house. Daddy's family has lived in Perry County, Alabama, along the same stretch of road for five generations. A two-lane road, once a dirt track, Daddy said the only thing that had changed was going from dirt to asphalt. It was still walled in on either side with tall pine trees like it had been when he was growing up.

Most days he'd roll the windows down, letting the fragrance from the pines waft into the car, and I would habitually put my arm out the window allowing the warm breeze to push against my hand, an unseen force I was fascinated by. That day he didn't roll them down. It was silent, even AJ wasn't chattering away, him being notorious for talking everyone's head off soon as the car engine started.

Mama and Daddy stared straight ahead, and Daddy's hands gripped the steering wheel tight, not relaxed like usual when he drove. Most times I'd sit in back, but on this trip Mama hauled me into the front seat to sit between them. She looked nervous, and I could hear her swallowing over and over like her mouth was dry.

She asked Daddy in a quiet voice, "I suppose Elroy will be there, as judge and jury?"

Uncle Elroy is Daddy's younger brother, and he's married to Aunt Margie, who got the religion a couple years ago and now carries her Bible around all the time. Their daughter, Debra, I have concluded, has got to be the meanest cousin anyone could ever have. She seems partial to chasing me around Granny Dupree's yard while waving a switch and hollering, "I'm gonna beat the tar outta you!" I prayed in earnest Debra wouldn't be there, hoping what Aunt Margie said about God and prayers was true: "Ask and ye shall receive."

Daddy didn't respond to Mama's question, although the hand closest to her opened and closed on the steering wheel. I'd been noticing his hands a lot lately, thinking they should look different after what they had done to her. I saw them in my mind as hideous, ugly things with sharp fingernails, the skin all warty and rough, like two appendages with a mind of their own. Instead, they were simply Daddy's hands, tanned skin with a few calluses from hard work. I somehow doubted Mama saw them the same way.

Granny Dupree's drive was marked by a rickety-looking

mailbox and consisted of two rutted dirt tracks made by tires with grass growing between them. Mama always complained how grass would grow here, trampled over by vehicles, but not in our yard. The house came into view, sitting at the end of the long drive filled with potholes. It looked like our house, being cinder block and all, and Granny Dupree she sure does love the color yellow. To me, the paint on the house looked like mustard, but one day I heard Mama on the phone telling Aunt Trish, who's married to Mama's brother, Ray, that it looked like the color of baby shit. I ain't never seen baby shit before, and all I could think was I was glad our house was painted a light blue.

Mama told me once that she and Aunt Trish had been best friends right on up through high school. I thought about Aunt Trish going over to Mama's house to play and do homework, and lo and behold, there stood her future husband, though she didn't know it at the time. I wondered how it was being married to someone ten years older. It gave me a creepy feeling if I thought about someone ten years older; they would be eighteen years to my eight, practically in their grave.

Daddy parked around back, and soon as the car stopped, AJ jumped out, heading toward the tire swing hanging from a huge pecan tree in the backyard. I wanted to stay outside, too. No one else was there, which meant my prayers had worked and I'd be able to play without running from Debra and her ever-present switch. That's when Mama reached toward me and grabbed my hand like she knew my thoughts. As we went up the back steps, Grandpa Dupree stuck his head out of the garage, his white hair standing in every direction. He waved a hand, then ducked back inside and I heard something clank as he yelled, "Damn it all to hell!" followed by more clanking.

Daddy opened the back screen door and Mama walked in with me in tow, then he followed. We were being so quiet it was like someone had died. Granny Dupree shuffled into the

kitchen, her house slippers making a lazy *shoop, shoop* noise on the tile floor. She had been dusting and set her dust rag and furniture polish on the counter, then grabbed hold of the front of her flowered cotton dress, flapping the material to vent some air. She never wore anything else, she was always in some kind of flowery cotton dress and house slippers, even in the winter, only adding an old gray sweater and socks.

She stopped flapping long enough to motion for us to sit. The windows were open and a fan was propped in one, steadily clanking away, but it didn't make the room feel any cooler despite the blades whirring 'round at full speed. The air was like a heavy wet blanket, the humidity making everything sticky. My cotton top was glued to my back, and I pulled it away from my skin while I watched the sweat on Daddy's brow roll down the side of his face.

Granny Dupree exclaimed, "Have mercy, it's hot! Ya'll want tea?"

Mama and Daddy shook their heads, declining. I leaned in close to Mama, thinking about what she'd told me in the bathroom, but soon as my arm touched hers she leaned away.

"Dixie, please stand up, it's too hot."

I moved away from her, unsure of what to do with myself. I went to bite my nails, but knew Mama hated when I did that. I settled on watching Granny Dupree pour herself some tea and then she came and sat at the table. She grabbed her pack of cigarettes and lit one up, blowing the smoke toward the fan.

"Well, are we gonna deal with what happened?" Granny Dupree went straight to the point. There was no small talk about the weather or even a "*how're ya'll doin'?*"

Squinting, she looked at everyone, and my heart thumped away in my chest. I'd rather put up with Debra and her switch than to be standing here with everyone expecting me to make this thing right. I couldn't imagine how quiet could be loud,

but that's what it seemed like at that moment. Granny Dupree waited and Mama sat with no expression, while Daddy stared at Mama, then down at his folded hands in his lap.

After an uncomfortable minute, Granny Dupree snorted, turned to me, and asked, "Sweetie, how'd you hurt your mouth and your cheek?"

She sounded curious, but, I heard something else in her voice. She took my chin in her hand and her grip reminded me of the way Mama combed my hair, a silent message in the tightness of her fingers. I could smell furniture polish on them, a lemony smell mixed in with the Marlboros she chain-smoked. I thought, *What about Mama's face, it's as bruised as mine. How come no one cares about her face?*

"Answer me, child, how did it happen?" Taking her bony finger, stained with nicotine, she prodded at the bruise on my face.

"I was playin'. It happened when I was outside with AJ, just playin'."

Granny Dupree sat back, still holding on to my chin.

"Hm."

I heard suspicion in her voice and I swallowed. Daddy was rustling around, but I couldn't look at him since she still held my face.

She asked me again. "You want to tell me how you got that busted lip?"

Her fingers clutched my chin, and her eyes were piercing. She turned my head this way and that, while staring at me so fierce, I pictured she had X-ray vision. Granny Dupree knew I was lying. She scared me and I felt a strong urge to pee.

I took a breath and tried again, "We was playin' outside. That's all."

Daddy spoke up as if to remind me what happened. "Dixie, you told me your mama did it."

Lordy, I'm in the middle. Now I got to lie to Daddy.

Flustered, I said, "She didn't do it . . . I lied . . . I just fell."

Staring at the bruise on Mama's face made it easier because I had to make up for what I'd done. Granny Dupree's fingers released my chin, and I saw the look of relief on Mama's face. Seeing that, I wasn't about to change my story. I plunged on.

"I said it 'cause I was mad she wouldn't let me have no Co-cola."

Daddy looked confounded while Mama had an odd smile that didn't reach her eyes. He couldn't believe I would lie about such a thing, and I felt guilty when he turned to look at me, as if seeing me for the first time. I couldn't look at him. I stared instead at Mama's bruised face. Granny Dupree's clock ticked on the wall while the adults assessed what I said.

After a minute, Granny Dupree said, "Well. Ain't that something? Don't that just beat all?"

Mama refused to acknowledge her.

She told me, "Dixie, honey, go on out and play."

I rushed for the door, and once on the porch, I stood with my heart still hammering like a drum in my chest. I looked toward the pecan tree, where I saw AJ spinning in circles, just to fall down, get back up, and do it again. Mama had to realize what I'd done for her, and I was certain it would fix things between us.

Later that night, I wrote: *I lyed and now Mama's not in trubble. Now she's happy.*

I imagined it was that simple, but how was I to know happiness could be such an elusive thing?

THE NIX

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NATHAN HILL

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There was a king in Sāvatthi who addressed a man and asked him to round up all the persons in the city who were blind from birth. When the man had done so, the king asked the man to show the blind men an elephant. To some of the blind men he presented the head of the elephant, to some the ear, to others a tusk, the trunk, the body, a foot, the hindquarters, the tail, or the tuft at the end of the tail. And to each one, he said, "This is an elephant."

When he reported to the king what he had done, the king went to the blind men and asked them, "Tell me, blind men, what is an elephant like?"

Those who had been shown the head of the elephant replied, "An elephant, your majesty, is just like a water jar." Those who had been shown the ear replied, "An elephant is just like a winnowing basket." Those who had been shown the tusk replied, "An elephant is just like a plowshare." Those who had been shown the trunk replied, "An elephant is just like a plow pole." Those who had been shown the body replied, "An elephant is just like a storeroom." And each of the others likewise described the elephant in terms of the part they had been shown.

Then, saying, "An elephant is like this, an elephant is not like that! An elephant is not like this, an elephant is like that!" they fought each other with their fists.

And the king was delighted.

—Inspired Utterances of the Buddha

THE NIX

PROLOGUE

Late Summer, 1988

IF SAMUEL KNEW his mother was leaving, he might have paid more attention. He might have listened more carefully to her, observed her more closely, written certain crucial things down. Maybe he could have acted differently, spoken differently, been a different person.

Maybe he could have been a child worth sticking around for.

But Samuel did not know his mother was leaving. He did not know she had been leaving for many months now—in secret, and in pieces. She had been removing items from the house one by one. A single dress from her closet. Then a lone photo from the album. A fork from the silverware drawer. A quilt from under the bed. Every week, she took something new. A sweater. A pair of shoes. A Christmas ornament. A book. Slowly, her presence in the house grew thinner.

She'd been at it almost a year when Samuel and his father began to sense something, a sort of instability, a puzzling and disturbing and sometimes even sinister feeling of depletion. It struck them at odd moments. They looked at the bookshelf and thought: *Don't we own more books than that?* They walked by the china cabinet and felt sure something was missing. But what? They could not give it a name—this impression that life's details were being reorganized. They didn't understand that the reason they were no longer eating crock pot meals was that the crock pot was no longer in the house. If the bookshelf seemed bare, it was because she had pruned it of its poetry. If the china cabinet seemed a little vacant, it was because two plates, two bowls, and a teapot had been lifted from the collection.

They were being burglarized at a very slow pace.

"Didn't there used to be more photos on that wall?" Samuel's father said, standing at the foot of the stairs, squinting. "Didn't we have that pic-

ture from the Grand Canyon up there?"

"No," Samuel's mother said. "We put that picture away."

"We did? I don't remember that."

"It was *your* decision."

"It was?" he said, befuddled. He thought he was losing his mind.

Years later, in a high school biology class, Samuel heard a story about a certain kind of African turtle that swam across the ocean to lay its eggs in South America. Scientists could find no reason for the enormous trip. Why did the turtles do it? The leading theory was that they began doing it eons ago, when South America and Africa were still locked together. Back then, only a river might have separated the continents, and the turtles laid their eggs on the river's far bank. But then the continents began drifting apart, and the river widened by about an inch per year, which would have been invisible to the turtles. So they kept going to the same spot, the far bank of the river, each generation swimming just a tiny bit farther than the last one, and after a hundred-thousand years of this, the river had become an ocean, and yet the turtles never noticed.

This, Samuel decided, was the manner of his mother's departure. This was how she moved away—imperceptibly, slowly, bit by bit. She whittled down her life until the only thing left to remove was herself.

On the day she disappeared, she left the house with a single suitcase.

| PART ONE |

THE PACKER ATTACKER

Late Summer, 2011

1

THE HEADLINE APPEARS one afternoon on several news websites almost simultaneously: *Governor Packer attacked!*

Television picks it up moments later, bumping into programming for a Breaking News Alert as the anchor looks gravely into the camera and says "We're getting word out of Chicago that Governor Sheldon Packer has been attacked." And that's all anyone knows for a while, that he was attacked. And for a few dizzying minutes everyone has the same two questions: Is he dead? And: Is there video?

The first word comes from reporters on the scene, who call in with cell phones and are put live on the air. They say Sheldon Packer was at the Conrad Hilton Hotel hosting a dinner and speech. Afterwards, the Governor was making his way with his entourage through Grant Park, glad-handing, baby-kissing, doing all your typical populist campaign maneuvers, when suddenly from out of the crowd a person or a group of people began to attack.

"What do you mean *attack?*" the anchor asks. He sits in a studio with shiny black floors and a lighting scheme of red, white, and blue. His face is smooth as cake fondant. Behind him, people at desks seem to be working. He says: "Could you describe the attack?"

"All I actually know right now," the reporter says, "is that things were thrown."

"What things?"

"That is unclear at this time."

"Was the Governor struck by any of the things? Is he injured?"

"I believe he was struck, yes."

"Did you see the attackers? Were there many of them? Throwing the things?"

"There was a lot of confusion. And some yelling."

"The things that were thrown, were they big things or small things?"

"I guess I would say small enough to be thrown."

"Were they larger than baseballs, the thrown things?"

"No, smaller."

"So golfball-sized things?"

"Maybe that's accurate."

"Were they sharp? Were they heavy?"

"It all happened very fast."

"Was it premeditated? Or a conspiracy?"

"There are many questions of that sort being asked."

A logo is made: *Terror in Chicago.* It whooshes to a spot next to the anchor's ear and flaps like a flag in the wind. The news displays a map of Grant Park on a massive touchscreen television, a staple of modern newscasting: someone on television communicating via another television, standing in front of the television and controlling the screen by pinching it with his hands and zooming in and out in super high definition. It all looks really cool.

While they wait for new information to surface, they debate whether this incident will help or hurt the Governor's presidential chances. Help, they decide, as his name recognition is pretty low outside of a rabid conservative evangelical following who just loves what he did during his brief tenure as Governor of Wyoming, where he banned abortion outright and required the ten commandments to be publicly spoken by children *and teachers* every morning before the pledge of allegiance and made English the official and only legal language of Wyoming and banned anyone not fluent in English from owning property. Also he permitted firearms in every state wildlife refuge. And he issued an executive order requiring state law to supersede federal law in all matters, a move that amounted to, according to constitutional scholars, a fiat secession of Wyoming from the United States. He wore cowboy boots. He held press conferences at his cattle ranch. He carried an actual live real gun, a revolver that dangled in a leather holster at his hip.

At the end of his one term as Governor, he declared he was not running for re-election in order to focus on national priorities, and the media naturally took this to mean he was running for president. He perfected a sort of preacher-slash-cowboy pathos and an anti-elitist populism and found a receptive audience among especially blue-collar white conservatives put out

by the current recession. He compared immigrants taking American jobs to coyotes killing livestock, and when he did this he pronounced *coyotes* pointedly with two syllables: *ky-oats.* He put an *R*-sound in Washington D.C. so it became *Warshington.* He said *bushed* instead of *tired.* He said *yallow* for *yellow,* and *crick* for *creek.* He used strikingly informal language for a national political figure—words like *heck, darn, doggone*—combined with paralinguistic behaviors like winking or wincing or frowning clownishly, which further emphasized his folksiness.

One got the sense that words were being articulated by his mouth at the exact moment they popped into his head without regard to context or syntax or really even just trying to connect them in any basic way to whatever else he was saying at that moment. His speaking style was a kind of verbal impressionism. Freed from the constraints of traditional grammar, his sentences tumbled onwards not quite logically but more in a sort of semantic soup or gruel of freely associated talking points, meandering this way and that, the discursive equivalent of flood-waters going wherever they want to. On that day, for example, the day he was attacked, he had criticized the president—who at that moment was vacationing in Martha's Vineyard—telling supporters at his fundraiser: "It matters symbolically where he is and I don't know why our president bothers even making promises at this point or spewing those platitudes like he said he promised to not rest until every American got a job and yet there he goes jetting off to tickle his toes in the sand for ten days in a pretty elite high mucka-mucka area where the rest of us normal folks just sort of shake our heads and pull ourselves up by those bootstraps just like 'Mericans used to do and empower the individuals in our small businesses and our families to make decisions on our own and not have the government tell us what to do so the private sector can grow and thrive and the stimulation of the economy that was based on developing our natural resources and the greatest work ethic in the whole entire world."

Supporters said that's just how normal, non-elite people from Wyoming talked.

His detractors loved pointing out that since the courts had struck down almost all of his Wyoming initiatives, his legislative record was effectively nil. None of that seemed to matter to the people who continued to pay for his $500-a-plate fundraisers (which, by the way, he called "grub-downs") and his $10,000 lecture fees and his $30 hardcover book *The Heart of a True American,* loading up his "war chest," as the news liked to call it, for a

"future presidential run, maybe."

And now the Governor has been attacked! Though nobody seems to know how he's been attacked, what he's been attacked with, who he's been attacked by, if the attack has injured him. News anchors speculate at the potential damage of taking a ball bearing or marble at high velocity right in the eye. They talk about this for a good ten minutes, with charts showing how a small mass traveling at close to sixty miles per hour could penetrate the eye's liquid membrane. When this topic wears itself out, they break for commercials. They promote their upcoming documentary on the ten-year anniversary of 9/11: *Day of Terror, Decade of War.* They wait.

Then something happens to save the news from the state of idleness into which it has drifted: the anchor reappears and announces that a bystander caught the whole spectacular thing on video, and has now posted it online.

And so here is the video that's going to be shown several thousand times on television over the next week, that will collect millions of hits and become the third-most-watched internet clip this month behind the new music video from teen pop singing sensation Molly Miller for her single "You Have Got To Represent," and a family video of a toddler laughing until he falls over. Here is what happens:

The video begins in whiteness and wind, the sound of wind blowing over an exposed microphone, then fingers fumbling over and pressing into the mic to create seashell-like swooshing sounds as the camera adjusts its aperture to the bright day and the whiteness resolves to a blue sky, indistinct unfocused greenishness that is presumably grass, and then a voice, a man's voice loud and too close to the mic: "Is it on? I don't know if it's on."

The picture comes into focus just as the man points the camera at his own feet. He says in an annoyed and exasperated way "Is this even on? How can you tell?" And then a woman's voice, calmer, melodious, peaceful, she says "You just look at the back. What does it say on the back?" And her husband or boyfriend or whoever he is, who just cannot manage to keep the picture steady, says "Would you just help me?" in this aggressive and accusatory way that's meant to communicate that whatever problem he's having with the camera is her responsibility. The video through all this is a jumpy, dizzying close-up of the man's shoes. Puffy white high-tops. Extraordinarily white and new-looking. He seems to be standing on top of a picnic table. "What does it say on the back?" the woman asks.

"Where? What back?"

"On the screen."

"I know *that,*" he says. "Where on the screen?"

"In the bottom right corner," she says with perfect equanimity. "What does it say?"

"It just says R."

"That means it's recording. It's on."

"That's stupid," he says. "Why doesn't it just say *On*?"

The picture bobs between his shoes and what seems to be a crowd of people in the middle distance.

"There he is! Lookit! That's him! There he is!" the man shouts. He points the camera forward and, when he finally manages to keep it from trembling, Sheldon Packer comes into view, about thirty yards away and surrounded by campaign staffers and security. There is a light crowd. People in the foreground becoming suddenly aware that something's happening, that someone famous is nearby. The cameraman is now yelling: "Governor! Governor! Governor! Governor! Governor! Governor! Governor!" The picture begins shaking again, presumably from this guy waving or jumping or both.

"How do you make this thing zoom?" he says.

"You press 'zoom'," says the woman. Then the picture begins to zoom, which causes even more focus- and exposure-related problems. In fact, the only reason any of this footage is at all useable on television is because the man eventually hands the camera to his partner, saying "Here, would you just take this?" He rushes over to shake the Governor's hand.

Later all of this blather will be edited out by TV, so the clip that will be repeated hundreds of times on television will begin here, paused, as the news puts a small red circle around a woman sitting on a park bench on the right side of the screen. "This appears to be the perpetrator," the anchor says. She's white-haired, probably sixty years old, sitting there reading a book, in no way unusual, like an extra in a movie, filling out the frame. She's wearing a light blue shirt over a tank-top, black leggings that look elastic and yoga-inspired. Her short hair is tousled and falls in little spikes over her forehead. She seems to have an athletic compactness to her—thin but also muscular. She notices what's happening around her. She sees the Governor approaching and she closes her book and stands and watches. She's on the edge of the frame seemingly trying to decide what to do. Her hands are on her hips. She's biting the inside of her mouth. It looks like she's weighing her options. The question this pose seems to ask is: *Should I?*

Then she starts walking, quickly, toward the Governor. She has discarded her book on the bench and she's walking, taking these large strides like suburbanites doing laps around the mall. Except her arms stay steady at her sides, her fists in balls. She gets close enough to the Governor that she's within throwing range and, at that moment, fortuitously, the crowd parts, so from the vantage point of our videographer there's a clear line of sight from this woman to the Governor. The woman stands on a gravel path and looks down and bends at her knees and scoops up a handful of rocks. Thus armed, she yells—and this is very clear, as the wind dies down exactly at this moment and the crowd seems to hush, almost as if everyone knows this event is going to happen and so they all do what they can do to successfully capture it—she yells "You pig!" And then she throws the rocks.

At first there's just confusion as people turn to see where the yelling is coming from, or they wince and turn away as they are struck by the stones. And then the woman scoops another handful of rocks and throws, and scoops and throws and scoops and throws, like a child in an all-out snowball war. The small crowd ducks for cover and mothers protect their children's faces and the Governor doubles-over, his hand over his right eye. And the woman just keeps throwing her rocks until the Governor's security guards reach her and tackle her. Or not really *tackle,* but rather embrace her and slump to the ground, like exhausted wrestlers.

And that's it. The whole video lasts just a few minutes. After its broadcast, certain facts become available in short order. The woman's name is released: Faye Anderson-Andresen, which everyone on the news mistakenly pronounces as "Anderson-Anderson," making parallels to other infamous double names, notably Sirhan Sirhan. It is quickly discovered that she is a teaching assistant at a local elementary school, which gives ammunition to certain pundits who say it shows how the radical liberal agenda has taken over public education. The headline is updated to *Teacher Attacks Gov. Packer!* for about an hour until someone manages to find an image that allegedly shows the woman attending a protest in 1968. In the photo, the woman is wearing big round glasses and appears to be leaning on someone just out of frame. Behind her someone holds a banner that says "I Can't Stand War!"

The headline changes to *Sixties Radical Attacks Gov. Packer!*

And as if the story isn't delicious enough already, two things happen at about the end of the workday to vault it into the stratosphere, watercooler-

wise. First, it's reported that Gov. Packer is having emergency surgery on his eyeball. And second, a mugshot is unearthed that shows in 1968 the woman was arrested—though never officially charged or convicted—for *prostitution.*

This is just too much. How can one headline possibly gather all these amazing details? *Radical Hippie Prostitute Teacher Blinds Gov. Packer in Vicious Attack!*

The news plays over and over the part of the video where the Governor is struck. They enlarge it so it's all pixellated and grainy in a valiant effort to show everyone the exact moment that a sharp piece of gravel splashes into his right cornea. Pundits argue about the meaning of the attack, and whether it represents a threat to democracy. Some call the woman a terrorist, others say it shows how far our political discourse has fallen, others say the Governor asked for it by being so recklessly pro-gun. Comparisons are made with the Weather Underground and the Black Panthers. The NRA releases a statement saying if Governor Packer had been carrying his revolver, this never would have happened. The people working at their desks behind the TV anchor, meanwhile, do not appear at this moment to be working any harder or less hard than they were earlier in the day.

It takes about forty-five minutes for a clever copywriter to come up with the phrase "Packer Attacker," which is promptly adopted by all the networks and incorporated into the special logos they make for the coverage.

The woman herself is being kept in a downtown jail awaiting arraignment and is unavailable for comment. Without her explanation, the narrative of the day forms when opinion and assumption combine with a few facts to create an ur-story that hardens in people's minds: the woman is a former hippie and current liberal radical who hates the Governor so much that she waited in a premeditated way to viciously attack him.

Except there's a glaring logical hole in this theory, which is that the Governor's jaunt through the park was an impromptu move that not even his security detail knew about. Thus the woman couldn't have known he was coming, and so couldn't have been waiting in ambush. However, this inconsistency is lost in the more sensational news items, and is never fully investigated.

2

PROFESSOR SAMUEL ANDERSON sits in the darkness of his small university office, his face lit grayly by the glow of a computer screen. Blinds are drawn over the windows. A towel blocks the crack under the door. He has placed the trash bin out in the hall so the night-janitor won't interrupt. He wears headphones so nobody will hear what he's doing.

He logs on. He reaches the game's intro screen with its familiar image of orcs and elves torqued in battle. He hears the brass-heavy music, triumphant and bold and warlike. He types a password even more involved and intricate than the password to his bank account. And as he enters the World of Elfquest landscape, he enters not as Samuel Anderson the Assistant Professor of English, but rather as *Dodger the Elven Thief,* and the feeling he has is very much like the feeling of coming home. Coming home at the end of a long day to someone who's glad you're back, is the feeling that keeps him logging on and playing upwards of forty hours a week in preparation for a raid like this, when he gathers with his anonymous online friends and together they go kill something big and deadly.

Tonight it's a dragon.

They log on from basements, offices, dimly lit dens, cubicles and workstations, from public libraries, dorm rooms, spare bedrooms, from laptops on kitchen tables, from computers that whir hotly and click and crackle like somewhere inside their plastic towers some food item is frying. They put on their headsets and log on and materialize in the game world and they are together again, just as they have been every Wednesday and Friday and Saturday night for the past few years. Almost all of them live in Chicago, or very close to Chicago. The game-server on which they're playing—one of thousands worldwide—is located in a former meatpacking warehouse on Chicago's south side, and for lag- and latency-related

issues, Elfquest always places you in the server nearest your house. So they are all practically neighbors, though they have never met in real life.

"Yo, Dodger!" someone says as Samuel logs in.

Yo, he writes back. He never talks here. They think he doesn't talk because he doesn't have a microphone. The truth is he does have a microphone, but he's worried that if he talks during these raids some wandering colleague out in the hall might hear him saying things about dragons. So the guild knows really nothing about him except that he never misses a raid and has the tendency to spell out words rather than use the accepted internet abbreviations. He will actually write "be right back" instead of the more common "brb." He will write "away from keyboard" rather than "afk." People are not sure why he insists on this reverse-anachronism. They think the name "Dodger" has something to do with baseball, but in fact it is a Dickens reference. That nobody gets the reference makes Samuel feel smart and a little superior, which is something he needs to feel to offset the shame of spending so much time playing a game also played by twelve-year-olds.

Samuel feels conflicted about these Elfquest friends: happy for the camaraderie while also resenting that he's become one of them. One of those guys who spends his Friday nights playing video games. He tries to remind himself that millions of other people do this. On every continent. Twenty-four hours a day. At any given moment, the number of people playing World of Elfquest is a population about the size of Paris, he thinks, sometimes, when he feels that rip inside him because this is where his life has ended up.

One reason he never tells anybody in the real world that he plays Elfquest is that they might ask what the point of Elfquest is. And what could he say? *To slay dragons and kill orcs.*

Or you can play the game as an orc, in which case the point is to slay dragons and kill elves.

But that's it, that's the tableau, the fundamental premise, this basic yin and yang.

He began as a level one elf and he worked his way up to a level ninety elf and this took roughly ten months. Along the way, he had adventures. He traveled continents. He met people. He found treasure. He completed quests. Then at level ninety he found a guild and teamed up with his new guild-mates to kill dragons and demons and most especially orcs. He's killed so many orcs. And when he stabs an orc in one of the vital places, in

the neck or head or heart, the game flashes *CRITICAL HIT!* and there's a little noise that goes off, a little orcish cry of terror. He's come to need that noise. He drools over that noise. His character class is *thief,* which means his special abilities include pickpocketing and bomb-making and invisibility, and one of his favorite things is to sneak into orc-heavy territory and plant dynamite on the road for orcs to ride over and get killed by. Then he loots the bodies of his enemies and collects their weapons and their money and their clothes and leaves them naked and defeated and dead.

Why this has become so compelling he isn't really sure.

Tonight it's twenty elves armed and armored against this one dragon because it is a very large dragon. With razor-sharp man-sized teeth. Plus it breathes fire. Plus it's covered in scales the thickness of sheet metal, is something they can see if their graphics card is good enough. The dragon appears asleep. It is curled catlike on the floor of its magma-rich lair, which is set inside a hollowed-out volcano, naturally. The ceiling of the lair is high enough to allow for sustained dragon flight because during the battle's second phase the dragon will launch into the air and circle them from above and shoot fiery bombs onto their heads. This will be the fourth time they've tried to kill this dragon; they have never made it past phase two. They want to kill it because the dragon guards a heap of treasure and weapons and armor at the far end of the lair, the looting of which will be sweet vis-a-vis their war against the orcs. Veins of bright-red magma glow just under the ground's rocky surface. They will break open during the third and final phase of the fight, a phase they have not yet seen because they just cannot get the hang of the fireball-dodging thing.

"Did you all watch the videos I sent?" says their raid leader, an elf warrior named Pwnage. Several players' avatars nod their heads. He had emailed them tutorials showing how to defeat this dragon. What Pwnage wanted them to pay attention to was how to manage phase two, the secret to which seems to be to keep moving and avoid getting bunched up.

LETS GO!!! writes Axman, whose avatar is currently dry-humping a rock wall. Several elves dance in place while Pwnage explains the fight, again.

Samuel plays Elfquest from his office computer because of the faster internet connection here, which can increase his damage output in a raid like this by up to two percent, usually, unless there's some bandwidth-traffic problems, like when students are registering for classes. He teaches literature at a small university about an hour northwest of Chicago, in a

suburb where all the great freeways split apart and end at giant department stores and corporate office parks and three-lane roads clogged with vehicles driven by the parents who send their children to Samuel's school.

Children like Laura Pottsdam—blonde, lightly freckled, dressed sloppily in logoed tanktops and sweatshorts with various words written across the butt, majoring in business marketing and communication, and who, this very day, showed up to Samuel's Introduction to Literature course, handed in a plagiarized paper, and promptly asked if she could leave.

"If we're having a quiz," she said, "I won't leave. But if we're not having a quiz, I really need to leave."

"Is there an emergency?" he said.

"No. It's just that I don't want to miss any points. Are we doing anything today worth points?"

"We're discussing the reading. It's information you'll probably want to know."

"But is it worth *points*?"

"No, I suppose not."

"Then, okay, I really have to leave."

They were reading Hamlet, and Samuel knew from experience that today would be a struggle. The students would be spent, worn down by all that language. The paper he had assigned was about identifying logical fallacies in Hamlet's thinking, which even Samuel had to admit was sort of a bullshit exercise. They would ask why they had to do this. They would ask *when are we ever going to need to know Hamlet in real life?*

He was not looking forward to this class.

What Samuel thinks about in these moments is how he used to be a pretty big deal. When he was twenty-four years old a magazine published one of his stories. And not just any magazine, but *the* magazine. They did a special on young writers. "Five under Twenty-Five," they called it. "The next generation of great American authors." And he was one of them. It was the first thing he ever published. It was the only thing he ever published, as it turned out. There was his picture, and his bio, and his great literature. He had about fifty calls the next day from big-shot book people. They wanted more work. He didn't have more work. They didn't care. He signed a contract and was paid a lot of money for a book he hadn't even written yet. This was ten years ago, back before America's current financial bleakness, before the crises in housing and banking left the world economy pretty much shattered. It sometimes occurs to Samuel that his

career has followed roughly the same trajectory as global finance: the good times in summer 2001 seem now, in hindsight, like a pleasant and whimsical daydream.

LETS GOOOOOOOO!!! Axman writes again. He has stopped humping the cave wall and is now leaping in place. Samuel thinks: Ninth grade, tragically pimpled, hyperactivity disorder, will probably someday end up in my Intro to Lit class.

"What did you think about Hamlet?" Samuel had asked his class today, after Laura's departure.

Groans. Scowls. Guy in the back held his hands aloft to show his two big meathook thumbs pointing down.

"It was stupid," he said.

"It didn't make any sense," said another.

"It was too long," said another.

"*Way* too long."

Samuel asked his students questions he hoped would spark any kind of conversation: Do you think the ghost is real or do you think Hamlet is hallucinating? Why do you think Gertrude remarried so quickly? Do you think Claudius is a villain or is Hamlet just bitter? And so on. Nothing. No reaction. Their eyes were blank as birds. They stared at their computers. They always stare at their computers. Samuel has no power over the computers, cannot turn them off. Every classroom is equipped with computers at every single seat, something the school brags about in all the marketing materials sent to parents: *Wired campus! Preparing students for the twenty-first century!* But it seems to Samuel that all the school is preparing them for is to sit quietly and fake like they're working. To feign the appearance of concentration when in fact they're checking sports scores or reading email or watching videos or spacing out. And come to think of it, maybe this is the most important lesson the school could teach them about the American workplace: How to sit calmly at your desk and surf the internet and not go insane.

"How many of you read the whole play?" Samuel said, and of the twenty-five people in the room, only four raised their hands. And they raised their hands slowly, shyly, embarrassed at having completed the assigned task. The rest seemed to reproach him—their looks of contempt, their bodies slumped to announce their huge boredom. It was like they blamed *him* for their apathy. If only he hadn't assigned something so stupid, they wouldn't have had to not do it.

"Pulling," says Pwnage, who now sprints toward the dragon, giant axe in hand. The rest of the raid group follows, crying wildly in a proximate imitation of movies they've seen about medieval warfare.

Pwnage, it should be noted, is an Elfquest genius. He is a video game savant. Of the twenty elves here tonight, six are being controlled by him. He has a whole village of characters that he can choose from, mixing and matching them depending on the fight, a whole self-sustaining micro-economy between them, playing many of them simultaneously using an incredibly advanced technique called "multi-boxing" that involves several networked computers linked to a central command brain that he controls using programmed maneuvers on his keyboard and fifteen-button gaming mouse. Pwnage knows everything there is to know about the game. It's like he's internalized the secrets of Elfquest like a tree that eventually becomes one with the fence it grows next to. He annihilates orcs, often delivering the killing blow to his signature phrase:

I just pwned ur face noob!!!

During phase one of the fight they mostly have to watch out for the dragon's tail, which whips around and slams onto the rock floor. So everyone hacks away at the dragon and avoids its tail for the few minutes it takes to get the dragon down to sixty percent health, which is when the dragon takes to the air.

"Phase two," says Pwnage in a calm voice made robot-sounding from being transmitted over the internet. "Fire incoming. Don't stand in the bad."

Fireballs begin pummeling the raid group, and while many players find it a challenge to avoid the fire while continuing their dragon-fighting responsibilities, Pwnage's characters manage this effortlessly, all six of them, moving a couple taps to their left or right so that the fire misses them by a few pixels.

Samuel is trying to dodge the fire, but mostly what he's thinking about right now is the pop quiz he gave in class today. After Laura left, and after it became clear the class had not done the assigned reading, he got into a punishing mood. He told his students to write a 250-word explication of the first act of Hamlet. They groaned. He hadn't planned on giving a pop quiz, but something about Laura's attitude left him feeling passive aggressive. This was an *Introduction to Literature* course, but she cared less about literature than she did about *points.* It wasn't the topic of the course that mattered to her, but the currency. It reminded him of some Wall Street

trader who might buy coffee futures one day and mortgage backed securities the next. The thing that's traded is less important than how it's measured. Laura thought like this, thought only about the bottom line, her grade, the only thing that mattered.

To most of his students, education is simply a series of Tasks To Be Completed. Like some widget made in a factory, it doesn't matter who does the work, as long as the work gets done.

And here's the thing: *Maybe they're right.*

Samuel used to mark up their papers—with a red pen even. He used to teach them the difference between "lay" and "lie," or when to use "that" and when to use "which," or how "affect" is different from "effect," how "then" is different from "than." All that stuff. But then one day he was fueling up his car at the gas station just outside campus—it's called the *EZ-Kum-In-'n-Go*—and he looked at that sign and thought: what is the point?

Really, honestly, why would they ever need to know Hamlet?

He gave a quiz and ended class thirty minutes early. He was tired. He was standing in front of that disinterested crowd and he began to feel like Hamlet in the first soliloquy: insubstantial. He wanted to disappear. He wanted his flesh to melt into a dew. This was happening a lot lately: he was feeling smaller than his body, as if his spirit had shrunk, always giving up his armrests on airplanes, always the one to move out of the way on sidewalks.

That this feeling coincided with his most recent search for internet photos of Bethany—well, that was too obvious to ignore. His thoughts always turn to her when he's doing something he feels guilty about, which, these days, is just about all the time, his whole life being sort of barnacled by these layers of impenetrable guilt. Bethany—his greatest love, his greatest screw-up—who's still living in New York City, as far as he knows. A violinist playing all the great venues, recording solo albums, doing world tours. Googling her is like opening this great spigot inside him. He doesn't know why he punishes himself like that, once every few months, looking at pictures late into the night of Bethany being beautiful in evening gowns holding her violin and big bunches of roses and surrounded by adoring fans in Paris, Melbourne, New York City.

What would she think about this? She would be disappointed, of course. She would think Samuel hasn't grown up at all—still a boy playing video games in the dark. Still the kid he was when they first met. Samuel thinks about Bethany the way other people maybe think about God. As

in: *How is God judging me?* Samuel has the same impulse, though he's replaced God with this other great absence: Bethany. And sometimes, if he thinks about this too much, he can fall down a kind of hole and it's like he's experiencing his whole life at a one-step remove, as if he's not leading his life but rather assessing and appraising a life that weirdly, unfortunately, happens to be his.

The cursing from his guild-mates brings him back to the game. Elves are dying rapidly. The dragon roars from above as the raid unloads all its best long-range violence—arrows and musket-balls and throwing knives and electrical lightning-looking things that emerge from the bare hands of the wizards.

"Fire coming at you Dodger," says Pwnage, and Samuel realizes he's about to be crushed. He dives out of the way. The fireball lands near him. His health bar empties almost to zero.

Thanks, Samuel writes.

And cheers now as the dragon lands and phase three begins. There remain only a few attackers of the original twenty: there's Samuel and Axman and the raid's healer and four of Pwnage's six characters. They have never reached phase three before. This is the best they've done against this dragon.

Phase three is pretty much like phase one except now the dragon is moving all around and opening up magma-veins under the floor and shaking loose huge deadly stalactites from the cave's ceiling. Most Elfquest boss-fights end this way. They are not so much tests of skill as of pattern-memorization and multitasking: can you avoid the lava splashing up from the floor and dodge the rocks falling from above and watch the dragon's tail so that you're not in the way of it and follow the dragon around its lair to keep hitting it with your dagger using the very specific and complicated ten-move attack that achieves the maximum damage-output per second necessary to bring the dragon's health bar to zero before its internal ten-minute timer goes off and it does something called "enrages" when it goes all crazy and kills everyone in the room?

In the throes of it, Samuel usually finds this exhilarating. But immediately after, even if they win the fight, he always feels this crashing disappointment because all the treasure they've won is just fake treasure, just digital data, and all the weapons and armor they've looted will help them only so long, because as soon as people start beating this dragon the developers will introduce some new creature who's even more difficult to kill

and who's guarding even better treasure—a cycle that endlessly repeats. There is no way to ever really win. There is no end in sight. And sometimes the pointlessness of the game seems to reveal itself all at once, such as right now, as he watches the healer try to keep Pwnage alive and the dragon's health bar is slowly creeping toward zero and Pwnage is yelling "Go go go go!" and they are right on the verge of an epic win, even now Samuel thinks the only things really happening here are a few lonely people tapping keyboards in the dark, sending electrical signals to a Chicagoland computer server, which sends them back little puffs of data. Everything else—the dragon and its lair and the coursing magma and the elves and their swords and their magic—all that is just window-dressing, just façade.

Why am I here? he wonders, even as he is crushed by the dragon's tail and Axman is impaled by a falling stalactite and the healer burns to ash in a lava crevice and so the only elf remaining is Pwnage and the only way they're going to win here is if Pwnage can stay alive, and the guild cheers through their headsets and the dragon's health ticks down to four percent, three percent, two percent . . .

Samuel wonders, even now, so close to victory: *What is the point?*

What am I doing?

What would Bethany think?

#1 INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

DINAH JEFFERIES

The TEA PLANTER'S WIFE

a novel

I

Twelve Years Later: Ceylon, 1925

With her straw sun hat in one hand, Gwen leaned against the salty railings and glanced down again. She'd been watching the shifting color of the sea for an hour, tracing the shreds of paper, the curls of orange peel, and the leaves drifting by. Now that the water had changed from deepest turquoise to dingy gray, she knew it couldn't be long. She leaned a little further over the rail to watch a piece of silver fabric float out of sight.

When the ship's horn sounded—loud, prolonged, and very close—she jumped, lifting her hand from the rail in surprise. The little satin purse, a farewell present from her mother, with its delicate beaded drawstring, slid over her hand. She gasped and reached out, but saw it was too late as the purse dropped into the ocean, swirled in the dirty water, and then sank. And with it her money, and Laurence's letter with his instructions folded neatly inside.

She looked about her and felt another stirring of the unease she hadn't been able to shake off since leaving England. You can't get much further from Gloucestershire than Ceylon, her father had said. As his voice echoed in her head, she was startled when she heard another voice, distinctly male but with an unusually honeyed tone.

"New to the East?"

Accustomed to the fact that her violet eyes and pale complexion always attracted attention, she turned to look and was forced to squint into bright sunlight.

"I . . . Yes. I'm joining my husband. We're only recently married."

She took a breath, just stopping herself from blurting out the whole story.

A broad-shouldered man of medium height, with a strong nose and glittering caramel eyes, gazed back at her. His black brows, curling hair, and dark polished skin stopped her in her tracks. She stared, feeling a little unnerved, until he smiled in an open sort of way.

"You're lucky. By May the sea would normally be a great deal wilder. A tea planter, I'm guessing," he said. "Your husband."

"How did you know?"

He spread his hands. "There is a type."

She glanced down at her beige-colored dress: drop-waisted, but with a high collar and long sleeves. She didn't want to be a "type," but realized that if it weren't for the chiffon scarf knotted at her neck, she might appear drab.

"I saw what happened. I'm sorry about your purse."

"It was stupid of me," she said, and hoped she wasn't blushing.

Had she been a little more like her cousin, Fran, she might have engaged him in conversation, but instead, imagining the short exchange to be over, she turned back to watch as the ship slipped closer to Colombo.

Above the shimmering city, a cobalt sky stretched into distant purple hills; trees gave shade and the air was filled with the cries of gulls as they swooped over the small boats massing on the water. The thrill of doing something so different bubbled through her. She had missed Laurence and, for a moment, allowed herself to dream of him. Dreaming was effortless, but the reality was so exciting it set butterflies alight in her stomach. She took a deep breath of what she'd expected would be salty air and marveled at the scent of something stronger than salt.

"What is that?" she said as she turned to look at the man, who, she rightly sensed, had not shifted from the spot.

He paused and sniffed deeply. "Cinnamon and probably sandalwood."

"There's something sweet."

"Jasmine flowers. There are many flowers in Ceylon."

"How lovely," she said. But even then, she knew it was more than that. Beneath the seductive scent there was an undercurrent of something sour.

"Bad drains too, I'm afraid."

She nodded. Perhaps that was it.

"I haven't introduced myself. My name is Savi Ravasinghe."

"Oh." She paused. "You're . . . I mean, I haven't seen you at dinner."

He pulled a face. "Not a first-class passenger is what you mean, I think. I'm Sinhalese."

She hadn't noticed until now that the man stood on the other side of the rope that separated the classes. "Well, it's very nice to meet you," she said, pulling off one of her white gloves. "I'm Gwendolyn Hooper."

"Then you must be Laurence Hooper's new wife."

She fingered the large Ceylon sapphire of her ring and nodded in surprise. "You know my husband?"

He inclined his head. "I have met your husband, yes, but now I'm afraid I must take my leave."

She held out her hand, pleased to have met him.

"I hope you'll be very happy in Ceylon, Mrs. Hooper."

When he ignored her hand, she let it fall. He pressed his palms together in front of his chest, fingers pointing upward, and bowed very slightly.

"May your dreams be fulfilled . . ." With closed eyes, he paused for a moment, then walked off.

Gwen felt a little disconcerted by his words and the odd departing gesture, but with more pressing matters on her mind, she shrugged. She really must try to remember Laurence's lost instructions.

Luckily, first class disembarked first, and that meant her. She thought of the man again and couldn't help but feel fascinated. She'd never met anyone so exotic and it would have been much more fun if he'd stayed to keep her company—though, of course, he could not.

Nothing had prepared her for the shock of Ceylon's scorching heat, nor its clashing colors, nor the contrast between the bright white light and the depth of the shade. Noise bombarded her: bells, horns, people, and buzzing insects surrounding her, swirling and eddying, until she felt as if she were being tipped about, like one of the pieces of flotsam she'd been watching earlier. When the background noise was eclipsed by loud trumpeting, she spun round to stare at the timber wharf, mesmerized by the sight of an elephant raising its trunk in the air and bellowing.

When watching an elephant had become quite normal, she braved the Port Authority building, made arrangements for her trunk, then sat on a wooden bench in the hot steamy air with nothing but her hat to shade her, and with which, from time to time, she swatted the clusters of flies that crawled along her hairline. Laurence had promised to be at the dockside, but so far there was no sign of him. She tried to recall what he'd said to do in the event of an emergency, and spotted Mr. Ravasinghe again, making his way out of the second-class hatch in the side of the ship. By avoiding looking at the man, she hoped to hide her flush of embarrassment at her predicament, and turned the other way to watch the haphazard loading of tea chests onto a barge at the other end of the docks.

The smell of drains had long since overpowered the spicy fragrance of cinnamon and now mingled with other rank odors: grease, bullock dung, rotting fish. And as the dockside filled with more disgruntled passengers being besieged by traders and hawkers peddling gemstones and silk, she felt sick with nerves. What would she do if Laurence didn't come? He had promised. She was only nineteen, and he knew she'd never been further from Owl Tree Manor than a trip or two to London with Fran. Her spirits sank. It was too bad her cousin hadn't been able to travel out with her, but straight after the wedding Fran had been called away by her solicitor, and though Gwen would have entrusted Laurence with her life, all things considered, she couldn't help feeling a bit upset.

A swarm of seminaked brown-skinned children flitted among

the crowd, offering bundles of cinnamon sticks, and with enormous, imploring eyes, begged for rupees. A child who couldn't have been more than five pulled out a bundle for Gwen. She held it to her nose and sniffed. The child spoke, but it was gobbledegook to Gwen, and sadly she had no rupees to give the urchin, nor any English money either, now.

She stood and walked about. There was a brief gust of wind, and from somewhere in the distance came a troubling sound—*boom, boom, boom*. Drums, she thought. Loud, but not quite loud enough to identify a regular beat. She didn't wander far from the small case she'd left by the bench, and when she heard Mr. Ravasinghe call out, she felt her forehead bead with perspiration.

"Mrs. Hooper. You cannot leave your case unguarded."

She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. "I was keeping my eye on it."

"People are poor and opportunistic. Come, I'll carry your case and find you somewhere cooler to wait."

"You're very kind."

"Not at all." He held her by the elbow with just his fingertips and forged a path through the Port Authority building. "This is Church Street. Now look over there—just at the edge of Gordon Gardens is the Suriya, or tulip tree as it is known."

She glanced at the tree. Its fat trunk folded deeply like a woman's skirt, and a canopy studded with bright orange bell-shaped flowers offered an oddly flaming kind of shade.

"It will provide a degree of cool, though with the afternoon heat coming on so strong, and the monsoon not yet arrived, you will find little relief."

"Really," she said. "There's no need for you to stay with me."

He smiled and his eyes narrowed. "I cannot leave you here alone, a penniless stranger in our city."

Glad of his company, she smiled back.

They walked across to the spot he'd indicated, and she spent another hour leaning against the tree, perspiring and dripping beneath

her clothes, and wondering what she'd let herself in for by agreeing to live in Ceylon. The noise had amplified, and though he stood close, hemmed in by the crowds, he still had to shout to be heard.

"If your husband has not arrived by three, I hope you won't mind my suggesting you retire to the Galle Face Hotel to wait. It is airy, there are fans and soft drinks, and you will be infinitely cooler."

She hesitated, reluctant to leave the spot. "But how will Laurence know I'm there?"

"He'll know. Anyone British of any standing goes to the Galle Face."

She glanced at the imposing façade of the Grand Oriental. "Not there?"

"Definitely not there. Trust me."

In the fierce brightness of the afternoon, the wind blew a cloud of grit into her face, sending tears streaming down her cheeks. She blinked rapidly, then rubbed her eyes, hoping she really could trust him. Perhaps he was right. A person could die in this heat.

A short distance from where she stood, a tight bundle had formed beneath rows and rows of fluttering white ribbons strung across the street, and a man in brown robes, making a repetitive high-pitched sound, stood in the center of a group of colorful women. Mr. Ravasinghe saw Gwen watching.

"The monk is pirith chanting," he said. "It is often required at the deathbed to ensure a good passing. Here I think it is because great evil may have transpired at that spot, or at the very least a death. The monk is attempting to purify the place of any remaining malignancy by calling for the blessings of the gods. We believe in ghosts in Ceylon."

"You are all Buddhists?"

"I myself am, but there are Hindus and Muslims too."

"And Christians?"

He inclined his head.

When by three there was still no sign of Laurence, the man held out a hand and took a step away. "Well?"

She nodded, and he called out to one of the rickshaw men, who wore very little more than a turban and a greasy-looking loincloth.

She shuddered at how thin the man's brown naked back was. "I'm surely not going in that?"

"Would you prefer a bullock cart?"

She felt herself redden as she glanced at the heap of oval orange fruits piled up in a cart that had huge wooden wheels and a matted canopy.

"I do beg your pardon, Mrs. Hooper. I shouldn't tease. Your husband uses carts to transport the tea chests. We would actually ride in a small buggy. Just the one bullock and with a shady palm-leaf hood."

She pointed at the orange fruits. "What are those?"

"King coconut. Only for the juice. Are you thirsty?"

Even though she was, she shook her head. On the wall just behind Mr. Ravasinghe, a large poster showed a dark-skinned woman balancing a wicker basket on her head and wearing a yellow and red sari. She had bare feet and gold bangles on her ankles and she wore a yellow headscarf. MAZZAWATTEE TEA, the poster proclaimed. Gwen's hands grew clammy and a flood of sickening panic swept through her. She was very far from home.

"As you can see," Mr. Ravasinghe was saying, "cars are few and far between, and a rickshaw is certainly faster. If you are unhappy, we can wait, and I'll try to obtain a horse and carriage. Or, if it helps, I can accompany you in the rickshaw."

At that moment, a large black car came hooting its way through the crowd of pedestrians, bicyclists, carts, and carriages, only narrowly missing numerous sleeping dogs. *Laurence*, she thought with a surge of relief, but when she looked in through the window of the passing vehicle, she saw it contained only two large middle-aged European women. One turned to look at Gwen, her face a picture of disapproval.

Right, Gwen thought, galvanized into action, *a rickshaw it is*.

A CLUSTER OF thin palms stood waving in the breeze outside the Galle Face Hotel, and the building itself sided the ocean in a very British way. When Mr. Ravasinghe had given her the oriental manner of salutation and a very warm smile, she was sorry to see him go but walked past the two curved staircases and settled herself to wait in the relative cool of the Palm Lounge. She instantly felt at home and closed her eyes, pleased to have a small respite from the almost total invasion of her senses. Her rest didn't last long. If Laurence were to arrive now, she was only too aware of the sorry state she was in, and that was not the impression she wanted to create. She sipped her cup of Ceylon tea, and then looked across the tables and chairs dotted about the polished teak floor. In one corner a discreet sign pinpointed the location of the ladies' powder room.

In the sweet-smelling, multiple-mirrored room, she splashed the repeated image of her face and applied a dab of Après L'Ondée, which luckily had been safely stowed in her small case and not in her drowned purse. She felt sticky, with sweat running down under her arms, but pinned up her hair again so that it coiled neatly at the nape of her neck. Her hair was her crowning glory, Laurence said. It was dark, long, and ringleted when unpinned. When she'd mentioned she was considering having it cut short like Fran's, flapper style, he'd looked horrified and tugged loose a curl at the back of her neck, then leaned down and rubbed his chin on top of her head. After that, with his palms placed on either side of her jaw, his fingers gathering up her hair, he'd stared at her.

"Never cut your hair. Promise me."

She'd nodded, unable to speak, the tingle from his hands so delicious that all manner of hitherto unfelt sensations arose in her.

Their wedding night had been perfect and so had the following week. On their final night neither of them had slept, and he'd had to rise before dawn in order to reach Southampton in time to board the ship for Ceylon. Though he was disappointed she wasn't coming with him, he had business in Ceylon and they agreed the time would

soon pass. He hadn't minded her staying on to wait for Fran, but she had regretted the decision the moment he was gone and hardly knew how she would bear to be apart from him. Then, when Fran had been delayed still further in London over a property she was letting out, Gwen decided to travel alone.

With her captivating looks, Gwen had never been short of beaux, but she'd fallen for Laurence from the moment she spotted him at a musical evening Fran had taken her to in London, and when he had grinned at her and charged over determined to introduce himself, she was lost. They'd seen each other every day after that, and when he proposed, she'd raised a burning face and, with no hesitation, said yes. Her parents had been none too pleased that a thirty-seven-year-old widower wanted to marry her, and her father had taken a little persuading but was impressed when Laurence offered to leave a manager in charge of the plantation and return to live in England. Gwen would not hear of it. If Ceylon was where his heart belonged, it was where her heart would belong too.

As she closed the powder room door behind her, she saw him standing with his back to her in the large entrance hall, and her breath caught in her throat. She touched the beads at her neck, adjusting the blue droplet so that it sat in the center, and, awed by the intensity of her feelings, stood still to drink in the sight of him. He was tall, with a good broad back and short, light brown hair, flecked with early gray at the temples. A product of Winchester school, he looked as if confidence ran in his veins: a man who women adored and men respected. Yet he read Robert Frost and William Butler Yeats. She loved him for it, and for the fact that he already knew she was far from the demure girl people expected her to be.

As if he had felt her eyes on him, he spun round. She took in the relief in his fierce brown eyes and the wide spreading smile as he came striding toward her. He had a square jaw and a cleft chin, which, along with the way his hair waved at the front and went crazy at the double crown, she found utterly irresistible. Because he was wearing

shorts, she could see that his legs were tanned, and he looked so much more dusty and rugged here than he had done in the chilly English countryside.

Full of energy, she ran across to meet him. He held her at arm's length for just a moment, then wrapped her in a bear hug so tight she could hardly breathe. Her heart was still racing when he'd finished swinging her round and finally let her go.

"You have no idea how much I've missed you," he said, his voice deep and a little gruff.

"How did you know I was here?"

"I asked the harbormaster where the most beautiful woman in Ceylon had gone."

She smiled. "That's very nice, but of course I am not."

"One of the most adorable things about you is that you have no idea how lovely you are." He held both her hands in his. "I'm so sorry I was late."

"It doesn't matter. Someone looked after me. He said he knew you. Mr. Ravasinghe, I think that was his name."

"Savi Ravasinghe?"

"Yes." She felt the skin at the back of her neck prickle. He frowned and narrowed his eyes, increasing the fan of fine lines that were prematurely etched into his skin. She longed to touch them. He was a man who had lived and, to her, that made him even more attractive.

"Never mind," he said, quickly recovering his good humor. "I'm here now. The darned car had a problem. Luckily, Nick McGregor managed to sort it out. It's too late to drive back, so I'm just booking us rooms."

They walked back to the desk, then, finished with the clerk, he reached for her, and as his lips brushed her cheek her breath escaped in a little puff.

"Your trunk will go up by train," he said. "At least as far as Hatton."

"I know, I talked to the man in the Port Authority building."

"Right. McGregor will arrange for one of the coolies to fetch it

from the station in a bullock cart. Will you have enough in that case until tomorrow?"

"Just about."

"Do you want some tea?" he said.

"Do you?"

"What do you think?"

She grinned and suppressed the urge to laugh out loud as he asked the clerk to send the bags up double quick.

They walked to the stairs arm in arm, but once round the bend in the stairwell she felt unexpectedly shy. He let go of her and went on ahead to unlock and then throw open the door.

She took the last few steps and gazed in at the room.

Late-afternoon sunlight spilled through tall windows, tinting the walls a delicate shade of pink; the painted lamps either side of the bed were already lit and the room smelled of oranges. Looking at a scene so clearly set for intimacy, she felt a burst of heat at the back of her neck and scratched the skin there. The moment she had imagined over and over was finally here, and yet she stood hesitating in the doorway.

"Don't you like it?" he said, his eyes bright and shiny.

She felt her pulse jump in her throat.

"Darling?"

"I love it," she managed to say.

He came across to her and let loose the hair that was pinned up. "There. That's better."

She nodded. "They'll be bringing the bags."

"I think we have a few moments," he said, and touched her bottom lip with his fingertip. But then, as if on cue, there was a knock at the door.

"I'll just open the window," she said, stepping back, glad of an excuse not to let the porter witness her stupid anxiety.

Their room faced the ocean and as she pushed the window ajar she looked out at ripples of silvery gold where the sun caught the tips of

the waves. This was what she wanted, and it wasn't as if they hadn't spent a week together in England, but home felt very distant and that thought brought her close to tears. She closed her eyes and listened as the porter carried in their bags, then, once the man had gone, she twisted back to look at Laurence.

He gave her a crooked smile. "Is something wrong?"

She bowed her head and stared at the floor.

"Gwen, look at me."

She blinked rapidly and the room seemed to hush. Thoughts raced through her mind as she wondered how to explain the sensation of being catapulted into a world she didn't understand, though it wasn't just that—the feeling of being naked under his gaze had unnerved her too. Not wanting the embarrassment to ambush her, she looked up and, moving very slowly, took a few steps toward him.

He looked relieved. "I was worried for a moment there."

Her legs began to shake. "I'm being silly. Everything is so new . . . You're so new."

He smiled and came to her. "Well, if that's all, it's easily remedied."

She leaned in toward him, feeling light-headed as he fumbled with the button at the back of her dress.

"Here, let me," she said and, reaching behind, slipped the button through the loop. "It's a knack."

He laughed. "One I shall have to learn."

An hour later and Laurence was asleep. Fueled by the long wait, their lovemaking had been intense, even more so than on their wedding night. She thought back to the moments when she first arrived in the country; it was as if the hot Colombo sun had sucked the energy from her body. She'd been wrong. There was abundant energy lying in reserve, although now as she lay listening to the threads of sound drifting in from the outside world, her arms and legs felt heavy and she wasn't far from sleep. She realized how perfectly natural lying beside Laurence was beginning to feel and, smiling at her earlier

nervousness, shifted a little so that she could look at him while still feeling the strength of his body in the places where he seemed to be glued to her. Now that her love had somehow distilled into this perfect moment, she felt blanched of all other emotion. It was going to be all right. For another minute or two she breathed in the muskiness of him while watching the shadows of the room lengthen and then rapidly darken. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

2

Two days later Gwen woke early to sunlight streaming through her muslin curtains. She was looking forward to breakfasting with Laurence and then being taken on the grand tour. She sat on the side of the bed and undid the plaits in her hair, then swiveled round to sink her feet into a sleek fur rug. She glanced down and wriggled her toes in its whiteness, wondering what animal it had belonged to. Out of bed, she slipped on a pale silk gown someone had draped over a nearby chair.

They'd arrived at the plantation in the hill country the night before, just as the sun went down. With a head aching from exhaustion, and dazzled by the violent reds and purples of the evening sky, Gwen had fallen into bed.

Now she marched across the wooden floorboards and went to the window to pull the curtains apart. She took a deep breath when she looked out on the first morning of her new world and, blinking in the brightness, reeled at the barrage of buzzing, whistling, and chirping that filled the air.

Below her, gentle flower-filled gardens sloped down to the lake in three terraces, with paths, steps, and benches strategically placed between the three. The lake itself was the most gloriously shining silver she'd ever seen. All memory of the previous day's car journey, with its terrifying hairpin bends, deep ravines, and nauseating bumps, was instantly washed away. Rising up behind the lake, and surrounding it, was a tapestry of green velvet, the tea bushes as symmetrical as

if they'd been stitched in rows, where women tea pickers wore eye-catching brightly colored saris and looked like tiny embroidered birds who had stopped to peck.

Just outside her bedroom window, there was a grapefruit tree beside another tree she didn't recognize, but that looked as if it was laden with cherries. She would actually pick some for breakfast, she decided. On the table out there, a small creature stared back at her with round saucerlike eyes, looking half monkey and half owl. She glanced back at the enormous four-poster bed, surrounded by a mosquito net. The satin spread was barely crumpled and she thought it odd that Laurence hadn't joined her. Perhaps, wanting her to have an uninterrupted sleep after the journey, he had gone to his own room. She looked round, hearing the door creak as it opened. "Oh, Laurence, I—"

"Lady. You must be knowing, I am Naveena. Here to wait on you."

Gwen stared at the small, square-shaped woman. She wore a long blue-and-yellow wraparound skirt with a white blouse and had a long graying plait that hung all the way down her back. Her round face was a mass of wrinkles and her dark-ringed eyes gave nothing away.

"Where's Laurence?"

"Master is at work. Since two hours going now."

Deflated, Gwen took a step back and sat on the bed.

"You wishing breakfast here?" The woman indicated a small table in the window. There was a pause as they stared at each other. "Or verandah?"

"I'd like to wash first. Where is the bathroom?"

The woman walked across to the other side of the room, and as she moved, Gwen noticed her hair and clothes were infused with an unusual spicy fragrance.

"Here, Lady," the woman said. "Behind screen is your bathing room, but latrine coolie not coming yet."

"Latrine coolie?"

"Yes, Lady. Coming soon."

"Is the water hot?"

The woman waggled her head. Gwen was unsure whether she had meant yes it was or no it wasn't, and realized she must have shown her uncertainty.

"There is wood-burn boiler, Lady. Albizia wood. Hot water coming in, morning and evening, one hour."

Gwen held her head high and attempted to sound more self-assured than she felt. "Very well. I shall wash first and then take breakfast outside."

"Very good, Lady."

The woman pointed at the French doors. "They open to verandah. I will go and come. Bring tea for you there."

"What is the creature out there?"

The woman turned to look, but the creature had gone.

In complete contrast to the sweltering humidity of Colombo, it was a bright but slightly chilly morning. After breakfasting she picked a cherry; the fruit was a lovely dark red, but when she bit, it tasted sour, and she spat it out. She wrapped her shawl round her shoulders and set off to investigate the house.

First she explored a wide, high-ceilinged corridor that ran the length of the house. The dark wooden floor gleamed and the walls were punctuated by oil lamps along its length. She sniffed the air. She'd expected the place to smell of cigar smoke, which it did, but it also smelled strongly of coconut oil and aromatic polish. Laurence called it a bungalow, but Gwen noticed a sweeping teak staircase that led off from an airy hall to another floor. On the other side of the stairs, a beautiful chiffonier inlaid with mother of pearl leaned against the wall, and next to that was a door. She pushed open the door and walked into a spacious drawing room.

Surprised by its size, she took a deep breath, opened one of the brown shuttered windows from a bank of windows running across the entire wall, and saw that this room also fronted the lake. As light filled the room she glanced around. The walls were painted the softest

blue-green you could imagine and the general effect of the place was refreshingly cool, with comfy-looking armchairs and two pale sofas piled high with embroidered cushions depicting birds, elephants, and exotic flowers. A leopard skin hung across the back of one of the sofas.

Gwen stood on one of two navy-blue-and-cream Persian rugs and twirled round with her arms held out. This would do nicely. Very nicely indeed.

A deep growl startled her. She glanced down to see that she'd trodden on the paw of a sleeping short-haired dog. A glossy black Labrador she thought it might be, though not quite the usual kind. She took a step back, wondering if it might bite. At that moment a middle-aged foreign man almost soundlessly entered the room. A narrow-shouldered man, with small features and a saffron-brown face, he wore a white sarong, a white jacket, and a white turban.

"The old dog's name is Tapper, Lady. Master's favorite dog. I am butler, and here is tiffin." He held out the tray he was carrying, then deposited it on a small nest of tables. "Our own Broken Orange Pekoe."

"Really? I've only just had breakfast."

"Master will return after twelve. You will hear the workers' horn, Lady, and then he will be here." He indicated a wooden rack beside the fireplace. "There are magazines for you to read."

"Thank you."

It was a large stone-surround fireplace, with brass tongs, shovel and a poker, the usual trappings of a fire, and beside them an enormous basket piled high with logs. She smiled. A cozy evening lay ahead, with just the two of them curled up beside the fire.

She had just an hour before Laurence returned, so, ignoring the tea, she decided to explore the outside of the house. It had been dusk when they'd arrived in Laurence's new Daimler, and she hadn't been able to see what the front of the house really looked like. She found her way back along the corridor and into the main hall, then pushed open one of the dark double doors, with a pretty decorative fanlight above it, and found herself on the front step, under a shady porch. A gravel drive, lined with flowering tulip trees, and interspersed with palms,

led away from the house and then twisted upward into the hills. A few of the blooms lay scattered like large orange tulips, bright against the grassy verge.

She longed to walk up into the hills but first went round to the side of the house, where a covered but wall-less room fronted the lake, though at a slightly different angle from her own room. This outdoor room or portico had eight dark wooden pillars, a marble floor and rattan furniture, and the table was already set for lunch. When a small striped squirrel raced up one of the pillars and disappeared behind a beam, she grinned.

Retracing her steps to the front of the house, she began to climb the gravel drive, counting the trees. The further she climbed, the stickier she felt, but she didn't want to look back until she reached twenty. As she counted and smelled the scent of Persian roses, the heat was building up, though thankfully still nothing like the blistering hub of Colombo. Either side of her, lush verges were carpeted with bushes crammed with large heart-shaped leaves and peachy white flowers.

At the twentieth tree she threw off her wrap, closed her eyes, and spun round. Everything glittered. The lake, the red roof of the house, even the air. She took a deep breath as if by doing so she might absorb every particle of the beauty before her: the scented flowers, the thrill of the view, the luminous green of the plantation hills, the sound of the birds. It was heady stuff. Nothing kept still, and the air, filled with vivid bustling life, buzzed in continuous motion.

From her vantage point the shape of the house was clear. The back elevation was parallel with the lake, with the outdoor room on the right, and at one side of the house it looked like an extension had been added, thus forming an L. Beside it was a courtyard and a path that disappeared through a wall of tall trees. She took several more deep breaths of clean air.

The ugly loud hooting of the midday horn shattered the tranquillity. She had lost track of time, but her heart skipped a beat when she picked out Laurence with another man as they strode from the tall trees toward the house. He looked in his element, strong and in

charge. She threw her shawl over her shoulder and made a dash for it. But running down the steep slope was more awkward than climbing up, and after a few minutes she slid on the gravel, caught her toe in a root, lost her footing, and fell forward so hard it forced the air from her lungs.

When she was able to breathe and attempted to stand, her left ankle gave way. She rubbed her grazed forehead and felt so dizzy she sat back on her behind, already feeling the start of another headache, set off by the sun's heat. It had been so cool earlier, she hadn't thought to wear a sun hat. From beyond the tall trees she heard a frightful shriek, like a cat or a child in pain, or perhaps a jackal. She didn't want to wait to find out, so she forced herself to stand again, this time managing not to yield to the pain, and began to hop back down to the house.

Just as she was in clear sight of the front door, Laurence came back out and hurried toward her.

"I'm so pleased to see you," she called out as her breath quickened. "I went up to see the view but I fell."

"Sweetheart, it isn't safe. There are snakes. Grass snakes, tree snakes. Snakes that rid the gardens of rats. All kinds of biting ants and beetles. Better not go off on your own. Not yet."

She pointed at where the women had been picking tea. "I'm not as delicate as I look, and those women were in the countryside."

"The Tamils know the land," he said as he came across to her. "Never mind, hold on to my arm and we'll get you inside, and I'll ask Naveena to strap that ankle up. I can get the local doctor down from Hatton if you like."

"Naveena?"

"The ayah."

"Oh yes."

"She looked after me as a child and I'm fond of her. When we have children—"

Gwen raised her brows and gave him a slow smile. He grinned, then finished his sentence: "She'll look after them."

She stroked his arm. “What will I have to do?”

“There’s plenty to do. You’ll soon find out.”

On the way back down to the house, she felt the warmth of his body against hers. Despite the pain in her ankle, she experienced the familiar tingle and lifted a hand to touch the deep cleft in his chin.

Once her ankle had been bandaged, they both sat down together in the outdoor room.

“Well,” he said, with a sparkle in his eyes. “Do you like what you see?”

“It’s perfect, Laurence. I’m going to be very happy here with you.”

“I blame myself for your fall. I’d intended to talk to you last night, but your headache was so bad, I decided to wait. There are a few little things I need to mention.”

She glanced up. “Oh?”

The furrows on his forehead deepened, and when he narrowed his eyes, it was clear how the sun had enhanced the wrinkles there.

“For your own safety, steer clear of workforce matters. You don’t need to bother yourself with the labor lines.”

“What on earth are they?”

“They’re where the plantation workers and their families live.”

“But that sounds interesting.”

“To be honest, there’s nothing much to see.”

She shrugged. “Anything else?”

“Best not to wander about unaccompanied.”

She snorted.

“Just until you’re more familiar with things.”

“Very well.”

“Only allow Naveena to see you in your nightgown. She’ll bring your morning tea at eight. Bed tea, they call it.”

She smiled. “And do you stay with me for bed tea?”

“Every chance I get.”

She blew him a kiss across the table. “I can’t wait.”

“Me neither. Now don’t worry about a thing. You’ll soon pick up

on how things are done. You'll meet some of the other planters' wives tomorrow. She's a funny old bird, but Florence Shoebotham may be a great help to you."

"I haven't got anything left to wear."

He grinned. "That's my girl. McGregor has already sent someone in a bullock cart to pick up your trunk from Hatton station. Later, I'll introduce you to the staff, but apparently there's a crate waiting for you from Selfridges too. Things you ordered before you came out, I'm guessing?"

She stretched out her arms, feeling suddenly brighter at the thought of the Waterford crystal and a wonderful new evening dress. The dress was just the thing, short with several layers of fringes in silver and pink. She remembered the day in London when Fran had insisted she have it made. Only ten days and Fran would be here too. A large jackdaw swept across the table and, quick as a wink, snatched a bread roll from the basket. She laughed and Laurence did too.

"There's a lot of wildlife. I saw a striped squirrel run into the verandah roof."

"There are two. They have a nest up there. They do no harm."

"I like that." She touched his hand and he lifted it to kiss her palm.

"One last thing. I'd almost forgotten, but it's probably the most essential point. Household matters are entirely your affair. I won't interfere. The household staff answer to you and only to you."

He paused.

"You may find things have gone a little awry. The staff have had their own way for far too long. It might be a struggle, but I'm sure you'll pull them back into shape."

"Laurence, it'll be fun. But you haven't really told me much about the estate itself."

"Well, it's a large Tamil workforce. The Tamil are excellent workers, unlike most of the Sinhalese. We house at least fifteen hundred. Provide a school of sorts, a dispensary, and basic medical aid. They have various benefits, a shop, subsidized rice."

"And the actual tea making?"

"That's all done in our tea factory. It's a long process but I'll show you one day, if you like."

"I'd love it."

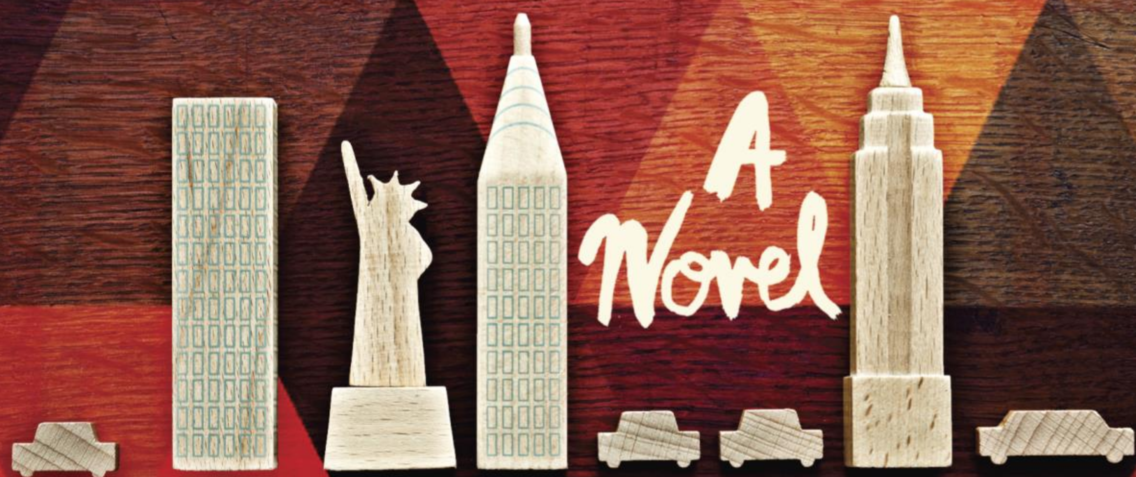
"Good. So now that's settled, I suggest an afternoon rest," he said, standing up.

She looked down at the remains of their luncheon and hugged herself. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Now was the time. When Laurence bent down to kiss her forehead, she closed her eyes and couldn't stifle the grin of pleasure, but as she opened her eyes, she saw he had already moved off.

"I'll see you this evening," he was saying. "I'm so sorry, darling, but I have to see McGregor now. The tea factory horn will sound at four, and I'll be away from the house then, but do sleep on."

She felt tears warm the back of her lids but wiped her eyes with her table napkin. She knew how busy Laurence was and, of course, the plantation had to come first, but was she only imagining that her lovely, sensitive husband was being just a teeny bit distant?

Behold the DREAMERS



IMBOLO MBUE

One

He'd never been asked to wear a suit to a job interview. Never been told to bring along a copy of his résumé. He hadn't even owned a résumé until the previous week when he'd gone to the library on Thirty-fourth and Madison and a volunteer career counselor had written one for him, detailed his work history to suggest he was a man of grand accomplishments: farmer responsible for tilling land and growing healthy crops; street cleaner responsible for making sure the town of Limbe looked beautiful and pristine; dishwasher in Manhattan restaurant, in charge of ensuring patrons ate from clean and germ-free plates; livery cabdriver in the Bronx, responsible for taking passengers safely from place to place.

He'd never had to worry about whether his experience would be appropriate, whether his English would be perfect, whether he would succeed in coming across as intelligent enough. But today, dressed in the green double-breasted pinstripe suit he'd worn the day he entered America, his ability to impress a man he'd never met was all he could think about. Try as he might, he could do nothing but think about the questions he might be asked, the answers he would need to give, the

way he would have to walk and talk and sit, the times he would need to speak or listen and nod, the things he would have to say or not say, the response he would need to give if asked about his legal status in the country. His throat went dry. His palms moistened. Unable to reach for his handkerchief in the packed downtown subway, he wiped both palms on his pants.

"Good morning, please," he said to the security guard in the lobby when he arrived at Lehman Brothers. "My name is Jende Jonga. I am here for Mr. Edwards. Mr. Clark Edwards."

The guard, goateed and freckled, asked for his ID, which he quickly pulled out of his brown bifold wallet. The man took it, examined it front and back, looked up at his face, looked down at his suit, smiled, and asked if he was trying to become a stockbroker or something.

Jende shook his head. "No," he replied without smiling back. "A chauffeur."

"Right on," the guard said as he handed him a visitor pass. "Good luck with that."

This time Jende smiled. "Thank you, my brother," he said. "I really need all that good luck today."

Alone in the elevator to the twenty-eighth floor, he inspected his fingernails (no dirt, thankfully). He adjusted his clip-on tie using the security mirror above his head; reexamined his teeth and found no visible remnants of the fried ripe plantains and beans he'd eaten for breakfast. He cleared his throat and wiped off whatever saliva had crusted on the sides of his lips. When the doors opened he straightened his shoulders and introduced himself to the receptionist, who, after responding with a nod and a display of extraordinarily white teeth, made a phone call and asked him to follow her. They walked through an open space where young men in blue shirts sat in cubicles with multiple screens, down a corridor, past another open space of cluttered cubicles and into a sunny office with a four-paneled glass window running from wall to wall and floor to ceiling, the thousand autumn-drenched trees and

proud towers of Manhattan standing outside. For a second his mouth fell open, at the view outside—the likes of which he'd never seen—and the exquisiteness inside. There was a lounging section (black leather sofa, two black leather chairs, glass coffee table) to his right, an executive desk (oval, cherry, black leather reclining chair for the executive, two green leather armchairs for visitors) in the center, and a wall unit (cherry, glass doors, white folders in neat rows) to his left, in front of which Clark Edwards, in a dark suit, was standing and feeding sheets of paper into a pullout shredder.

"Please, sir, good morning," Jende said, turning toward him and half-bowing.

"Have a seat," Clark said without lifting his eyes from the shredder.

Jende hurried to the armchair on the left. He pulled a résumé from his folder and placed it in front of Clark's seat, careful not to disturb the layers of white papers and *Wall Street Journal*s strewn across the desk in a jumble. One of the *Journal* pages, peeking from beneath sheets of numbers and graphs, had the headline: WHITES' GREAT HOPE? BARACK OBAMA AND THE DREAM OF A COLOR-BLIND AMERICA. Jende leaned forward to read the story, fascinated as he was by the young ambitious senator, but immediately sat upright when he remembered where he was, why he was there, what was about to happen.

"Do you have any outstanding tickets you need to resolve?" Clark asked as he sat down.

"No, sir," Jende replied.

"And you haven't been in any serious accidents, right?"

"No, Mr. Edwards."

Clark picked up the résumé from his desk, wrinkled and moist like the man whose history it held. His eyes remained on it for several seconds while Jende's darted back and forth, from the Central Park treetops far beyond the window to the office walls lined with abstract paintings and portraits of white men wearing bow ties. He could feel beads of sweat rising out of his forehead.

"Well, Jende," Clark said, putting the résumé down and leaning back in his chair. "Tell me about yourself."

Jende perked up. This was the question he and his wife, Neni, had discussed the previous night; the one they'd read about when they Googled "the one question they ask at every job interview." They had spent an hour hunched over the cranky desktop, searching for the best answer, reading much-too-similar pieces of advice on the first ten sites Google delivered, before deciding it would be best if Jende spoke of his strong character and dependability, and of how he had everything a busy executive like Mr. Edwards needed in a chauffeur. Neni had suggested he also highlight his wonderful sense of humor, perhaps with a joke. After all, she had said, which Wall Street executive, after spending hours racking his brain on how to make more money, wouldn't appreciate entering his car to find his chauffeur ready with a good joke? Jende had agreed and prepared an answer, a brief monologue which concluded with a joke about a cow at a supermarket. That should work very well, Neni had said. And he had believed so, too. But when he began to speak, he forgot his prepared answer.

"Okay, sir," he said instead. "I live in Harlem with my wife and with my six-years-old son. And I am from Cameroon, in Central Africa, or West Africa. Depends on who you ask, sir. I am from a little town on the Atlantic Ocean called Limbe."

"I see."

"Thank you, Mr. Edwards," he said, his voice quivering, unsure of what he was thankful for.

"And what kind of papers do you have in this country?"

"I have papers, sir," he blurted out, leaning forward and nodding repeatedly, goose bumps shooting up all over his body like black balls out of a cannon.

"I said what *kind* of papers?"

"Oh, I am sorry, sir. I have EAD. EAD, sir . . . that is what I have right now."

"What's that supposed—" The BlackBerry on the desk buzzed.

Clark quickly picked it up. "What does that mean?" he asked, looking down at the phone.

"It means Employment Authorization Document, sir," Jende replied, shifting in his seat. Clark neither responded nor gestured. He kept his head down, his eyes on the smartphone, his soft-looking fingers jumping all over the keypad, lithely and speedily—up, left, right, down.

"It is a work permit, sir," Jende added. He looked at Clark's fingers, then his forehead, and his fingers again, uncertain of how else to obey the rules of eye contact when eyes were not available for contact. "It means I am allowed to work, sir. Until I get my green card."

Clark half-nodded and continued typing.

Jende looked out the window, hoping he wasn't sweating too profusely.

"And how long will it take for you to get this green card?" Clark asked as he put down the BlackBerry.

"I just really don't know, sir. Immigration is slow, sir; very funny how they work."

"But you're in the country legally for the long term, correct?"

"Oh, yes, sir," Jende said. He nodded repeatedly again, a pained smile on his face, his eyes unblinking. "I am very legal, sir. I just am still waiting for my green card."

For a long second Clark stared at Jende, his vacant green eyes giving no clue to his thoughts. Hot sweat was flowing down Jende's back, soaking the white shirt Neni had bought for him from a street vendor on 125th Street. The desk phone rang.

"Very well, then," Clark said, picking up the phone. "As long as you're legal."

Jende Jonga exhaled.

The terror that had gripped his chest when Clark Edwards mentioned the word "papers" slowly loosened. He closed his eyes and offered thanks to a merciful Being, grateful half the truth had been sufficient. What would he have said if Mr. Edwards had asked more

questions? How would he have explained that his work permit and driver's license were valid *only* for as long as his asylum application was pending or approved, and that if his application were to be denied, all his documents would become invalid and there would be no green card? How could he have possibly explained his asylum application? Would there have been a way to convince Mr. Edwards that he was an honest man, a very honest man, actually, but one who was now telling a thousand tales to Immigration just so he could one day become an American citizen and live in this great nation forever?

"And you've been here for how long?" Clark asked after putting down the receiver.

"Three years, sir. I came in 2004, in the month—"

He paused, startled by Clark's thunderous sneeze.

"May God bless you, sir," he said as the executive placed his wrist under his nose and let loose another sneeze, louder than the first. "*Ashia*, sir," he added. "May God bless you again."

Clark leaned forward and picked up a bottle of water on the right side of his desk. Behind him, far beyond the spotless glass window, a red helicopter flew above the park, going from west to east under the cloudless morning sky. Jende returned his gaze to Clark and watched as he took a few sips from the bottle. He yearned for a sip of water, too, to erase the dryness in his throat, but dared not change the trajectory of the interview by asking for some. No, he couldn't dare. Certainly not right now. His throat could be the driest spot in the Kalahari and it wouldn't matter right now—he was doing well. Okay, maybe not too well. But he wasn't doing too badly, either.

"All right," Clark said, putting down the bottle. "Let me tell you what I want in a driver." Jende swallowed and nodded. "I demand loyalty. I demand dependability. I demand punctuality, and I demand that you do as I say and ask no questions. Works for you?"

"Yes, sir, of course, Mr. Edwards."

"You're going to sign a confidentiality agreement that you'll never

say anything about what you hear me say or see me do. Never. To anyone. Absolutely no one. Do you understand?"

"I understand you very clearly, sir."

"Good. I'll treat you right, but you must treat me right first. I'll be your main priority, and when I don't need you, you'll take care of my family. I'm a busy man, so don't expect me to supervise you. You've come to me very highly recommended."

"I give you my word, sir. I promise. My full word."

"Very good, Jende," Clark said. He smirked, nodded, and said again, "Very good."

Jende pulled his handkerchief from his pants pocket and dabbed his forehead. He took a deep breath and waited for Clark to scan his résumé one more time.

"Do you have any questions for me?" Clark asked, moving the résumé to a pile of papers on the left side of his desk.

"No, Mr. Edwards. You have told me what I need to know very well, sir."

"I've got one more interview tomorrow morning, then I'll make my decision. You'll hear from me, maybe later tomorrow. My secretary will call you."

"Thank you so much, sir. You are very kind."

Clark stood up.

Jende quickly pushed back his chair and stood up, too. He straightened his tie, which over the course of the interview had become as tilted as a willowy tree in a wild storm.

"By the way," Clark said, looking at the tie, "if you hope to further your career, you'll get a better suit. Black, blue, or gray. And a real tie."

"Not a problem at all, sir," Jende replied. "I can find a new suit, sir. I surely can."

He nodded and smiled awkwardly, revealing his crowded teeth and promptly shutting his mouth. Clark, without smiling back, offered a hand, which Jende took with both of his and shook with great care, his

head bowed. Thank you so much in advance, sir, he wanted to say again. I will be the best chauffeur ever if you give me this job, he almost said.

He didn't say it; he had to keep his desperation from bursting through the thin layer of dignity it had been wrapped in throughout the interview. Clark smiled and patted him on the arm.

Two

"One and a half years today," Neni said to Fatou as they walked through Chinatown looking for make-believe Gucci and Versace bags. "That's how long it's been since I came to America."

"One and half years?" Fatou said, shaking her head and rolling her eyes. "You count half-years, too? And you say it, no shame." She laughed. "Lemme tell you something. When you in America *vingt-quatre ans*, and you still poor, you no gonno count no more. You no gonno even say no more. No. You gonno shame to say anything, I tell you."

Neni chuckled as she picked up a Gucci tote so determined to pass as real it glimmered. "You're ashamed to tell people you have been here for twenty-four years?"

"No, I no shame. Why I shame? I tell people I just come here. They hear me talk, they say ah, she don't know English. She musto just come from Africa."

The Chinese store owner rushed toward them. Take the bag for sixty dollars, he said to Neni. Why? Neni asked, contorting her face. I give you twenty. The man shook his head. Neni and Fatou started

walking away. Forty, forty, the man shouted at them as they pushed through a throng of European tourists. Okay, come take for thirty, he shouted. They went back and bought it for twenty-five.

"Now you look lika Angeli Joeli," Fatou said as Neni walked with the bag on her arm, her curly weave flowing behind her.

"Really?" Neni said, tossing her hair.

"What you mean, really? You wanno look lika Angeli Joeli, no?"

Neni threw her head back and giggled.

How she loved New York City. She still couldn't believe she was here. Couldn't believe she was walking around shopping for Gucci, no longer a jobless, unwed mother, sitting in her father's house in Limbe, sunrise to sunset, dry season to rainy season, waiting for Jende to rescue her.

It didn't seem like eighteen months already, perhaps because she still remembered much about the day she and Liomi arrived at JFK. She still remembered how Jende had stood at the terminal waiting for them, dressed in a red shirt and blue clip-on tie, a bouquet of yellow hydrangeas in his hands. She still remembered how they had embraced and held each other for almost a minute in silence, their eyes tightly shut to banish the agony of the past two years in which he had worked three jobs to save the money needed for her student visa, Liomi's visitor visa, and their airline tickets. She remembered how Liomi had joined in their embrace, grabbing both of their legs before Jende had paused from holding her to pick him up. She remembered how the apartment—which Jende had recently found after almost two years of sharing a two-bedroom basement apartment with six Puerto Rican men in the Bronx—was that night filled with Jende's laughter and her voice delighting him with stories from back home, alongside Liomi's squeals as father and son roughhoused and tickled each other on the carpet. She remembered how they had moved Liomi from their bed to the cot in the middle of the night so they could lie side by side, do all the things they had promised to do to each other in emails and phone calls and text messages. And she still clearly remembered lying in bed

next to Jende after they were done, listening to the sounds of America outside the window, the chatter and laughter of African-American men and women on the streets of Harlem, and telling herself: I am in America, I am truly in America.

She could never forget that day.

Or the day, two weeks after their arrival, when they were married at city hall with Liomi as their ring bearer and Jende's cousin Winston as their witness. On that day in May 2006, she finally became a respectable woman, a woman declared worthy of love and protection.

Limbe was now some faraway town, a place she had loved less with every new day Jende was not there. Without him to go for a walk on the beach with, go dancing with, or sit with at a drinking spot and enjoy a cold Malta Guinness on a hot Sunday afternoon, the town was no longer her beloved hometown but a desolate place she couldn't wait to get out of. In every phone call during the time they were apart she had reminded him of this, of her inability to stop daydreaming about the day she would leave Limbe and be with him in America.

"I dream, too, *bébé*," he always said to her. "Day and night I dream all kinds of dreams."

On the day she and Liomi got their visas, she had gone to bed with their passports under her pillow. On the night they left Cameroon, she felt nothing. As the bus her father had rented to drive them—and the two dozen family and friends who came along to escort them—pulled out from in front of their house to begin the two-hour trip to Douala International Airport, she had smiled and waved at the neighbors and extended-family members who had gathered on the front lawn to enviously bid them farewell. She had taken a panoramic mental photograph of them, knowing she wouldn't be missing them for too long, wishing them the same happiness she knew she was going to find in America.

A year and a half later now and New York City was her home, a place with all the pleasures she desired. She woke up next to the man she loved and turned her face to see their child. For the first time in her life, she had a job, as a home health aide through an agency that

paid her in cash, since she had no working papers. She was a matriculated student for the first time in sixteen years, studying chemistry at Borough of Manhattan Community College, never worrying about her tuition because she knew Jende would always pay the three-thousand-dollars-a-semester fee without grumbling, unlike her father, who unceasingly complained about his financial headaches and delivered a lecture about CFA francs not growing on mango trees whenever one of his eight children asked for money for school fees or new uniforms. For the first time in much too long, she didn't wake up in the morning with no plans except to clean the house, go to the market, cook for her parents and siblings, take care of Liomi, meet with her friends and listen to them bash their mothers-in-law, go to bed and look forward to more of the same the next day because her life was going neither forward nor backward. And for the very first time in her life, she had a dream besides marriage and motherhood: to become a pharmacist like the ones everyone respected in Limbe because they handed out health and happiness in pill bottles. To achieve this dream, she had to do well in school, and she was doing just that—maintaining a B-plus average. Three days a week she went to school and, after classes, walked the school's hallways with her bulky algebra, chemistry, biology, and philosophy textbooks, glowing because she was growing into a learned woman. As often as she could, she sat in the library to do her homework, or went to office hours to hound professors for advice on what she needed to do to get better grades so she could get into a great pharmacy school. She was going to make herself proud, make Jende proud of his wife, make Liomi proud of his mother. She'd waited too long to become something, and now, at thirty-three, she finally had, or was close enough to having, everything she'd ever wanted in life.

The MORTIFICATIONS

DEREK PALACIO

A Novel

Ulises Encarnación did not believe in fate. This may have been a by-product of the sailor's name his father, Uxbal, had given him and the fact that Ulises detested ocean horizons—they were impermanent and appeared liked waterfalls over which one could cascade into death. More likely his disbelief was a consequence of how Ulises was taken from Cuba as a young boy by his mother, Soledad, as a member of the now-infamous 1980 Mariel Boatlift. Uxbal had wanted the family to stay despite their poverty. They did have a sturdy house with a garden, tomatoes when others didn't, but Soledad saw in Ulises a mind for school, and she worried about the state of young, pensive boys in Cuba. Bookworms were considered faggots, and though she did not think her son a homosexual, the state might, and she cringed at the thought of him in prison or, worse, at a rehabilitation camp.

There was also Ulises's twin sister, Isabel—or Izzi, as they sometimes called her—a young girl who sang in church, which could be done anywhere, and who seemed unattached to Buey Arriba, meaning, she might not remember much of Cuba if the family left right then. Soledad preferred to wrench two children out of one culture and into another before the Soviet Union collapsed, which she wrongly predicted would happen in 1985. Uxbal warned them they would not find a home so nice in the States. Kingdoms, he said, are hard to come by. He was so certain of his position that he'd tried holding his daughter ransom, locking Isabel inside the country house with him. Soledad was able to retrieve the girl only by holding Ulises hostage in return. Sewing shears in hand and pressed to her son's jugular, Soledad swore

to Uxbal that unless Isabel walked out the front door, suitcase in hand, his bloodline would die.

It was then, at the age of twelve, that Ulises learned there were no goddesses of the loom, that people could not be, simultaneously, vessels of fate and free will. Destiny was a consequence of irreparable action and, in the case of his childhood relocation, his determined mother's forced evacuation. Outside their country house she'd whispered in his ear not to worry, but there was a blade against his neck, and why would his father have slipped Isabel so quickly out the door if Soledad had not been serious? Aboard an overcrowded lobster boat, hunched against the back of a car thief and wedged between his mother and sister, Ulises immigrated to the United States, rubbing his throat the entire time. He felt close to dying then, not sure he could trust his mother anymore, and he would forever associate that fear with the farthest stretch of water he could see over the hull of a boat looking north of Cuba, where he saw nothing but more water.

It surprised Ulises that from Miami they took a train north to what the Americans called New England. Soledad's distant cousins lived in Miami, close to Sunny Isles, and he assumed they would make a large, loud Cuban family together. This was Ulises's second train ride, the first the journey from Buey Arriba to Havana. Uxbal had once told his son a story about his own first train ride, from the farmland hills of the Sierra Maestra to the southeastern coast: a little black boy had been seated on the bench in front of Uxbal, and Ulises's father had never seen such hair before. He was five, the boy perhaps the same age, and Uxbal did not hesitate to reach over the bench and touch the tiny curls. He was mesmerized. The black boy shouted, though, and the mothers stood and grabbed for their children. Ulises's grandmother took Uxbal into her arms, from which perch Uxbal craned his neck to see his victim. The little black boy watched Ulises's father from over the bench like a boy at the zoo, Uxbal the animal in the cage. What did Ulises's grandmother say to his father? *Don't be such a shit.*

Ulises asked his mother then why they were going farther north. There are too many Cubans in Miami, Soledad told him, and Ulises, struggling to recall the point of his father's anecdote, realized how far away he was being taken and how quickly his mother wanted him to forget Uxbal.

Are we going to New York? he asked.

A little farther north, his mother said. My second cousin knows some people in Connecticut.

Are we going to speak Spanish there?

Among ourselves, she said, but English with the new friends we make.

As a young woman, Soledad had been a nanny for British missionaries. She spoke English with a terrible accent.

Will you still sing to me at night? Ulises asked.

I left my voice in Cuba, she said, which Ulises understood as, I can't, because it will remind me of the island.

Do you hate Papi? Isabel asked.

I will never forget your father.

In Hartford, Ulises learned to wear a hat, coat, and gloves, but the cold didn't bother Isabel as much, and she learned to ice skate wearing just a scarf and jacket. The family moved into the South End, near a shallow pond called Opal's Lake that was reliably frozen by December. During their first winter, the first winter of their lives, it snowed twice by late November, and Isabel was drawn outdoors in a way Ulises found unnatural. Often she'd visit the pond to skate, and there she'd let the snowflakes pile onto her shoulders and melt into her hair. Izzi's gone a little crazy with the move, he thought to himself. He told his sister, One day we'll find you in a block of ice.

I didn't think I would like it, she said. Sometimes I can't feel my neck, or my hands get numb. I forget I have a body. It's not like Cuba,

where you're always sweating and the sun won't let you forget your skin. I can spend the time thinking of other things.

Ulises fought the weather by never stepping out into it. He imprisoned himself like a cloistered monk in their new house, a cloudy German Colonial with a white, claustrophobic kitchen and iron radiators. Each room in the heavy house was its own lonely cell—the doors were made of hardwood and were as dark as volcano mud—and Ulises got into the habit of closing all the doors all the time, ostensibly to trap what little heat he found steaming from the cast-iron accordions, which were in every room, placed always under a low, milky window. The house in Buey Arriba had either window screens or nothing, not the double-paned slabs of this strange New England monastery. The shifting pipes, the moaning wood: it all reminded Ulises of hurricane season, the only time of year their old house had cause to shake. He had trouble sleeping and complained to Soledad.

The house is rocking you to sleep at night, his mother said.

It reminds me of the lobster boat, Ulises said.

For work, Soledad found a position as a stenographer at the Hartford County Courthouse, and she found a Jesuit school for her children to attend. It was more expensive than public school, but Soledad possessed a bias for religious education; she thought it more rigorous and demanding and, therefore, more effective. At St. Brendan's, the priests were old white men who gave Mass in Latin every day, which Ulises found exotic and beautiful, though he was not at all interested in the actual dogma. He enrolled in Latin courses, and the old white priests believed they'd found a Spanish Lamb whom they could mold into an orator. He had a gift for the dead language, could speak it better than English, though he learned that quickly as well. At school he wrote short monographs on the value of St. Jerome's Vulgate, which the priests insisted be printed in the student newspaper. The other boys teased Ulises, but they were more jealous than condescending.

Ultimately, he was gracious with his gift, holding study sessions with his classmates to show them how certain nouns declined.

Isabel proved even more devout in her studies. She remembered her prayers from back on the island, and the nuns were impressed by the precision of her memory. In Cuba, the Encarnacións had attended Mass as a family until Soledad learned that the flat-roofed packing-house where services were held was also a rebel meeting place. It was Isabel who'd brought this, accidentally, to her mother's attention—she once carried home a typed manifesto denouncing the ills of communism, copies of which had been distributed during the adoration of the Holy Eucharist that happened after Mass the last Sunday of every month. Soledad found it ridiculous that rebels still existed almost twenty years after Castro's ascent; at that point, one accepts the world, or one leaves it. But Uxbal continued to attend services, sometimes sneaking his daughter away with him, which made Soledad furious and Ulises confused.

In New England Isabel memorized whatever new devotion the nuns taught her. By sophomore year, she was leading the whole school, grades six through twelve, in perfect Morning Prayer. Ulises would translate his sister's words into Latin in his head, and at home he would recite to her his translations, asking which she found more beautiful. Sometimes she preferred the Latin to the English, but she always finished her answers with a Spanish caveat; the Cuban *Our Father* was the prettiest song she'd ever heard. When she sang it, her eyes would close, and she would wring her hands, as if she were at Mass on Sunday and reaching for her father's palm. It was obvious to Ulises that his sister was never as happy as then.

Soledad continued her sabbatical from Mass and instead spent her Sundays practicing for the intricacies of the county court system. As a stenographer, she made a good salary; she'd been a seamstress as well as a nanny in Cuba, and her dexterous knuckles adapted well to

the keys. While Ulises and Isabel were at church on Sundays—the priests and nuns kept tabs despite the five weekday services the children attended—Soledad practiced her shorthand skills on a creaky, borrowed stenotype, copying at length either Isabel's history book or Ulises's English primer. She was quick and smart, and the work and the New England cold helped her put at bay—in a manner not unlike her daughter's—the humid Caribbean climate. Yet she could not forget the region entirely. The courthouse was on Washington Street, at the end of which was Columbus Green where stood a bronze statue of Christopher Columbus, a gift to the city from the Italian-American Society. Seeing the pale-green metal figure, Soledad recalled the famous words attributed to the sailor and taught to every child in Cuba: the island, he had said, was *the most beautiful land human eyes have ever seen.* She woefully agreed, and in those moments she suffered brief but bright memories of verdant hills, rotting fruit, overflowing rain gutters, and cowherds glistening with sweat. Hartford she understood as a machine, a contraption she might force herself into, but its clamor, all the life of the city, coalesced into a fugue noise, such that she felt herself submerged in a fugue state. This, however, provided more relief than alarm. She could move through the New England landscape without memory, a circumstance she found freeing.

More important, it was difficult for her to feel sexual in Connecticut, where the air was biting and the sky was low and gray. Soledad was never warm, and she buried herself in wool sweaters, long underwear, layers of socks, high collars, and double-thick polyester skirts. The clothing blunted the keen passes of courthouse lawyers who found her exotic, who appreciated her dark eyes and choppy accent. She made a name for herself this way, though accidentally. Her children were the shining stars of St. Brendan's School—not immigrant filth or the youngest members of the waning Puerto Rican gangs—and the courthouse administration respected her because she was lovely but not

sexually opportunistic. She worked hard, and eventually the district attorney's office as well as the public defender's requested her services regularly, even for the most minor offenses.

Yet Soledad was not aware how severe her unintended celibacy was until a young tax attorney quietly asked her to dinner. She declined, saying her son was participating in a debate that evening, and her daughter needed a dress ironed for Mass the following morning. It was obvious then: she'd decided to raise her children with such devotion that she might forgive herself for abandoning the only man she'd ever loved on the rotting island she once knew as Cuba. Despite this, she sincerely enjoyed the work, and during the twins' junior year at St. Brendan's, she was promoted past court reporter and straight to courthouse auditor. The title was ominous but the pay admirable.

The following summer, at the age of seventeen, Isabel announced her intentions to enter the convent. She'd spent a good deal of time considering the possibility while gliding back and forth across Opal's Lake. Primarily, she'd wondered at the detachment she felt from her own skin. Isabel was as striking as her mother, and plenty of Jesuit boys in her class had made a point to smile at her whenever possible. She had noticed, of course, but she'd never responded. She saw in those soft faces little more than juvenile desire, which she understood as superficial, as deep as the grooves she carved into the pond ice with her skates. Eventually, what she'd previously considered a lack of interest, she now strung together as Providence. She had a higher calling, she said, which buffered her heart from the advances of all the well-mannered, pretty-lipped boys in her grade.

Despite his sister's position at school as a sort of religious wunderkind, Ulises found her insistence on divine intervention hard to believe.

Maybe you just don't like foreigners, he offered.

Here, we are the foreigners, Isabel said.

This seems rash, he said. What if you promise yourself away and then change your mind?

I don't see how that's possible. I've already made two simple vows, one of chastity and one of poverty.

You don't have any money, he said. And the other is a joke.

It's different when you say them out loud and in church. They mean something more. It's not just what I don't want anymore.

The vows are names you've given to the facts of your life, he said. They're not really paths toward God.

And that was when Isabel told her brother about Sundays in Cuba, the months after Ulises stopped attending Mass. The flat-roofed packinghouse had specialized in guava crating, which meant the work had been seasonal. The number of factory hands correlated with the number of red-green guavas shipping west.

It was a place for drifters, Isabel said. Never the same group of men working, no one ever staying.

A place for rebels, Ulises interrupted, echoing a phrase Soledad had used.

Papi was a rebel, Isabel said, and a recruiter. That's why we left. Ma found out that I was at the meetings after Mass with him, and she wouldn't stand for it. It made up her mind.

Ulises could not speak. He was not overcome by astonishment or disbelief but was awash with anger for his mother, who'd lied to him. He was also filled with terrible jealousy. Their father had never spoken of the rebel meetings to Ulises, not a word. Why had he not asked him to join the cause?

What did you talk about at the meetings? he asked.

Recruiting, Isabel said, always recruiting. They were always trying to get more people.

Why didn't Papi ever recruit me?

It wasn't part of the plan, she said. We were the plan, the daughters.

They were raising us to be rebel mothers, to someday marry and raise rebel children.

They were going to breed an army?

Something like that.

That's insane, Ulises said. They tried to brainwash you.

That's what Ma thought. But it wasn't like that. We would pray at the meetings, and then we were given a choice: we could promise ourselves to Cuba, or we could refuse.

What does that mean? Ulises asked.

It means we promised to marry whomever our fathers asked us to, and to stay chaste until that day.

And if you refused?

Nothing. But they would ask us again the following week.

Realizing that Isabel had, of course, said yes, Ulises wanted to know how many times she'd had to be asked before relenting.

Twelve times, she said.

You were twelve then, Ulises told her. It wasn't a real promise.

It was clear to Ulises then that Isabel's faith in God was nothing more than the logical attempt to keep her promise to their father. Uxbal, lost in Cuba, could not marry off his daughter. The only decent thing to do was to swear off all men and then wait for miraculous word from the island. The decent thing was to become a nun.

You weren't there, Isabel said, which made Ulises burn. The day I promised, I was filled with something fierce, and it hasn't left me since. I think I'm just realizing it now.

Ulises approached his mother right away, first out of anger, but then out of pity for his sister, who he believed was throwing away her life on a coerced promise to a madman. He gave a speech to Soledad in their cramped kitchen while she prepared her morning coffee and rubbed her hands awake. She looked tired and sat down at the pitiful table

next to their ancient refrigerator. It was the first time he'd spoken to her about their exile since coming to Hartford.

Isabel thinks she's some Virgin Mary, he said.

Soledad's faced hardened. She's always been close to God, she said.

She's entering the convent because of Papi, not because of God. Do you know what she promised him?

Of course, his mother said.

If Ulises had thought his righteousness afforded him a position of power over his mother, then he was entirely mistaken. She said *of course* not to admit her guilt or treason, but to reaffirm the fact that she'd made a decision and not simply fled the island on an emotional whim. Hearing his mother's clipped response, Ulises thought of his sister, who'd made a decision, albeit a warped one, and his father, who'd decided *not* to leave with his family. Clearly, no one was in charge.

Do you think I took you from Cuba simply for a better life? Soledad asked.

It's what you told me, Ulises said.

It was partly the truth, she said. The other truth is that there wasn't even the possibility of a so-so life in Cuba. The poor were no longer allowed to just be poor—they also had to be wretched—so if we were going to live in a shack and grow our own crappy tomatoes, why not do it here? Here we can pretend to be happy, and no one cares.

Papi wanted to be happy, too, Ulises said.

There you are wrong, because your father needed us to be miserable or, at least, to pretend to be miserable so that others would join his stupid cause. No one starts a rebellion when you can make salsa and brew your own beer and sit outside all night with one candle and tell stories. Revolution derives from discontent, my love.

And what about Isabel? he asked. Are you just going to let her keep living some fantasy about fulfilling her promise to Papi?

I don't think I can do much else, she said. I took her away from him once, and I think that's as many separations as she'll allow.

She's going to rot away in a habit, Ulises said. This made Soledad tear up enough that she had to place her coffee mug on the counter and scratch at her eyes.

It took everything to leave Cuba, she said. I brought her here without asking, and I don't think I can ask anything so big of her again. But the same goes for you, if that's any consolation. You can do what you like here in America, and you'll have my blessing.

I don't think that should include screwing yourself, Ulises said.

Soledad did not mention to her son that perhaps she'd made a mistake. It was 1985, after all, halfway through the year, and the Soviet bloc seemed sound and sustainable. Soledad's prediction, one of the cornerstones of her evacuation theory, had proven untrue. As a result, the mother of two transplanted Cubanos had come to believe she no longer possessed the wisdom necessary to guide her children in the larger matters of their lives. They were on their own, and they should follow fate, or whatever they eventually perceived as destiny. In any case she would not stand in their way, which is why she approached her daughter the afternoon after her argument with Ulises to tell her: You have all my blessings. I know God makes you content.

Isabel accepted Soledad's blessings with grace but without excitement. Her decision making was an act of power, so maternal permission, though welcome, was unnecessary. Isabel did, however, request to no longer be called Izzi. She found it an infantile nickname for a young woman who now followed a higher calling. Soledad agreed, and with that the conversation was finished. In the end, the brief discussion did more to free Soledad from the guilt of her decision to leave Cuba than it did to free Isabel to pursue her religious inclinations, and from that day on Soledad no longer invested herself so deeply in her children's pursuits. She attended fewer Latin Club readings for

Ulises, and she asked Isabel to start ironing her own dresses for morning worship.

More important, Soledad met someone.

Henri Willems was a Dutch horticulturalist who, in the early 1980s, was attempting to grow Habano tobacco in the Connecticut River Valley. At the time he met Soledad, he had loose but legal land agreements with a majority of the family-farm operations southeast of Hartford. The region already had a long history of growing Broadleaf for cigar wrappers and binders, and New England Native American tribes had been growing Brightleaf for centuries. Willems thought that, with enough diligent care and oversight, one might cultivate Habano tobacco in the rough northeastern climate.

The farmers whose lands Willems had leased thought he was crazy; the Habano strand was too tropical for the temperate Connecticut weather. But Willems came from money—his great-grandfather Jacobus Willems was the first to take Sumatra tobacco to Holland in 1860, where he formed the Gonaïves-Sumatra Tobacco Exchange—so the growers weren't too concerned with how Henri squandered his wealth. They did, however, take issue with the elaborate shading structures Henri began to erect on their prolific topsoil. The tents were nothing new to tobacco cultivation, but together the farmers opportunistically sued Willems for breach of contract, arguing in the Hartford County Courthouse that Henri had leased the land for farming, not for construction. He'd have to renegotiate if he wanted to grow *and* build on their plots.

During the hearing, which Soledad did not attend, Willems gave an impassioned speech about honoring the agricultural legacy of the Connecticut River Valley. He spoke about his travels abroad, his search for a place where the Habano leaf could be resurrected. According to

him, the plant had suffered a continual decline ever since the beginning of the deathly AmeriCuban embargo. Less tangentially, he argued that nearby landowners did not regulate the vine-staking that occurred on their leased vineyards. He finished his monologue with a plea: the Habano leaf was a masterpiece of God's creation; mankind was a better animal for smoking and cultivating it; Cuba had become a wasteland where the leaf would soon go extinct; his mission in life was to keep the regal plant from fading into obscurity.

The court found in favor of the farmers.

It was Soledad's diligence that eventually brought Henri Willems into sight, as once a week she reviewed the transcripts prepared by the courthouse's junior stenographers. At home and with a glass of white rum in hand, Soledad found the horticulturalist's transcribed story both beautiful and sincere. She was most taken by Willems's brief discussion of Cuba as a decaying wasteland, a view she shared, though it had the effect of making her both heartbroken for and disgusted with their pitiful house back in Buey Arriba. She was so moved, she attempted the following day to have the verdict overturned by discussing the case with the district attorney. The lawyer said he could do nothing, but Willems should take the ruling as an opportunity to build processing plants or whatever else he might like dirt cheap. Soledad fashioned a letter that advised the horticulturalist to do just that and included a clean set of transcripts—typed freshly on a Smith Corona SL 480 that had come with her promotion—should Willems ever need them.

Lastly, Soledad slipped a note into the package in admiration of the man's vision. She noted a romantic tone to his rhetoric—*your speech was more impassioned than most of the pleas for child custody I sometimes read at night*—and she praised his efforts to preserve something authentic of Cuba—*you're brave to save the things others would leave behind.* She sealed the large envelope with her thumb after licking the

wide upper flap, but she chose, in the end, not to clean the faint smear of purple lipstick her lips had left behind. She mailed the package and waited, though not entirely certain of what she waited for.

It turned out to be a Sumatra-tobacco plant, three feet tall and rooted in a wide, circular, rose-colored cachepot. It arrived with instructions for setting the plant in front of a window receiving at least six hours of direct sunlight a day and nursing the leaf to four feet tall, at which point it should be relocated outdoors, ideally beneath the shade of an older-growth walnut. The only spot in the quaint Encarnación house for such a gargantuan weed was in the living room, and with Ulises's help, Soledad relocated the pot from the front stoop to the one window in that space not blocked by a radiator. By Ulises's estimation, the leaf wouldn't last a month.

It'll crowd out the window and die thirsty for sunlight, Ulises said. The sky is too gray here.

Some green in this house is wonderful, Soledad said.

But now the room is too dark.

Nonsense, she said. It's just breaking up the light.

Because it's so large, Ulises said. Because it's absurdly big.

Not so big, Soledad said, but certainly extravagant. Plentiful. The leaves brim over, you could say. It's like living in a palace now.

The horticulturalist and the auditor began dating immediately.

Of Henri Willems, Ulises was uncertain. The man had what his mother referred to as a country chin, a square-cut jaw that finished flat instead of round. He seemed honest, which Ulises drew from the man's routinely plain attire, a necessity of doing business in the city and walking farmland in the same day. Willems's shoes were the thickest wing tips Ulises had ever seen, and he had to admit that he was impressed when the horticulturalist showed him the custom steel toes he'd had cobbled into the hand-stretched Spanish leather. Just the

same, Willems was pasty white, an inch shorter than Soledad, and his Spanish, when he braved speaking it in front of the family, had the strangest accent, a lingering stress falling on the final syllable of each sentence, which gave all his remarks the sound of a question.

He reminds me of your father, Soledad said when Ulises asked why she felt such a steady attraction to the European. This could not have surprised Ulises any more than it did. At first, she said, I thought it was his demeanor. He's a very confident man, and when he talks about tobacco—I don't know—it's ravishing. And when he talks about Cuba—do you know he's been twelve times?—it's as if he is seeing the same island that I am, which is a starving place, and if only we could unearth the fields again . . . but that's idealism, impractical, which is why Henri is here with the Habano, which is why you and I and your sister are here in New England. Some things need to be saved even at the cost of paradise. Henri understands that.

You've never called Cuba paradise before, Ulises said.

Soledad thought for a moment and then agreed. It's Henri, she said. He reminds me of the treasures one could have in Cuba. I had forgotten.

That's what Papi used to do, Ulises said.

Only the best version of your father did that: the man who planted tomatoes outside our house and made salads with them at night and would eat them plain off the vine. That was the man I loved. His hands were in the soil when you were young. When we left, he was trying to grow a rebel government, a new hierarchy, and those things aren't real in the end unless everyone believes them to be. Henri's cigars are real whether I smoke them or not.

Ulises shared his mother's response with Henri himself. Measured as the horticulturalist was, he simply said, I'm a fortunate man if your mother considers me the best version of the love of her life.

I think it means she could leave you at any moment, Ulises said, and I think that would be unfair. I think she's walking around in some

fantasy about who you are or, at least, who she wants you to be. I think she's feeling guilty still about leaving my father alone in Cuba.

I would expect as much, Willems said. It wasn't an easy thing your mother did. And if she ever leaves me, then she leaves me, but I'm taken with her and will believe it when she says it's me she wants.

What happens when you sleep together? Ulises asked. Aren't you afraid she might close her eyes and think of my father?

We've already consummated our relationship, Willems told Ulises. And though this is sacred ground, you've already broached it. So let me just say, she seems satisfied.

In reality, they were both right. Willems was a steady, mechanical lover, and Soledad's satisfaction stemmed from the combination of his consistency and the off chance that she might sometimes taste Connecticut dirt under his fingernails, a token of the fields and her abandoned husband, though it can be said that her concept of Uxbal had evolved into something more mythic by then, less a distinct person and more an archetype of her ideal counterpart.

Please don't think of me as the aggressive type, Willems said to Ulises, but the first night we saw each other, the inclination was mutual.

Ulises considered the history of his mother's sex life: he assumed that, since they'd arrived in the States, she'd not been with a man until Willems. That was five years of physical famine followed now by two months of feast. But how could his mother love a shadow, even a better shadow, of her distant husband without reservation? That meant moving, in some sense, backward in time. What had the gap been for if not for the last stage of abandonment? If not for forgetting? Ulises tried to imagine Uxbal during that half decade, what he must have been doing all that time. He also tried to imagine his father before they'd parted, but his memories were hazy at best.

I don't remember my father the same way my mother sometimes

does, he confessed to Willems. I don't really remember him much at all. But my mother and sister can't seem to forget him.

That's because sons have a tendency to become their fathers, Willems said. There's nothing to remember when you assume another man's life. It just becomes your own.

Ulises thought the horticulturalist was talking about fate, and he asked, What did your father do?

He was a tobacco farmer, Willems said.

A nagging fear took root in Ulises that he was headed in the same vague direction as Uxbal; that is, toward *oblivion and nothingness,* as Soledad had once described it. He was terrified not only to think that he might become his father, but also that he had no idea what that meant. More troubling was how his mother seemed so certain of Willems, the apparent resurrection of Uxbal. Ulises could not see what his mother saw: his father, as best he could remember, was a tall man with broad shoulders and a thick neck, bald from an early age, a pair of glasses perpetually hanging over his chest. Willems had pasty arms and that country jaw. He claimed to have 20/15 vision, and he was short enough to hide behind some of the more impressive tobacco plants he brought to their house, especially that first Sumatra leaf, which had grown another foot since its arrival, doing exactly what Ulises had predicted it would: crowd out the window in the living room with a set of ever-expanding leaves.

So Ulises asked Willems for a job. His logic was that he could scrape together a father, his old father, from bits of the Dutchman; he could resuscitate memories and eventually recall something of Uxbal besides the portrait lurking about his brain. Willems agreed to employ him, but only out of love for Soledad, and Ulises, like everyone else, would need to start at the bottom, working the crops in the field. So

Ulises bought three pairs of jeans and a broad-brimmed hat, and on a Sunday in August he was put to work in a Broadleaf field.

Ulises learned what his mother and sister had known for a long, long time: there is a great power in wanting. In the fields he'd proven himself almost useless; he, like Isabel, had Uxbal's long arms, but they were unaccustomed to the weight of tools, and soon he was relegated to the nearest greenhouse to sort, organize, and eventually catalog the seed inventory. He was dismayed at first, but when he noticed that Willems checked his seeds more often than he did his dirt, he thought the change fortuitous. The man was often about, and Ulises could study the Dutchman for shades of his father.

What Ulises had not expected was an industriousness to fill the hours in between Willems's visits to the greenhouse. Though the horticulturalist came in and out at least twice a day, his stays were brief, ten to fifteen minutes at most, and the hours in between became dark matter in need of mass. Into those voids Ulises thrust his energy, hoping always to accomplish some minor task worthy of Willems's attention when he arrived. Improving the already efficient operation was nearly impossible, but he did succeed in fine-tuning some minor movements of the Dutchman's tobacco orchestra: by the end of a month, he'd developed an epoxy-resin with which to coat the seed bags, essentially making them invincible; after two months, he'd built a sampling box for new seed varieties, which enabled Willems to better compare texture, smell, and speculative fecundity; by three months in, Ulises had reorganized not just his original greenhouse, but all the greenhouses Willems owned in Connecticut. The Dutchman nodded his head in genuine approval of all this, and, come November, when it was too cold to work the fields any further and the sky was permanently overcast, Willems decided to teach Ulises the finer points of his finished product, to give meaning to the boy's nascent understanding of its primary parts.

What did the study yield? As far as Ulises could tell, Willems touched everything: he ran his hand through seeds, fondled the leaves of infant tobaccos, tested the weight of fresh knives for leaf-cutting, passed between his palms small *matules,* the tiniest leaf bundles, and always balanced the newest cigar on his right index finger as if the tipping point was a symptom of its quality. Willems also smelled everything; it was something to see him kneel in a row of what would become Emperor Maduros and shove his face into the dirt. Often he tasted, and sometimes he even listened, though the listening seemed less scientific; the shaking of seed bags produced a shuffling sound Willems found pleasant. In the end, Ulises determined that his mother's lover was an empiricist.

But the conclusion didn't amount to much; Ulises could have come to the same truth at the dinner table and saved himself a season's worth of time. Over pork loin, rice, spinach salad, lentil soup, and turkey breast, Willems spoke to Soledad about the pains of his day and the progress of his crop, going so far as to outline the ever-shifting agricultural outlook for the week—the leaves will swell in this sun, the dirt will dry in this heat, the humidity will thicken the stalks, et cetera. At the same time he would comment on the tenderness of the brisket or the flexibility of the asparagus or the merlot's bouquet. Ulises had trouble associating him with his father, who seemed to dwell only in abstractions, in faith and politics. He decided it was the absence of Uxbal in Willems that Soledad found captivating. She was in love with the void.

But then, on a late November evening, Willems revealed himself at dinner. As was the custom, Isabel said grace before the meal, and the others, despite being essentially agnostic, humored her, bowing their heads and waiting out the lengthy benediction. Ulises, sore in the

neck from a day of tilling, looked up to see Willems mumbling under his breath. The Dutchman was praying, something Ulises had never expected from a man who routinely put his nose in the mud, and the moment Isabel whispered, *Amen,* he turned to Willems and asked, What are you praying for?

Willems looked caught in a lie, or, at least, embarrassed. He glanced at Soledad, who shrugged. The man sighed. Turning to Ulises, he said, The tobacco.

My grandfather had indentured servants, Willems confessed, former slaves and Indians, and they built our farms on the smaller islands of the West Indies. One on Cuba, also. They're the ones who picked our leaves and rolled our cigars. There was a cholera outbreak on one of the islands. According to my father, the servants would go out into the fields healthy and strong but return glassy-eyed and sluggish. A day came when twenty men and three children died in the fields. My father tried to persuade my grandfather to do something, to lug in fresh water, to clean the bunkhouses, to isolate the ill, but he refused. It was time for the harvest, and he simply imported more men, more Indians, some Chinese. The city health inspector quickly learned of my grandfather's negligence, shut down his farms, and burned all his tobacco fields along with the bodies of the dead. My father broke ties with the family and started his own tobacco company, but he would only make cigarettes. He said cigars were tainted. He said he had dreams, and in the dreams when he smoked cigars, the souls of the dead would seep out of them and haunt him for the rest of his life. I think they did anyway. My grandfather, at least, went mad. He died alone in a poorhouse. So this will sound ridiculous, but I sometimes worry that the fogs from my cigars are the souls of good people, and I say a little benediction for them.

But you're not afraid of ghosts, are you? Ulises asked.

I've inherited my father's fear, Willems said, but also my grandfather's constitution. I've yet to have my father's dreams, but I also

don't want to ignore the dead. He paused. I know, he said. It's all ludicrous.

A man divided, Ulises thought, and the pain of the division was clear on Willems's face. Ulises had never seen him so uncomfortable, and it was obvious that Willems couldn't reconcile his patriarchal past with his pragmatic present: he was the most careful man on the farm, and when he touched his seeds or smelled his dirt, it was with reverence. Ulises had assumed the affection was for the product itself, the finished Colorados and Obscuros, but in reality it was for what *might* be there, what was *possibly* buried in the soil. But the logic was irregular. Yes, the Dutchman was his father's son, but these fields were not the Antilles.

Poor man, Soledad said, and her sincerity prompted a memory of Uxbal for Ulises: his father splitting their tomato harvest in two, one half for the church and one half for the family. Ulises recognized that Soledad now looked at Willems similarly. Uxbal grew tomatoes for his family *and* his revolution, and Willems grew tobacco, rolled cigars, for his livelihood *and* for fear of inherited haunts. And in that wistful look of his mother, Ulises finally understood the connection between the Dutchman and his rebel father; both men were inclined toward reason *and* fancy, and the tension of opposing forces, the power of separate wants, perhaps more powerful even than his mother or sister's unidirectional wanting, was the origin of each man's exceptional gusto.

That night Ulises and Isabel were kept awake by Willems and their mother's exceptional gusto, the intensity of their lovemaking rattling the master-bedroom door. In the kitchen, Ulises and his sister waited for the session to end, but it lasted longer than expected. In the dark, Ulises told his sister that he thought Willems and Uxbal shared the same space in Soledad's heart.

Because he sees ghosts? Isabel asked.

Because he sees something that's not there, Ulises said.

This they both agreed upon: Soledad's mad love for Willems, the

evidence as loud and steady as roosters at sunrise. And they were both right. Up in the bedroom, Soledad rocked atop her Dutchman suitor with her eyes closed, and what she saw centered in that void was a faceless man rolling cigars next to a tomato vine, the symbolism trite and obvious, though arousing just the same. And, to be fair, she felt not that Willems had stepped more fully into her husband's shoes, but that he had stepped closer to the vision of her ideal man she had been cultivating ever since her departure from Cuba. Gasping, Soledad didn't know if Willems had finished with her, and so she reached for his penis, but he grabbed her hand and simply bit her neck. Over their slowed respirations they could hear the children retiring to their rooms.

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BILL RANCIC

A NOVEL

First Light

Bill Rancic
G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

New York

One

The envelope arrives one afternoon when I'm out in the yard raking leaves. I'm feeling pretty good at the moment, watching the street for the car bringing my wife and son home from the soccer game, wondering if Jackson got to play, wondering if he got to score. He's been riding the bench all season, watching his friends get more playing time, and it's been bothering him enough that he's added extra practices and workouts to his routine, running suicide drills at the stadium, lining up kick after kick in the fall twilight. I've been practicing with him in the evenings and on weekends, videotaping him so he can watch his form. A dentist appointment that morning kept me from actually making it to the game, but I've been thinking of my son all day as I scrape up leaves, red and brown and gold, wondering how it went. If he still didn't get to play, or played badly . . . I know how disappointed he'll be.

I remind myself that Jackson is a bright and loving kid who does well in school, who has plenty of friends, who is pretty much as well adjusted as any parent could hope. If he doesn't get to play in the soccer game today, so be it. Worse things have happened.

The leaves crackling underfoot remind me of the crunch of snow in the dead of winter. For a minute I'm back in the Yukon, in the woods with the snow falling all around, listening to Kerry's slow breathing, watching her chest rise and fall. It's a memory I have often—when my wife crawls into my arms at night, when our son sits between us on the sofa at home to watch a movie together or read a book. I remember praying for another breath, then another, then another. Praying for her, for us, to live, and thinking, *I'm not strong enough for this. I'll never be strong enough.*

My breath catches, and I freeze for a moment, remembering. The truth is that we almost didn't happen, Kerry and Jackson and me. If we hadn't been saved. If we hadn't survived. Then a siren blares and I remember where I am, what I'm doing. The ordinary world fits itself around me again, safe and

calm and familiar.

The mailman pauses on his afternoon route to hand me the mail. Behind me, the house Kerry and I bought and renovated seven years ago sits in its rectangle of mown grass, stained-glass windows glinting red and gold in the sun. Down the street I can hear the kids at the playground, their voices rising on the afternoon air like a flock of birds. I get a glimpse of Lake Michigan through the trees, sea green and icy cold even on such a hot day. Along the shore there are kids biking and playing volleyball, whizzing by on skateboards, soaking up every moment of sun before the long, cold Chicago winter that's coming, and I think that maybe Jackson and I will join them, once he gets home.

But when I flip through the mail and see the envelope with the Denali Airlines logo on the cover, I know immediately what's inside. I don't need to do any math to know that this year marks the tenth anniversary of the crash; I feel it every time I look at Jackson, his gangly limbs, his big feet and hands. Like my wife and me, he's a survivor, though he doesn't know it yet.

I sit down on my front steps with the envelope in both hands, turning it over and over, almost afraid to open it. Finally I slit the top and take out the card inside, also printed with the Denali Airlines logo: a blue mountain backlit by a setting red sun. I read: *You and your family are cordially invited to be our honored guests at a ceremony honoring the victims and survivors of Flight 806 . . .*

"Dad? Are you okay?"

It's Jackson. He and Kerry are home from the soccer game, but I didn't hear them pull up to the curb. I didn't hear anything except the roaring in my ears.

I look up into the face of my son, so like his mother—large, light-brown eyes, a mop of thick auburn hair that he's forever refusing to cut, the same high, freckled cheekbones, the same wide mouth. He's always been a good kid. Good-hearted, level-headed, if a bit on the sensitive side, with a tendency to mope. Like me.

I think, *It's time. He deserves to know.*

For a minute I consider throwing the invitation away, pretending it never came, but that's not a serious option. There are a hundred reasons why we should be at that memorial service, the most

important standing right in front of me.

“Dad?”

“I’m fine, buddy,” I say. “I’m just looking at this invitation that came in the mail.”

Behind him Kerry sees the envelope and freezes. She, too, knows what it means.

“Invitation? Like to a party?” asks Jackson.

“Sort of. I was thinking maybe you and me and your mom should take a trip.”

Jackson’s face lights up. “Like, where?”

I can see by the look on his face that he’s equating the word “trip” with “vacation”—Disney World, maybe, or California. Someplace warm, near the ocean, with a nice sandy beach and warm blue swimming pool and maybe a water slide or two. He isn’t thinking about snow and isolation, the deep cold woods of northern Canada. He isn’t thinking about memorials to the dead. His life, until now, has been fairly uneventful. A fact his mom and I have tried very hard to preserve.

Jackson grabs his skateboard from the front porch and is doing a few simple tricks along the sidewalk while we talk, taking a bit of a tumble when he trips trying to flip the board over. “Helmet, please,” his mother reminds him for the millionth time. He groans and takes the helmet out of the trunk of the car. Soon he’ll be a teenager, and getting him to listen won’t be so easy. *No,* I think—*it has to be now.* While he might still be willing to open his ears and his heart and hear, really hear, what we have to say.

“I was thinking we could take a drive up to Canada. To Whitehorse,” I say. “There’s something happening there soon the three of us are part of.”

I can feel Kerry tense up, but Jackson is oblivious to his mother’s fear, and mine. He scrunches up his face. “Whitehorse? Is that a real place?”

“It’s a city in Yukon Territory. Near Alaska.”

“Oh.” His face falls a little bit. “It sounded like town in *Dragon Age* or something. I thought it would be something cool.”

“It’s a real place, all right. Your mom and I have been there before.”

He looks intrigued. This is new information to him. “When?”

Kerry glances at me. We both knew this day was coming. Maybe not today, but soon. She says, “Before you were born, honey.”

He’s looking at me sideways now, his brown eyes full of skepticism, even a touch of annoyance. We almost never talk about our lives before he was born, though I know he’s curious. He asks us, sometimes, the story of how we met. “At work,” is all we’ve ever told him. “We worked together, and then we fell in love and decided to get married.” He’s never pushed the issue, though I’ve often wondered when he would ask for more details, when we’d have to tell him the truth and nothing but the truth.

Jackson says, “Did you say we’re going to *drive* there? Isn’t it, like, a million miles from here?”

“Four days’ drive, maybe five.” There is no way, absolutely no possibility of getting Kerry on a plane, not to mention me. Driving is our only option.

He groans. “Five days in the *car*? For *fun*?”

“Not exactly for fun,” I say. “It will be educational.”

That word “educational” is Jackson’s personal bête noire. He doesn’t like museums or historical sites, any of the things his mom and I have tried to interest him in whenever we use that word. He hears “educational” and thinks “boring.” But I have something in mind for this trip that will make driving imperative, beyond our fear of flying. And it will be educational, just not the way he thinks.

I want Jackson to see. To *know* the place, and what happened to us there. I want him to taste the air in the Yukon, ride its roads, see its towns and its hills. I want it to be as much a part of him, his life, as it is Kerry’s and mine.

“There’s a ceremony of sorts. A memorial for the victims of a plane crash. We should all be there.”

“A memorial for a plane crash? Why?” He drags out the last word, filling it with all the pre-teen skepticism he can muster.

“We were on the plane when it crashed,” I say.

I’ve imagined saying the words for so long, practiced them so many times, that the words are halfway out of my mouth before I realize it, but Jackson only looks at me and laughs, a kind of incredulous chuckle. Like he thinks this is another one of my weird dad jokes, as silly as the time when I

taped a picture of a mallard to the low ceiling over the basement stairs and told him to “duck” when he went downstairs. He doesn’t realize I’m serious. “No, really, Dad. What’s going on?” He looks from me to his mom and back. “A plane crash? Like, for real?”

I catch Kerry’s eye. We’ve talked about this moment so often: when we will tell him, how we will. We’ve been close to doing it already a number of times the past few weeks but just haven’t been able to make ourselves do it. Now her look says, *Are you sure about this?*

I’m not, not at all, and I know she isn’t, either. Still, she says, “For real.”

A hundred tiny emotions flit across his face—anger and confusion and fascination and fear. Finally he settles for curiosity. “Why didn’t you ever tell me?”

Kerry steps up and puts a hand on his shoulder, though I can see his posture tighten, almost wanting to throw her off but not able to bring himself to do it; he’s at that age when he both wants and resents his mother’s reassurances. “It’s complicated,” she says. “But we think maybe you’re grown up enough now to understand.”

He narrows his eyes at her, still skeptical. “But only if we go on this trip, right?”

“I know it doesn’t sound like fun,” I say. “But I think we should be there.”

Already I’m planning. Four days in the car, maybe five, would be just enough time to talk to Jackson. We need to be able to talk to our son, to have his full attention, away from video games and soccer and math homework, away from his friends and the city and all our familiar places and distractions. We need him to listen. To hear us.

“Dad,” he says, “can’t we go to Disney World instead? Or at least the beach?”

“This is more important, buddy. This is someplace we need to be. I promise you, this is something you’ll always remember.”

“You always say that, and it always ends up being so *boring*.”

He’s not accepting it, but at least he’s not fighting me too hard. It will be okay, I know it. “What do you think? Want a snack?” I ask, putting my arms around him and leading him inside the house, the dog panting at his heels.

"Sure," he says. "But nothing healthy. No kale. I hate that stuff."

I laugh. "I wouldn't dream of it."

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By the time we've got the car packed, the mail stopped, the house buttoned up for the time it will take to drive to Canada, attend the dedication, and come home again, we're all worked up into such a state of anxiety that even the dog seems glad to see us go, dashing off her leash at the kennel without so much as a backward glance. Jackson cries a little on Sasha's neck, turning his face away so I won't see his tears. "She'll be happier in the kennel than in the car with us, buddy," I tell him. "We'll be back in no time." He turns his head away so he won't have to answer. He's having trouble believing that his mom and I are taking this trip for anyone's benefit except our own, and I don't think he's entirely wrong about that.

We climb in the car, and soon we're on the highway heading out of the city, past deep-dish pizza parlors and Vienna Beef stands, merging into the stream of cars on the Kennedy heading north toward the Wisconsin border. Traffic is terrible, the cars thick and slow moving, like minutes ticking on a clock. A few days out of town, away from the crowds and noise, will be a relief. But then I remember the quiet of the forest and the snow in the Yukon, the sound of the wind in the trees, the bitter cold that seeped into my fingers and toes, the fear, and I remember. This isn't a vacation: Kerry and I nearly died out there. She spent a week in the hospital after, myself more than two. She still suffers migraines and memory loss from the injuries she sustained in the crash. She still has nightmares sometimes, though in the mornings she says she doesn't remember what they're about. In some ways, I think it's better. There are parts of the story I wish I could forget, too.

As we head north, the Chicago streets give way to a stream of beige suburbs, the white hulks of malls, the green tracts of forest preserves and subdivisions, the houses growing farther and farther apart until suddenly we're out in the country, in the open spaces of farmland and dairy pasture, the stubble fields brown in the fall light. Here and there a cloud of dust announces the presence of a combine harvesting the last of the corn, and every few miles a handpainted sign declares "Pumpkins for sale!" At

each one, Jackson begs us to stop and buy a pumpkin, forgetting we won't be home for weeks, that there is no more room in our Toyota for anything after packing three suitcases, a cooler of snacks, and Jackson's collection of books and games.

"Maybe on the way back, buddy," I say. I've taken the first shift, thinking Kerry will want to take the lead—she's his mom, and much of the telling of it should come from her—but I catch her eye across the car. The night before, she'd told me she was ready, that it was time. "I'll be glad to get it over with," she'd said, pulling out the old black journal, the only thing she'd brought back with her from the Yukon. I'd glanced at it, and she said, "It will be a relief to talk to him about everything, finally."

Now neither of us can bear to begin. It should be just like ripping off a Band-Aid, I think—one quick tug and you're done. Maybe we should wait for Jackson to ask a question. But no, that's no good, we might be waiting until we get back home again and the trip will be over.

Kerry makes a choking noise in her throat, and I shoot her a quick look of sympathy. It isn't easy, this business of dredging up the past. I realize with a tiny jolt that the black journal is in her lap. I didn't even see her take it out.

"Don't feel like you have to say everything at once," I say. "Begin at the beginning."

"I can't."

"One of us has to. We're going to want to stop for the night in an hour or so."

She squeezes her eyes shut. "It's too hard."

"You were always good at stories," I tell her. "Why is it so hard now?"

"There are big parts of it I don't really remember. And what about the rest? All those things we only learned about afterward, in the hospital? I don't know if it's enough."

"What you don't remember, I do. The parts we didn't see first-hand, we'll have to describe as best we can, as they were told to us."

"It feels weird. Speaking for people who can't speak for themselves."

She knows what I'll say next, because I've said it before, more times than either of us can count: *If we can't speak for them, then who can?* We are the living witnesses, the survivors, but we've always

known this story belongs as much to the dead as to the living. We owe it to them to tell their story as truthfully as we can.

She rubs the cover of the black journal and gives me a wan smile.

"Don't worry," I tell her. "We're in this together."

She reaches over and takes my hand, gulping in air. It's clear I will have to begin. Looking into the rearview mirror at our son, who's reading a book, I say, "Hey, buddy. Jackson. Your mom and I want to talk to you a minute." He leans forward, between the two front seats. "Do you remember your mom and me saying something about a plane crash?"

I can feel him sit up a little, pay more attention. "You said you'd tell me all about it on this trip. You said I was old enough now to understand."

"Maybe he's still not ready," Kerry says, so quietly I wonder if Jackson hears.

I reach over and grab her hand, feeling how badly it's shaking. "He is."

"Understand what?" He furrows his brow. "Like secrets?"

Secrets. The one word we were being so careful to avoid. "Not exactly. But parts of the truth we were waiting to tell you when you were old enough."

"So . . . secrets, basically." The kid is too smart for his own good sometimes.

His mom looks at him, then at me. "They might seem like secrets, but we don't think of them that way. It's just some things we've been waiting to tell you when the time was right. Grown-up things, I guess you could say."

I've rehearsed this speech over and over on nights when I couldn't sleep, starting when Jackson was a baby curled in his crib. *You have to understand*, I always start, in my imagination. *We all thought we were going to die. Some of us* did *die. And the things we did in order to live . . . none of it will ever be completely understandable to someone who wasn't there. But I have to try to make you see why it matters. Because if I don't, then what was it we were trying so hard to live* for*?*

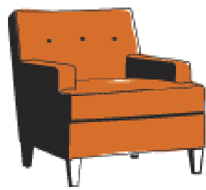
Next to me, his mother takes a deep breath and blows it out slowly. Her face is white. "Mom," Jackson says, "are you all right?"

She fixes a smile onto her face and says, “I will be, honey.”

Outside the windows the miles of corn and the little farms go by, the cows chewing their cud in the fields. Tomorrow we’ll cross over into Canada, leaving behind the familiar world. There can be no more excuses, no more delays. Let him know that everything we did was for him, and why it all matter so much, still.

Every child deserves that. To know. To understand.

And so we begin.



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