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SAMPLER

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## SPRING 2015 DEBUT FICTION SAMPLER

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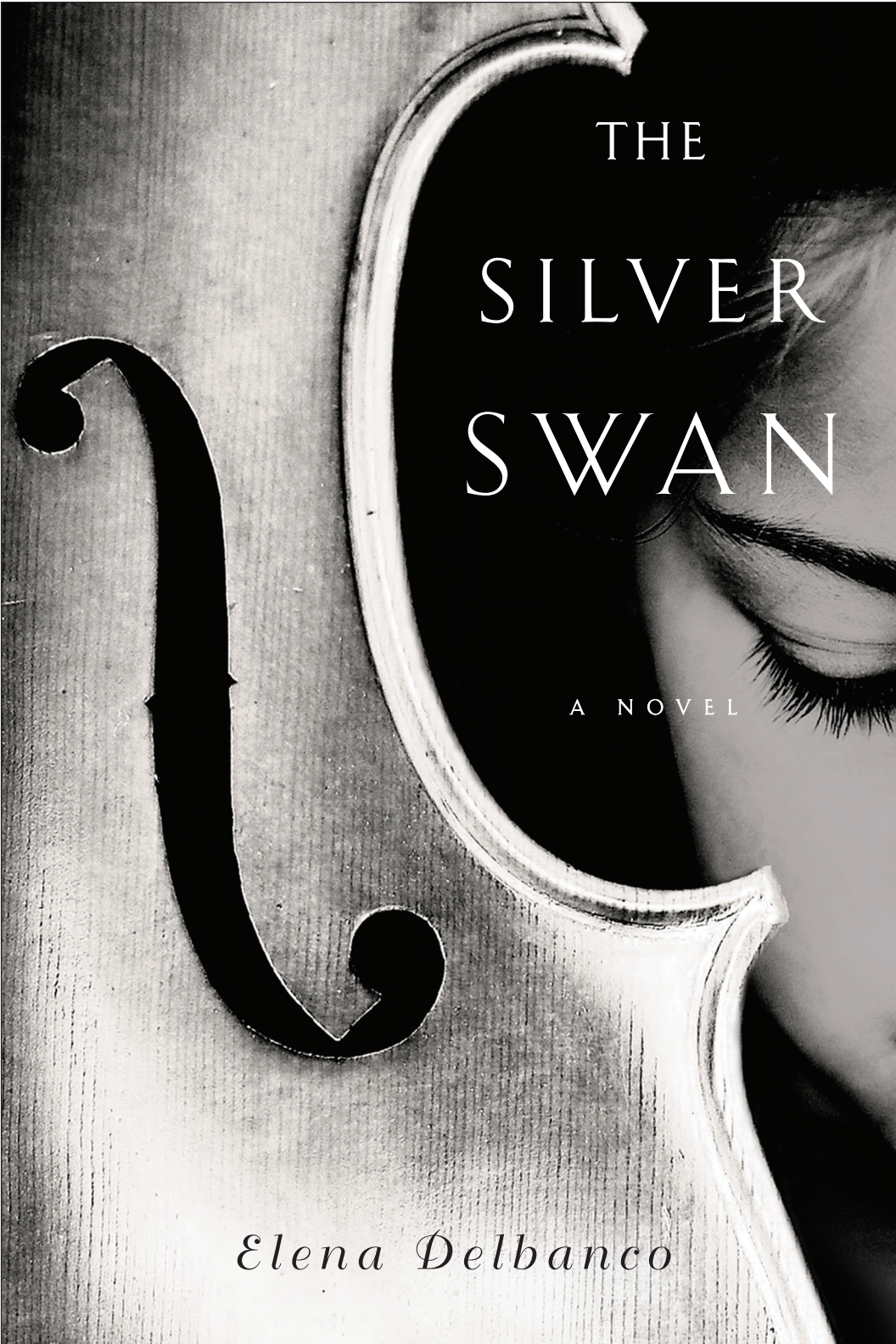
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THE  
SILVER  
SWAN

A NOVEL

*Elena Delbanco*

THE  
SILVER  
SWAN

*Elena Delbanco*



OTHER PRESS

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

*For Nicholas, forever*

The silver swan, who living had no note,  
As death approached, unlocked her silent throat.  
Leaning her breast against the reedy shore,  
Thus sang her first and last, and sang no more.  
“Farewell all joy, oh death come close mine eyes,  
More geese than swans now live, more fools than wise.”

— Orlando Gibbons, “The Swan Song,” Old English madrigal, 1612

## PROLOGUE

*1980*

Because the wood floor creaks in the long corridor, Mariana can hear her father approaching. She turns toward the door. As it opens, she looks down at the small cello she has been playing and tightly grips the bow. Alexander Feldmann leans against the doorframe. He wears a silk paisley dressing gown and embroidered slippers. With a cigarette in a tortoiseshell holder in his hand, he stares at her, exhaling smoke. “Mariana, you’re flat. That A is too flat.”

Sixty years old, Alexander is well over six feet, handsome, with dark hair now silvered at the temples; his brown eyes are deep set, his chin strong. Mixed in with the tobacco, Mariana smells his lavender eau de cologne. He chides her gently, less irritably. “You’re not stretching far enough, sweetheart. When your hands have grown a little, this won’t be so difficult.”

Looking down at her cello, she nods.

“You’re noodling around, Mariana, you’re not really practicing. I can tell. And why are you sitting on your desk chair? Your feet can’t reach the floor. How can you play when you’re not stable or grounded?”

“I don’t like to sit on the little chair, Papa. I put it in the closet. It’s too small.”

He laughs and comes to stand behind her. Mariana feels shy with her father, who is rarely home. World famous as a performer, he has a schedule of concerts that keeps him away; he is already booked for the next three years. And during his days in Manhattan, Alexander is preoccupied with his own daily hours of practice and giving cello lessons in his studio in the apartment. His students, from Juilliard, come and go all day, each for an appointed hour.

Now he touches her shoulder, amused. “Mama told me that you erased Eric Katz’s name and put yours on my list for a lesson today. That was naughty.”

“I know you’re leaving again,” she whispers. “First thing tomorrow morning.”

“And?”

She pauses, looking away. “I wanted to be with you.”

Alexander takes another puff of his cigarette. “Well, when you finish practicing, you may join us for breakfast. Your mother and I do need to talk before I go to Switzerland.”

He leans down and takes her left hand, showing her the position she needs to reach the A properly. His face is smooth, the scent of his aftershave strong. Sweeping her hair aside, he gently kisses her neck. She closes her eyes. He whispers, “You must work harder, sweetheart. It takes more than talent to be a great cellist. It takes *hard* work, dedication.” As he leaves her room, he says, “For a special treat, if you work hard on the Sarabande this morning, I’ll let you play it for me on the Silver Swan, after breakfast. We’ll eat when you’re done.”

Then he is gone. Mariana waits for a moment. She reaches her hand to her hair and smells it dreamily for traces of him.

When he is away, she sneaks into his room and puts drops of his scent on her fingers. Then she rushes back to her own room and rubs her fingers on her pillowcase. The fragrance soothes her, helps her sleep.

Again she starts to play. In her nightgown, Mariana is working on Bach. She is tall for an eight-year-old, all arms and legs and angles; the seeds of future beauty have been planted in her face. As she leans forward, her long, dark hair falls over the instrument. She brushes it away with her right arm, lifting the bow impatiently. Forcing herself to concentrate, she repeats the opening measures of the Sarabande from the G-Major Suite. Filtered through venetian blinds, sun rises over the rooftops of Fifth Avenue across the wintry park. Though her bedroom door is closed, in the pauses while she rests she can hear her parents' voices raised in disagreement.

When twenty minutes have passed—a clock hangs on the bedroom wall, exacting and reproachful—she places the bow on the music stand and hops off her chair. Then, having set her instrument carefully down on the rug, she walks the long, dark corridor past the dining room and kitchen to what her parents call “the dinette,” where they await her. It is eight in the morning, a Sunday in mid-February. The walls of the apartment have just been painted—this is a choice of her mother's—charcoal gray.



The dinette is small, with a round table and molded pedestal chairs. Her own chair tips when Mariana climbs onto it, sitting between her father and mother and keeping her eyes on the table, not looking at the wall, which has been recently papered. The pattern makes her dizzy: thin stripes

of pale green and brown that, if she watches closely, waver. She shuts her eyes, then opens them, and the stripes merge and converge.

Her parents have stopped arguing. They are smoking and drinking espresso. A newspaper is folded at her mother's place, her eyeglasses, with their silver cord, resting on it. Her white hair is thick and unbrushed. Though Alexander urges her to color it, she will not. A great beauty once (so Mariana has been told and can see in the framed photographs of the young Pilar), her mother resolutely refuses to "keep herself up." That is her father's phrase when reproachful or angry, and he seems angry now. Pilar too is clad in a bathrobe. It is neither silk nor paisley, but nylon and black. When Alexander is away, she often wears it all day.

As Mariana reaches for the pitcher of orange juice, her mother says, not looking at her,

"Mariana, you know I don't like you to go barefoot. Where are your slippers?"

"I'm sorry."

"Let her be," says Alexander. "It's the day of rest..."

Her mother has tears in her eyes. Mariana knows her parents often fight before her father leaves on tour. This makes her both anxious and sad. Pilar places a plate of toast in front of her and pours a glass of juice, silent. "Thank you," Mariana says, and tries to touch her mother's hand, but she has pulled it away. The girl swallows what she barely chews. Dutifully, she slips down off her pedestal chair to retrieve her slippers. As she leaves the dinette, her father folds his napkin, takes one last sip of coffee, and tells her to join him in the studio.

"You've done a nice job this morning," he says. "Now come and play the Sarabande for me on the Silver Swan."

In her slippers, she runs the length of the apartment to Alexander's studio. As is the case with her bedroom, it looks out over Central Park. Here, however, the windows are unobstructed and sunlight floods the room. A concert grand Steinway, covered in a woven shawl of orange and gold, stands against one wall. The opposite wall has shelves from floor to ceiling, filled with music manuscripts and recordings and file boxes of Alexander's reviews. Also on the shelves are many photographs of him in evening clothes, onstage or backstage or with other musicians, shaking hands and smiling. There are citations and framed album covers and a Grammy Award and two Grand Prix du Disque.

A pair of cello cases stand in a corner, both closed. In the room's center, on a worn Persian rug, two chairs face each other. A small table holds a metronome and an ashtray filled with cigarette butts. The great Catalan cellist Pablo Casals, her father tells her, smoked a pipe while playing. When they opened up the maestro's cello, Alexander says, there were match heads and tobacco and even an old coin that had fallen through one of the f-holes and rattled around inside.

She giggles. "But we'll be much more careful," says her father, "won't we, with the Silver Swan?" He tells Mariana to sit in the chair facing his, then goes to one of the cases and carefully removes what he calls his treasure, the great love of his life. "I am speaking only of music, of course," he says. "You are the love of my life when I'm speaking of people."

"And Mama?" she asks. He doesn't answer.

As he brings the Stradivarius toward her, Alexander turns the instrument this way and that in the morning sun. The varnish glows a warm golden-orange. It absorbs yet engenders the light, sending flashes of sunlight across the walls.

“Beautiful, isn’t it, sweetheart?” He holds the Swan up beside her. “Let’s find our secret sign.”

At the crest of the cello’s dark scroll, Mariana studies two one-inch silver engravings: matched medallions of a swan poised for flight above the wooden pegs. The carvings, though small, are intricate. There is a story about them, one he has told her often. An artist called Benvenuto Cellini, a very famous Italian, used the pattern of a swan for a silver sculpture he made to decorate a container for salt. Somehow someone cut it up, and Stradivari was given the little swans to keep. When he built this instrument, he fitted the birds’ metal profiles onto the carved wooden scroll. “That’s why it’s called the Silver Swan. This happened in 1712 — can you believe it? — more than sixty years before America became America. And now this great cello, this work of art, belongs to me, to us.”

On one side of the mirroring paired images, Alexander’s own initials form part of the design, added to the filigree, an etched *AF* on the feathers of a wing. Her father has told Mariana that only three people in the world — he, she, and her mother — are aware of the existence of these additional marks. And the man who did the markings (here Alexander drops his voice) took his knowledge to the grave. So it is *our* family secret, *our* hidden sign, and the way you, Mariana Alexandra Feldmann, will always be able to recognize the authentic cello. There are lots of ugly ducklings, Alexander says, but only one true Swan. He tunes the instrument.

She watches her father’s long strong fingers, as he turns the wooden pegs. When he has finished tuning, he puts the gleaming Swan between her knees and kneels beside her on the carpet. He strokes her cheek. She is transfixed.

“All right, my angel, play beautifully for your papa.” He stands again. “One day, we’ll rent Carnegie Hall and we’ll choose the same date as my debut there in 1945. That happens to have been your birthday,” he reminds her. “Twenty-seven years later, you arrived on that exact date. It’s our magic number.” Mariana wonders if she would like to work so hard on her birthday but does not interrupt. She knows this story well, too. “A day I could never forget,” he says. “My debut. This is how I remember your birthday.”

“You’ll be away again this year,” she murmurs, but Alexander is lost in his fantasy.

“We’ll go to Bergdorf Goodman to buy you a glamorous dress and you’ll choose the color. I’ll be very proud of you, won’t I?” He holds her chin gently, his face close to hers. She doesn’t answer.

“Remember, best of all,” he repeats. “On that day, you’ll play the Swan.”

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Mariana*

*2010*

The winter had been hard and long: snow, rain, a sudden thaw, then snow again. By mid-April, finally, the ground had cleared. Mariana was on her way to Boston to meet her father's lawyer. As the plane landed at Logan, she pulled on her knee-high leather boots, fastened her hair with a tortoise clip, and returned her book to the Hermès bag between her feet. She was coming from New York for the day and carried no luggage. The man across the aisle, with whom she'd briefly spoken as they boarded, watched her unabashedly. At almost six feet, a dark and angular beauty, she was used to such attention; men had been staring at her for years. Crossing her legs and pressing them against the tray in front of her, she leaned back in her own cramped seat. Wind gusts, the pilot warned them, might be strong. Turbulence did not bother her.

Once at the gate, she unbuckled her belt and reached into the overhead bin for the rain cape it seemed she was going to need. Draping it around her shoulders, Mariana hoisted her bag and waited to deplane. Now her high-heeled boots felt tight, and she regretted having removed them for the flight.

Her father had died suddenly in his house in the Berkshires on January 10, ten days after his ninetieth birthday party. Because he and Mariana were just about to share their ritual cocktail at five thirty, she was able to give the corner an almost exact accounting of the timing of his fall: five twenty-eight. Waiting impatiently, on the second-floor landing, shouting for his nurse-attendant, he had raised himself from his wheelchair, become entangled in his oxygen tubing, and clattered down the long flight of stairs. Mariana, in the kitchen, ran to him, but he was unconscious. The nurse dialed 911. Mariana blamed herself. Had she been standing near her father — not staring out the kitchen window at the snowdrifts and the blowing snow — she might have caught him as he tumbled from the wheelchair, or might have broken his fall. She blamed the nurse as well.

Feldmann had survived his wife — who was fifteen years younger — by seven years. When her mother passed away on a clear, March morning, Mariana had been at her side. She and the hospice nurse had just finished changing their charge's nightgown and brushing back her silver hair. Pilar lay silent as the nurse gathered up the soiled clothes and sheets and took them to the laundry. Mariana held her mother's hand and studied her face, its sweet, peaceful expression. She spoke to her mother with the tenderness Pilar had so long rejected. These moments would have to satisfy her. They were what she would retain: a faint pressure on her hand, a sigh. She leaned down to whisper, "I love you, Mama." Mariana felt no breath. She cried out for the nurse.

At the moment his wife died, Alexander was in Poland, judging a competition. He hurried back, bemoaning his loss, proclaiming devotion to Pilar's memory and telling his

consolers he could not go on without her. Feldmann performed his sadness, an oratorio of grief.

In late May 2003, he sold the apartment on Central Park West and moved to Stockbridge, in the Berkshires. He told Mariana he was tired of the city and ready to live “in nature.” The family had long owned a summer place near Tanglewood that Alexander named “Swann’s Way” although he’d never read a word of Proust. Mariana had packed up Alexander’s apartment, closed up her own—a brownstone walk-up a few blocks away—and moved to Stockbridge with her father to care for him through the summer. The chamber music group she had played with since giving up her solo career, the New York Chamber Ensemble, did not perform in the summer months. When autumn came, she took a leave of absence to stay with Alexander. He said he could not survive without her, although he criticized her daily for forsaking her career.

Alexander required constant attention, and toward the end, Mariana was the only one left to provide it. She rarely left his side. One evening, shortly before his death, they sat together.

“Have I finished my martini, sweetheart?” Alexander’s fingers, trembling on the surface of the marble table, felt for the stem of the glass he could not see.

“There’s one more sip, Papa, and the olive’s at the bottom,” Mariana answered, edging the glass toward his hand. “And because it’s almost Christmas, we’ll celebrate. I’ll make you another. A small one, a mini. But you mustn’t get too sleepy before dinner. We have a lovely one tonight.”

He lifted his glass to capture the last drops. “You take such good care of me, darling. You must be very dull in the country with only an old man and his old friends for company.”

Mariana smiled at him. He had always confused the words “dull” and “bored,” as did his parents, who were Viennese and spoke tentative English all their lives. She took pleasure in this residue of foreign speech and did not correct him. “I am not at all dull here. I have a great deal to do taking care of you. I’ve come to love our life in Stockbridge, and, besides, I can always return to New York for a few days if I get restless.”

The old man was anxious. “You’re not planning to go again soon, are you? I get very lonely when you leave me here with nurses who never have anything interesting to say and can’t make a decent martini!” She laughed and stood up, reaching across the table to remove his glass. A small fire glowed across the room in the immense fireplace.

“No, I’m not leaving you. I haven’t found one good reason to go to New York in months, except to check on my apartment. I’m staying here, Papa.”

Outside, it was dark, and the holiday lights Mariana had strung on the evergreens in front of the house illuminated the fresh snow. They had had no such lights when she was a child and they came to this house in the Berkshires for the holiday season. Her parents opposed them. “We are Jewish, after all,” her mother said. But now her mother was dead, and her father took pleasure in the sparkling display. A large Christmas tree, cut on the property, stood in the entrance hall. Under it, Mariana had placed the presents for Alexander that arrived each day from friends and students and fans. There were many. He was impatient for Christmas morning and asked her often to tell him how many days he would have to wait.

“I’m going to the kitchen to fix your drink and tend to dinner,” she announced, leaning down to kiss the top of his head.

“Why don’t you play for a little while? This would be a good time.” She positioned his wheelchair, turning it away from the table, and put on the brakes. The Silver Swan rested on the paisley shawl covering the grand piano. Mariana brought it to him. Then she applied resin to his bow. With the fire at his back, he began to play as she took up his empty glass and left the room.

Standing at the bar in the butler’s pantry, Mariana opened the glass cabinet doors and removed the gin and vermouth. She filled the silver shaker with ice and carefully measured Alexander’s martini, then poured herself a glass of white wine. Since her mother’s death, they had spent so many evenings this way, alone or with company, winter and summer. Mariana had managed the beautiful old house, giving dinners and parties for the musicians who played at Tanglewood, inviting Alexander’s friends, students, and former colleagues, and a few of her own, to visit. She had flown with him to dozens of “farewell” concerts, to master classes and competitions and festivals in Puerto Rico, Germany, Spain, France, Korea, China, Japan, and Argentina. But in the past year, he had grown frail, tired, and forgetful. His eyesight had failed. He wanted less company but kept her at his side.

The great irony for Mariana was that this life she now shared with Alexander was all her mother ever wanted. More and more despondent, her mother had waited for him to grow tired of traveling and concertizing, to come home, to take up a life with her—a life like this, shared evenings by the fire, idle conversation, hands touching as they watched the stars above the mountains. She felt deeply sad that her mother had missed Alexander’s new sweetness, the gentle humor and tenderness he expressed in these last years. Gone were the

fearsome outbursts of temper, the anger and egotism that terrorized her and suffocated Pilar. Here was this loving old man who needed her. Her mother had died too soon.

Alexander's night nurse was eating her dinner at the kitchen table. She smiled at Mariana, arching her eyebrow at the extra martini on the tray, but said nothing. The old man must have his small pleasures, they had all agreed. Returning to the living room, Mariana set the drinks on the table and sat down. Alexander was playing the G-Major Bach Suite, the one he best remembered. His eyes were closed. The Silver Swan, its sound a resonant liquid gold, filled the room and vibrated in her chest. As she listened and sipped her wine, she imagined the Swan in the eighteenth-century Cremonese atelier where it was created; she saw another old man, brush in hand, applying his expert strokes of varnish as the instrument itself became a glistening source of light. This treasure, passed down through centuries and now possessed by Alexander Feldmann, would soon enough be hers.

The best violoncelli had names. She remembered some of them: the Bass of Spain, the Gore-Booth, and the Piatti. They were often named after the people who owned or performed on them: the Batta, the Countess of Stanlein, the Paganini, the Servais, the Duport, the Davidoff. "Perhaps," Alexander often said, "this will become the Feldmann. It may someday be named for me."



He came to the end of the suite and, exhausted, let his bow arm fall to his side. Mariana took the instrument from him. On the piano she saw the soft cloth he used to wipe the residue

of resin off the varnish. She retrieved it and, by the light of the lamp, cleaned the wood under the bridge.

“Don’t put it away just yet, darling,” Alexander murmured. “I would like to hear you play the Swan for me with the strength of your youth. I find I no longer can make it sing.”

“I can’t say I agree,” she answered. “You’ve lost very little.” This was not exactly true, but it was what her father wanted to hear. With her free hand, she moved a chair in front of him and placed the Swan between her legs. “What do you want me to play?”

“The D Major,” he said. She paused a moment and then plunged into the suite with force. He sat — eyes closed, smiling — and with his right hand beat time.

Mariana returned the Swan to the safe in Alexander’s studio and wheeled him to the dining room for dinner, drawing his chair up to the head of the long, polished table. She lit candles on the sideboard, tucked his napkin under his chin, and went to the kitchen. Returning with two bowls of onion soup, she joined him.

“I wonder how I shall be remembered,” Alexander began. Mariana sighed, anticipating another dinner spent discussing her father’s legacy, but she humored him as usual. “Really, Papa, your recordings will be played forever. No one will surpass your performance of the Dvořák concerto.”

“How sad,” he continued, “that I never recorded the Bach suites. I waited too long, it appears. That is a great loss for the world.” Feldmann paused. “I wonder if it’s too late.” Mariana didn’t answer. She too wished he had recorded them, but it was certainly too late. As they finished dinner, he grew troubled. “My sweetheart,” he said, patting Mariana’s hand, “you

are so good to me. But what will you do when I'm gone?" He paused again. "You know I have been ready to die for a long time now, but I cannot — because I know how much you need me and depend on me."

Mariana suppressed exasperation as he looked at her wistfully.

"You should have a husband."

"I had many a boyfriend as a kid, Papa, and you made it very difficult for all of them...and for me. Remember how intimidating you could be? She smiled as she said this, but clearly she was annoyed. "I think you were jealous every time I went out. You scared everyone away. And when I fell in love with Pietovsky, I thought you'd have a stroke, you were so agitated," she continued, an edge in her voice.

"Well, he was a married man, Mariana, and no good for you. What father would want that for his daughter? All we wanted, your mother and I, was that you find a good husband."

She stared at him in disbelief. "If I had a husband, good or bad, I couldn't have lived here with you for all these years."

"And," he continued, ignoring her answer, "you should never have stopped playing; you had such a rare talent. Such a tragedy. I hold Pietovsky responsible for this."

"And yet you remained dear friends."

"You should have had a fantastic career. Your life was unfolding so brilliantly."

"Don't blame Pietovsky. Besides, if I had had a great career, I would have been playing a concert somewhere in Europe tonight. Mama would have died alone, and you would be here with only your nurses for company."

Again, he ignored her. “And certainly, if you weren’t going to have a great career, you should have had a child. You are so nurturing, darling.”

“Oh, Papa.” She sighed again, getting up to clear away the dishes. “I have had a child, believe me. I still have a child. He is about to turn ninety years old, and yet he’s still a child.” She leaned down to kiss his cheek and went for the night nurse.



The Prudential Building loomed in the distance. From the taxi, Mariana could see joggers on the towpath by the Charles River, and bicyclists, and people walking dogs. She was about to meet Christopher Beecher of Beecher, Hamilton, Stein & Snow; Alexander had retained him when he established legal residence in the state of Massachusetts. The meeting today would clarify what she could expect from the Feldmann estate. As its sole heir, she would be rich. In addition to the Silver Swan, now estimated to be worth at least ten million dollars, and possibly a good deal more, there were nine copies of the great original—nowhere near as valuable, of course, but fine to play and worth a collective half million at least. There were bows and cash and stock market investments and the Berkshire property. Lawyers and accountants often warned Feldmann about taxes, and estate planners offered their advice. Had her father transferred ownership of the Swan to her years earlier, or sold it, or established a trust, the government would not now be poised to take such a large share of her inheritance. Yet he retained possession of the instrument, claiming he would own it until his death, an

event he simply could not foresee. He would say, “*If I die*,” not “*When...*”

At the lawyer’s office, Mariana was greeted by an elderly receptionist and then by Christopher Beecher himself, a short gentleman with a shock of white hair, piercing blue eyes, and a slightly hunched back that made him appear somehow kindly. His shirt was blue, his tie striped red and green. Horn-rimmed glasses on a black elastic ribbon dangled at his chin. Beecher invited her into his book-paneled office, where he explained that Alexander had particularly requested this meeting for a reading of the will, though such a face-to-face encounter was no longer necessary. “It is, I’m afraid, more a function of television shows and films than legal practice nowadays, but it was your father’s wish and we chose to honor it.”

“I’m glad you did. It’s a pleasure to meet you...”

“Yes.” His voice was high. “A personal association is always preferable, is it not, to fax machines and xeroxed documents arriving in the mail? And I do want to tell you how much I admired your father; I have a whole *shelf* of recordings, and I went to his concerts whenever he played in Boston. You know, I came to the memorial service in New York, though I did not introduce myself to you at the time. You were so occupied.”

She nodded. The memorial service had taken place on March 25, at the 92nd Street Y. Hundreds of people attended. Alexander’s students spoke. Few of his peers were still alive, and the men and women onstage were no longer young. Thirty-, forty-, fifty-, and even sixty-year-olds saluted their lost master, describing how he’d taught them, how he’d changed their bow arm or vibrato or understanding of the instrument, how generous he’d been and how important,

crucial even, to the course of their careers. Most passionately, they talked of the deep understanding of music he offered them. At the ceremony's end, sixteen cellists came onstage to play the Casals "Song of the Birds" in his honor. Many wept.

"In any case," Beecher continued, "your father wanted you to read a letter he entrusted to me just before he passed."

"Oh?"

Beecher handed her a sealed envelope: cream colored, thick, with her name in a familiar scrawl in black ink on the front. "This is for you."

Mariana was surprised. She asked the lawyer if he knew the letter's contents or had, in fact, read it himself.

"It's signed across the back, you see. And no, I have not read it. It is — that old-fashioned concept — confidential."

She wondered what the letter could contain. The two of them had lived together, after all, and she had overseen his mail, paid his bills. This letter would no doubt offer some instructions for a scholarship program he planned to establish or what she should do with the Stradivarius copies or do to the roof at Swann's Way.

The lawyer withdrew from the room; she opened the letter and read:

December 10, 2009

My dear Mariana,

I think perhaps this is the first letter I've written to you since you were a small child and I was traveling in France. And to think it will come to you when I am gone is very strange. But there are things you must know in order to understand how I have organized my legacy — things I meant to tell you when your mother died. Because you were distressed at that time and had already

decided to give up your solo career, I never found occasion to reveal these things to you. After a while, I simply decided not to.

As I'm sure you have known and been much affected by, your mother and I were not happy together. I shall spare you the details but tell you that she resented my absence as my concert schedule increased; she resented my success, my students — she even resented you — anything that took my attention away from her. It was an unnatural dependence, and as she grew more withdrawn, refusing to travel with me or share in the pleasures of my fame, I developed a close relationship with another woman, someone you have met only once before, the Swiss singer Francine Roselle.

Mme Roselle and I were both married to others throughout the years of our affair, she to the conductor Bernard Roselle. We saw each other only when we could, but our love was intense and passionate. As you may perhaps remember, Francine had something to do with my acquisition of the Silver Swan, long ago in Strasbourg. It was her mother who introduced me to the owner of the instrument. Over the years I taught Francine's son, Claude — he is three years your junior, and I have been very proud of his career: he is a fine cellist. His father is an excellent conductor, if somewhat uninspired. In some ways — since you, alas, no longer perform as a soloist — Claude has come to be my musical heir. I hope you will be friends. Your mother, I believe, never knew of my relationship with Mme Roselle, for we were together only in Europe.

This information changes nothing in your life, dear Mariana. You are my beloved, my only daughter, and I have always protected you, as I shall continue to through the disposition of my estate. But your knowledge of this will help you accept what is to come. I have written this letter, sealed it, and given it to my

lawyer, Christopher Beecher, whom you will now have met. No one else is apprised of this information — besides you and, of course, Mme Roselle, though she does not know I have told you of our relationship. You have been a devoted daughter. I have never understood what caused you to stop playing. But now, at least, I can offer you the fruits of my long life in art.

Be free, my angel, to live your own life at last.

Papa

Alone in the office, Mariana pressed her hands to her face. How could it be possible that neither she nor her mother had suspected this long, treacherous affair? How could he think this changed nothing? Had her mother actually known about Francine Roselle? How terrible if she *had* known, or suspected it. This would explain the tears, the dark silence in the house whenever Alexander got ready to leave. Every time he went on tour, he went to open arms abroad. Pilar must have felt the pain of his eagerness to go.

Mariana put the letter in her purse and rose from her chair. She wiped away her tears with the back of her trembling hand. The lawyer knocked. Courteously, he opened the door and beckoned her to follow. Mariana walked behind him to the conference room where, she assumed, he would read Feldmann's will to her. As he opened the oak door to usher her in, Beecher turned to face her. "Your father left very strict instructions for this occasion. I hope things will turn out to everyone's satisfaction."

"Everyone?"

But Beecher had entered the conference room.



The table gleamed. Large windows framed the street, the rise of Beacon Hill beyond, the shops and cars below. There were green-shaded lamps, dark leather chairs, a water pitcher and four glasses on a tray. Two people — a young man and a much older woman — were seated at the table. “You’ve met before,” said Christopher Beecher. “But unless I’m much mistaken, it’s been a very long time.”

The elegant man stood to greet her. From the photos on her father’s wall, she understood that this was Claude Roselle — but he was even more handsome in person. In most of those pictures, Claude wore a tuxedo; today he was attired in a slim, dark gray Italian suit. He approached, his hand out-thrust, smile flashing. He held her hand with both his own and pumped it warmly, eagerly, looking into her eyes.

“How wonderful to meet you, Mariana.”

She stared at him, then at the woman sitting at the far end of the table. This must be Alexander’s lover, Francine Roselle, the woman who’d drawn him away from Pilar and from Mariana as well. No photograph of Claude’s mother adorned her father’s studio wall, but here, clearly, was the singer who’d been Feldmann’s mistress, and for whom his love had been — as she’d just read — “intense and passionate.”

Christopher Beecher was saying, “And do you remember, or may I present, Mme Francine Roselle?”

The woman stood. She was short, plump, and still lovely, her skin unlined. Her hair, dyed a pale silvery blond, was carefully coiffed, and she wore a slate-blue traveling suit and embroidered white silk blouse. Strands of pearls enclosed her neck. Mariana would not have known her on the street, but seeing Francine now revived in her the mysterious feeling of unease she’d felt whenever Alexander mentioned — in passing, as he’d

often done — her name. Claude had retained her hand. “I so loved and admired your father. He was the most inspired of artists and teachers. I’m deeply grateful to have been his student.”

Francine Roselle pushed back her chair and came around the table, reaching up to kiss Mariana on both cheeks. Mariana froze. The smell of the woman’s skin was familiar: L’Heure Bleue — the Guerlain perfume her father always brought her from Europe, and which she’d never liked. Pilar had told him that the perfume was unsuitable for a young girl, but Alexander continued to purchase it, no doubt in haste, at the airport duty-free shop on his way home. Or perhaps he’d taken it from Francine’s supply. All his gifts were tokens, Pilar complained, all his kindnesses perfunctory or rushed. Francine drew back, removing her hands from Mariana’s arms as if she’d touched something terribly hot.

“We haven’t met for such a long time, my dear. I wanted to write to you the very *moment* of your father’s death. I would have come to his memorial service, but I had a concert engagement and was unable to cancel.” She clasped her hands as her eyes teared up. “His death deeply affected us. We will greatly miss him.”

“Yes,” said Claude. “It has been so difficult. Maman cried for weeks. We were — *are* — all so devastated. What a loss.”

“How are *you*, Mariana?” Francine asked.

“I’m sad of course.” Mariana said coldly, moving around the table. She waited for the lawyer to indicate her place. He did so, and she sat. But *why*, she asked herself, beginning to tremble, were these two people also present? Mme Roselle must now be, although she did not look it, not less than seventy years old. Why had she been asked to come to Boston, and to Beecher’s office?

She tried to imagine a reason. Perhaps these two intended to make an offer to buy the Stradivarius; perhaps her father had arranged it so they would have the chance to purchase the Swan, a right of first refusal. At her place there was a legal pad and a pen.

“What a loss,” Claude said again. “You must feel it keenly. You two were so close, I’m told.” Mariana turned and, studying him, found him disturbingly attractive. She could not look away, despite his mother’s attempt to engage her.

“How do you occupy yourself now?” Francine asked.

“I’ve had a lot to attend to,” she answered, “as you can imagine. He never paid attention to his affairs.” Saying this, she paused, embarrassed. “I mean, his financial affairs, of course.”

Beecher proposed they proceed with the meeting. Claude pulled out a chair and sat next to her, resting his arm across the back of her chair, while Francine returned to her seat at the far end of the table. Mariana thanked Claude for the glass of water he had poured and looked quickly away. She was drawn to him, to the strong angles of his face, his mixture of mature self-confidence, sincerity, and boyish charm. He had dark blue eyes and thick curls, fair like his mother’s. She knew very little about him, though she had read reviews, of course, which Alexander pressed on her. He was a rising star in Europe, much engaged and respected, and in the letter her father had called him “my musical heir.”

“Your attention, please,” said the lawyer, “we may as well begin.” Beecher thanked them each in turn for coming. He had scheduled this session, as Claude Roselle knew, to coincide with the musician’s debut concert in New York, so that it would not be necessary to travel twice to America.

He wished the young cellist luck. Looking at Mariana, he smiled. “I must iterate that it was your father’s explicit wish we be together in this room.”

Beecher droned on, “There are the usual assertions—‘being of sound mind and body’—the usual disclaimers—‘revoking all previous such documents, etc.’” Mariana tried to ignore the stirring proximity of young Roselle at her side, his arm across the back of her chair, almost embracing her. She turned quickly to glance at him and found that he was staring back, his eyes deep pools of concern and sympathy. Beecher continued talking, “. . . and the usual small bequests to housekeepers and relatives—your father’s nephew, I believe, now resident in Israel—and to the Cello Society and the Koussevitzky Memorial Fund at Tanglewood. And so on and so forth. I will of course be glad to discuss each of these in detail, but none of them need properly concern us now. Instead, and again as per Alexander Feldmann’s instructions, I am to inform you in person of the principal bequests herein. Any questions?”

They shook their heads. Mariana tried not to look at Claude. Her hands shook.

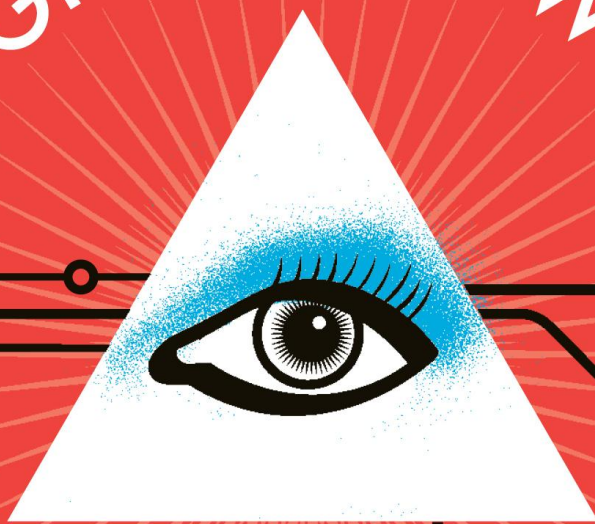
Settling his glasses on his nose, the lawyer read:

- (1) To my daughter Mariana Feldmann I leave the property in Stockbridge and all my stocks, savings, pensions, and personal effects.
- (2) To Mariana I leave my collection of the nine copies of the Silver Swan, which I purchased or commissioned from stringed instrument makers, and my collection of bows, to be disposed of at her discretion.
- (3) To Mariana I leave all my papers and music manuscripts.

- (4) To Claude Roselle, in recognition of his great artistry and his special relationship to me as my gifted student, and because my daughter no longer performs as a soloist, I leave the Stradivarius violoncello of 1712, known as the Silver Swan.

Mariana pushed back her chair and stood up abruptly. “No, that can’t be true. Read it again,” she cried out. As Beecher reread the final bequest, she began to weep. Alexander had betrayed her. Claude reached for her arm, but she flung him away. Grabbing her bag and coat, she ran out of the room, down the book-lined corridor, and out the door.

# THE GHOST NETWORK



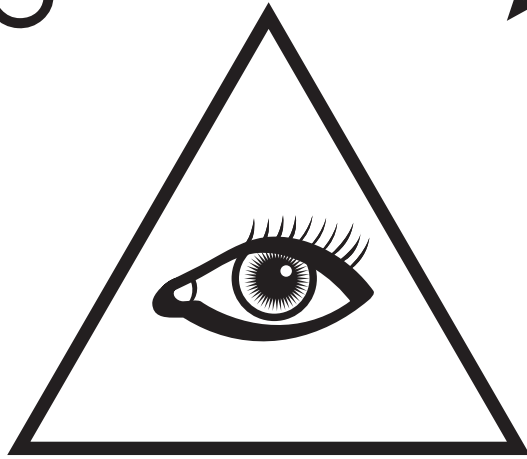
A NOVEL

# CATIE DISABATO

"Brilliant, daring, and masterful . . . Impossible to put down."

—EDAN LEPUCKI, *New York Times* bestselling author of *California*

THE GHOST NETWORK



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## A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

I inherited from Cyrus Archer a polished draft of this manuscript, but not a complete one. Cyrus's research was extensive and the majority of the plotting in the book is based on firsthand accounts of events. Unfortunately, Cyrus did not get a chance to fill in his footnotes, and in a few places, he didn't relay the source of a story or a quote. I have tried to fill in the gaps in attribution as best I can, using Cyrus's notes and in a few cases re-interviewing some of his interviewees.

—CATIE DISABATO



**THE  
GHOST NETWORK**

THE DISAPPEARANCE AND  
SEARCH FOR MOLLY METROPOLIS

**CYRUS K. ARCHER**

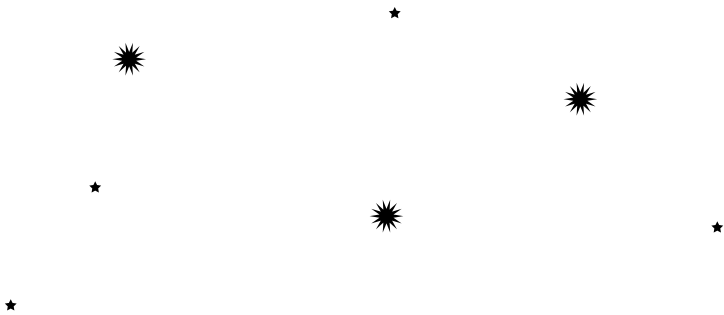
EDITED AND WITH AN EPILOGUE  
BY CATIE DISABATO\*



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*\* Any additions or adjustments from me are noted in the text or via footnotes. For visual distinction, my footnotes will be in italics.*

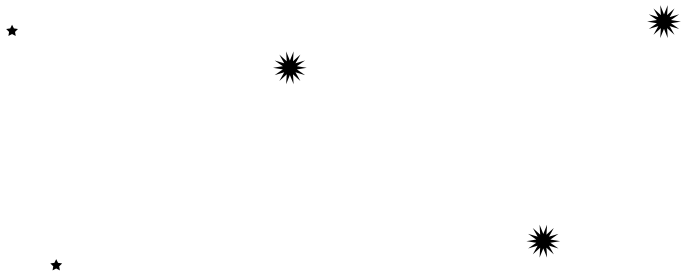
—Catie Disabato



“Rock and roll as a catalyst for the moment of utopian inspiration, that out-of-time moment when you not only imagine but live the self you would be in the world that could be. Whenever I listened to music during the sixties and seventies I was listening for the voice of that utopian moment, through the filters of pop conventions and clichés.”

—ELLEN WILLIS,

in the preface to Barbara O’Dair’s *Trouble Girls: The Rolling Stone Book of Women in Rock*, quoted from the collection of Willis’s rock criticism called *Out of the Vinyl Deeps: Ellen Willis on Rock Music*



# Prologue

April 25, 2010

It was the morning after a record-setting rainstorm. Chicago's mild, dry spring had given way to lightning and thunder. The soil soaked up six inches of rainfall; drowning worms emerged to cover the sidewalks with their squishy bodies and promptly froze to death in the cold spring air. Overworked eaves on rows of townhouses creaked and moaned in the strong morning winds, and streams of water rushed through the gutters. The winds had torn thick branches off the trees, which crushed the hoods of SUVs parked on the lakeside streets and cracked the pavement, causing hundreds of dollars in damages. The water in Lake Michigan was choppy and cold, below freezing; the surface of the lake was covered in fog.

Early that day, once the storm had broken, a baker named Rebecca Parker decided to take an unusual route along the lake on her walk home. Parker worked at Anthony's Deli on Wabash Street, baking bread from 3 a.m. to 7 a.m. On her way home,

she usually avoided Lake Shore Drive, with its extra chill from the wind moving over the lake. Instead, she preferred to walk on Rush Street or take public transit, riding the city's elevated train line, the L. But riding the rickety train in high winds frightened Parker, and the fallen tree branches that covered the sidewalks on Rush Street made for difficult walking, so she zipped her North Face down coat to her throat and walked towards Lake Shore Drive. At East Delaware Place, she crossed the highway and started walking on the Lakeshore Trail—the biking and walking path right along the lake—so she could avoid any sidewalk debris.

The Lakeshore Trail was otherwise deserted. Parker walked briskly through the fog. Just as she was about to turn off the Trail and return to the gridded streets west of Lake Michigan, Parker noticed a dark shape floating a few hundred feet off shore: two bodies clinging to a piece of wood, one completely still and one kicking feebly. The fog thickened and Parker hesitated, questioning whether she had seen anything at all. She waited half a minute for the fog to clear and for the makeshift raft to come into full view again before dialing 911. Both bodies now lay still on the slab of wood, bobbing through the sharp waves. Parker gave the operator her approximate address and blurted, “Both people on the raft look dead now.”

About five minutes later, two Chicago Police Department officers arrived on bikes and signaled a police boat with portable high beams. Parker was crying. She thought that by waiting before dialing 911, she had “as good as killed” the people on the raft.

About five minutes after that, the police boat appeared. It puttered slowly around the shallow water before the officers aboard found what they were looking for. The maritime police fished two bodies out of the freezing lake: twenty-three year old Regina Nix, called “Gina,” and twenty-seven year old Nicolas Berliner, called “Nick.” They were hypothermic, unconscious, and concussed, but

alive. They were immediately put into an ambulance and driven to Cook County Hospital.

Berliner regained consciousness in the ambulance and was admitted briefly to the Intensive Care Unit. Nix was taken into surgery immediately upon arriving at the hospital. Two fingers on her left hand, which had been partially severed and reattached approximately one week prior, couldn't withstand the trauma of hypothermia and had to be amputated.

While the doctors worked on Nix, Berliner gave a statement to the police. He didn't remember how he had ended up floating in Lake Michigan. The last thing he recalled was spending a good portion of the previous evening with Nix and her girlfriend at their favorite bar, Rainbo.

The officers on the scene left the hospital and returned to the police station on South Racine, where they found a theft report filed by Randy Hecht. He had reported his boat stolen around 5 a.m. An officer called Hecht and spoke to him briefly:

"That's a shame about the kids almost drowning and such," Hecht said. "I filed my report right after it happened. I saw those three kids fly off and I called you right away. Did you find the boat okay?"

To which the stunned police officer replied, "*Three* kids?"

The third person on the raft was Nix's girlfriend, Caitlin "Cait" Taer (rhymes with "air"). No one has seen her or heard from her since the police pulled Nix and Berliner from the lake. She disappeared. Her body was not found in Lake Michigan; it didn't wash ashore anywhere else.

Nix spoke to the officers as she recovered from her surgery. Doped on morphine, she claimed memory loss, like Berliner. Her doctors told the officers Nix's memory loss was most likely from both head trauma and excessive inebriation. Neither Nix nor Berliner remembered if Taer was on the boat with them when it broke apart, and they couldn't remember how it broke apart in the first

place. None of Taer's clothes were taken from her home; none of her meager savings were removed from her Bank of America account.

Investigators packed the facts into a neat conclusion: after a night of heavy drinking, Berliner, Nix, and Taer stole the boat for a joyride. Because none of them had any experience driving a boat, they steered themselves too far from shore, and then an early morning fog rolled in. Lost, they drifted until rough waves pushed the boat into a rock on the shoreline, then pulled them back into deep water on a breaking boat. All three passengers hit their heads during the collision, and while Nix and Berliner managed to cling to consciousness and a piece of the boat, Taer lost consciousness and drowned. Or perhaps, after the fog rolled in, they passed out in the boat and when the boat collided with a submerged rock, Nix and Berliner were revived by the suddenness of their head trauma and floated, while Taer drowned. Or perhaps, after the collision with the submerged rock, the rough current pulled parts of the broken boat in two directions. While Nix kicked Berliner to shore, Taer floated toward Canada until she became hypothermic, lost consciousness, and sank.

When I spoke with Officers Holt and Burns, they presented these three theories as only a few of many. While the conditions of their stories changed, the conclusion never did: a drunk girl drowned.

Nix and Berliner were charged with the theft of the boat. After a brief negotiation between Berliner's lawyer and the state prosecutor, Berliner and Nix agreed to perform one hundred hours of community service each to atone for the theft of the property. The felony was then expunged from their records. They were granted this leniency despite Berliner's prior legal troubles and his close ties with an incarcerated domestic terrorist named Marie-Hélène Kraus.

Three months later, on July 14, 2010, in response to a petition

from her immediate family, the state declared Taer legally dead, and the *Chicago Tribune* published a short news story/obituary:

Possible drowning victim Caitlyn [*sic*] Taer, 24, was declared dead yesterday. Taer had disappeared after a boating accident on Lake Michigan in late April. Maritime police were unable to recover a body but investigators concluded that she died in the incident. The District Attorney's office has no current plans to pursue manslaughter or wrongful death charges on behalf of the deceased. Taer is survived by her parents, Natasha Tenanbaum and Andrew Taer. Taer's friend Regina Nix remembers her as a "passionate person, who never doubted herself." Private services will be held.

A coffin filled with keepsakes, sandbags, and her favorite records was buried in place of a body.

Compared to Chicago's other disappearance that year, Taer's was small potatoes. Taer was actually a footnote\* in the larger disappearance of Miranda Young, better known by her stage name, Molly Metropolis.

Four months before Taer's disastrous boat trip, Molly Metropolis disappeared in Chicago during her Apocalypse Ball tour. She performed to a sold-out crowd on January 8 and was gone before sound check on January 9. As of this writing, she hasn't yet publicly reemerged. Her disappearance and Taer's are inextricably linked.

Why begin to write a book about an unfortunate girl who probably drowned and a gone-but-not-forgotten pop star?†

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\* The sentiment is semi-lifted from a piece by *New Yorker* journalist David Woodyard, who actually used the word "addendum" in his article concerning Taer. Woodyard has asked the author to clarify that point.

† *My assumption is that Cyrus K. Archer meant to expand on this question, perhaps even try to answer it, but I think it works better if I let it stand. It's the central question of the book, after all. A question even I am trying to answer.* —Catie Disabato

Social associations helped jump-start the process of writing this book; if my partner at the time, David Woodyard, hadn't written an article about Molly Metropolis and Taer, my reciprocal interest wouldn't have developed. At the time of Taer's disappearance, Woodyard wrote for *The New Yorker*, often focusing on topics at the intersection of popular culture and politics. He noticed that both of the people pulled out of Lake Michigan on the morning of Taer's disappearance were connected to Molly Metropolis. Nix, the eight-fingered hypothermic, was Molly Metropolis's former assistant; Berliner had been friends with the pop star since before her rise to fame in 2008. Woodyard conceived of a piece about cultural obsession with mystery stories and disappearing women, critiquing the morbid curiosity in the tenor of the national response to Molly Metropolis's disappearance, as well as the anemic Chicago-area broadcast news coverage of Taer's story. *The New Yorker* wanted to publish the article the same week as the US release of a new novel by Haruki Murakami, whose work frequently features disappearing women. Though in the original concept for his piece, Woodyard planned to use Taer's disappearance as a persistent metaphor for the dangers of "mystery-mongering," Woodyard's final article mentioned Taer only briefly:

In Chicago, over 200 missing persons reports are filed every year. Any number of these disappearances are runaways or murders quickly solved. Very few missing persons are actual disappearances. In Chicago, we are surprised to have two so far this year. The pop star Molly Metropolis disappeared half-way through her concert tour. Then a girl named Caitlin Taer, who was friends with Molly Metropolis's former personal assistant, vanished a few months later. No one outside of Chicago talks about Taer's disappearance because no one knew her name before she disappeared, but they still talk about Molly.

There, Woodyard's investigation into Taer's disappearance stopped. If he had pushed harder, he might've been the one writing this book.

During Woodyard's relatively brief period writing about Taer and Molly Metropolis's cases, he noticed that in Nix's statement to the police, she mentioned Taer had kept journals with detailed notes on her day-to-day life for more than a year before the incident in Lake Michigan. Intrigued, Woodyard attempted to acquire Taer's journals; he sent requests to the investigating police officers and Taer's immediate family. Unfortunately, he didn't receive the journals before his deadline.

A few weeks after Woodyard's article ran, a small but heavy FedEx box arrived at our door with a polite note from Taer's mother apologizing for the delay. Inside, we found the journals, neatly stacked. Woodyard no longer had any interest in Taer's journals but he had always been lazy about getting to the post office, so instead of sending them back immediately, he left the box in the corner of the living room, where they briefly became an unfortunate fixture of our decorating scheme. One evening, succumbing to a mild curiosity, I picked up a journal began to read.

The first entry was dated almost a year before Molly Metropolis (sometimes "Molly," "Metro," or "Molly Metro," to her dearest friends and her closest fans) disappeared. The prose was neither stirring nor poised:

I'm totally disgusted with this carpet, and basically my whole life. I know I'm using the carpet as a metaphor for my whole life, but I can't help it. It's so gross. I can't afford a steam cleaner. Maybe I'll save up. Charles [Taer's landlord] won't do it, but he's a fucktard. Listening to "New Vogue Riche," and it's cheering me up. I could use a dance partner.

Taer's love for "New Vogue Riche," a track from Molly Metropolis's first album *Cause Célèbrety* (pronounced Cause Celebrity) was

nothing compared to her deep affection for Molly's debut single, "Don't Stop (N'Arrête Pas)." The verse that introduced Molly Metro to the world and captured Taer's imagination is as follows: *I can't work during the daytime / Save my en-er-gy for night lights / The dark city is the place for more / Work, work, work the floor.*

Along with rave reviews of Molly's songs, Taer filled her journals with actual notes, grocery lists, and snippets of half-baked ideas or half-remembered conversations, alongside more traditional diary writing. I flipped through the pages, mostly bored and barely noticing when the text changed from Taer's usual disjointed lists to actual accounts of her day-to-day. I did pause, however, over a single phrase near the middle of the journal, written twice the size of her regular handwriting and underlined several times:

I found the fucking secret headquarters and now we're going to find Molly.

I stopped flipping through the pages, perhaps because of the whimsical nature of the phrase "secret headquarters." I found the first entries Taer wrote about Molly Metropolis's disappearance, and began reading Taer's story. It is dramatic to the point of being almost unbelievable.\*

Taer's journals mix fiction, diary-style writings, drafts of articles, and those grocery lists—a hodge-podge of styles with no system of transition or separation, making the truth and the context of the writing difficult for an outside reader to ascertain. Though I acknowledge that Taer's journals are tangled and scattered, and that the truth and context of Taer's writing is sometimes hard to establish, there is a profound semantic difference between "difficult" and "impossible." Having thoroughly studied Taer's journals, I developed a knack for deciphering her idiolect and an ear for her style.

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\* *In fact, according to Cyrus's notes, he was urged by David Woodyard to disregard everything he read in Taer's notebook. Woodyard believed Taer's story about Molly was fiction, and didn't think Cyrus should write a book about it. Woodyard's lack of support for Cyrus's project was one of the main factors in the disintegration of their relationship. —Catie Disabato*

When she was writing something that would eventually become a newspaper article, she'd affect an authoritative tone, which never sounded natural. These paragraphs would then appear, in edited forms, in her published criticism.

When she was writing fiction, she would try to play with words and languages, often incorporating phrases of French and Spanish (though she couldn't speak either language). Taer's fiction would often peter out as the narrative fell apart. The beginning of a story would be written with dramatic energy, many pages filled with hurried and messy handwriting. Perhaps a few days later, another few paragraphs would appear, continuing the earlier narrative thread. Then the story would wane until it vanished. She had little control over the fictional worlds she created in bursts of fevered inspiration, so if a story messily disintegrated, it was a telltale sign Taer was writing fiction rather than fact. Maybe she transferred her stories from the journals to a computer, where she regained control of her narratives, but I never found them on her internal or external hard drives.\*

Although Taer's last diary entries were written with the same drama and timbre as some of her stories, she meticulously dated all of them. She didn't date her fiction. In her final diary entries, Taer abbreviated people and place names, which she never did in her fiction, and she didn't vary the sentence structure. In short, though these later entries sound fictional, Taer wrote them like she was writing facts. Woodyard has proposed that she was writing fiction in the style of nonfiction for some aesthetic purpose, but Taer never, to my knowledge, affected that style elsewhere, nor did she ever profess a preference for experimental fiction in that mode. To steal a saying from my helpful friends at the CPD, "the best indication of future action is past action."

The events written hastily at the end of Taer's journals and

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\* Graciously, Taer's mother allowed me to access all of Taer's computers and data storage devices.

explored in this text unfold in dramatic, even fictive ways. I take full responsibility for any gaps in logic and legibility, stemming from a lack of knowledge or understanding.\* I hope those gaps will be few and far between.

This book is built on over one hundred interviews with everyone from key players in the unfolding drama to those whose roles were only incidental. I interviewed nearly every person mentioned in this text, with the notable exception of Alice Becker-Ho, widow of the French psychogeographer Guy Debord. My sincerest gratitude goes to Marie-Hélène Kraus for making a rare exception to her policy of refusing interview requests and speaking with me at length. I spent a combined twenty-four hours talking with Nix and Berliner, both separately and as a pair, and their accounts of the events are the cornerstone of this project.

Equally as important is what Taer left behind for me: audio files (which I transcribed myself) of interviews with Nix and various discussions of Molly's disappearance with Nix and Berliner—as well as the journals, which she wrote in every day during the early months of 2010.

Molly's record label, SDFC Records, provided some limited, but helpful, information on sales figures and marketing strategy and approved brief but informative interviews with recording and publicity executives who worked with Molly. HBO Films allowed me to view uncut footage from their unfinished concert special *Molly Metropolis Presents: The Apocalypse Ball*, and for that I am grateful. I appreciate the willingness of Nix and Berliner's families to speak with me, but I am especially indebted to the families of Molly Metropolis and Caitlin Taer, who agreed to be interviewed despite the difficulty of the subject matter. Molly's team, who still call themselves the General Council, were instrumental in making Molly come alive for me. In the countless interviews, profiles, YouTube

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\* *I've tried to wrap up any pieces left hanging, and I apologize for the places forthcoming where I've been unable to do so.* —Catie Disabato

videos, Tweets, and music videos that Molly left behind, I found the pop star she wanted to be.

Once Molly and Taer's story begins to take definitive shape, it quickly fizzles into absurdity, like a map of a world with slightly distorted proportions—almost normal looking at first, but on a second viewing, a terrible deviation, a ghost of a place that never was, a land that couldn't be, a burning and terrible world beneath everything that we know to be real.

This book isn't about the disappearance of Molly Metropolis or the death/disappearance of Caitlin Taer. It's the story of Taer looking for Molly Metropolis, and whether or not she was found.

## PART 1

“When I started writing songs, I didn’t have a plan,” Molly said. “I didn’t follow any songwriting rules, I made my own boundaries. I took whatever detours felt right to me. I wasn’t like, ‘I’m going to write this hit and be the world’s biggest pop star.’ I just wanted to feel the whole history of culture resonating through me.”

—“Living in Molly’s Metropolis,” *The New York Times Magazine*

# Chapter ①

January 2010. A new decade had recently been rung in, with less pomp and circumstance than the previous decade, which had the Y2K scare, not to mention the resurgence of Prince’s fantastic “1999,” selling over two million new copies over the course of the year. When the world celebrated the new millennium, Molly Metropolis was only thirteen. Born to an upper-middle-class interracial family, Molly’s African American mother differentiated her from her white high school classmates. She didn’t have any siblings or friends to share the experience of growing up biracial in a majority white space. Characteristically, Molly let her dissimilarities from her peers be her strength. “Sometimes I felt like an alien,” Molly told *The New York Times* in late 2009, “but even when I felt completely lonely, I thought, ‘it’s better to be unique than to be just like everyone else.’”\*

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\* “Molly Defies the Sophomore Slump,” last modified December 23, 2009; [www.nytimes.com/2009/12/23/arts/music/molly-defies-sophomore-slump.html?ref=music](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/23/arts/music/molly-defies-sophomore-slump.html?ref=music).

A few weeks after giving that interview, as the overwhelming success of her single, “Apocalypse Dance,” and its accompanying thirteen-minute *Alice in Wonderland*-themed music video portended her stratospherically successful year, Molly Metropolis disappeared.

Molly was gone just as we were truly getting to know her. Five hit singles from her outrun electro-infused\* and dance floor-centric debut *Cause Célèbrety*† gave Molly pop stardom and global name recognition. Her public presentation resembled Marilyn Monroe’s opaqueness disguised as translucence, before Marilyn died and was de-mystified. Like an Old Hollywood starlet with a name and backstory invented by a studio bigwig, Molly “seemed to invite you in, but then you realized you’ve had hours of conversation with her and you don’t really know anything about her.”‡ The only difference was that Molly made up her name herself. During a time when pop singers like Jessica Simpson and Britney Spears cultivated down-to-earth public personalities and signed away their last shreds of privacy to MTV’s reality television factory, Molly wanted her persona to be like parties at Holly Golightly’s apartment: crowded and so fun you forget you never really spoke to the hostess.§

After the premiere of the “Apocalypse Dance” music video, and amidst conflicts with her record label about her delayed second

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\* “Outrun electro” is a genre of electronic music, sometimes called synthwave, based on 1980s synthesizers played in pulsating, repeating arpeggios. Outrun had a popular following before Molly adopted the style for many of her tracks, but she was the first to introduce the sound to Top 40 pop.

† In his review of the album, *Los Angeles Times* music journalist Sam Lambert called Molly’s sound “dance pop for strange and unusual kids who see ghosts,” referencing Wynona Ryder’s famous line in the 1988 movie *Beetlejuice*: “I myself am strange and unusual.” Before writing his review, Lambert must’ve seen Molly’s first music video, in which Molly’s look consciously echoed Ryder’s in *Beetlejuice*.

‡ From my interview with Nadia Piereson, one of Molly’s backup dancers.

§ *Cyrus based this description on something Nix said to him in an e-mail, according to his notes, but I have no more clarifying details to offer. It will be important to remember Holly Golightly tried to trick people into thinking they knew her by presenting a false version of herself.* —Catie Disabato

album *Cause Apocalyptic*, Molly Metropolis updated her Twitter account more frequently with pictures of her dance rehearsals and workout sessions. She retweeted fans and, in true Stars!-They're-Just-Like-Us fashion, she grumbled about hangovers: “11-11-09, 2:16pm @MollyMetro Stayed up late celebrating the ‘Apocalypse Dance’ video premiere. Too. Much. Red. Wine.” She also Tweeted quotations from her favorite philosopher, Guy Debord, often unattributed: “11-16-09, 5:33 a.m. @MollyMetro I’ve written much less than most people who write; I’ve drunk much more than most people who drink.” Sometimes she altered Debord’s words to meet her own needs, for example, changing, “Young people everywhere have been allowed to choose between love and a garbage disposal unit,” to “11-14-09, 4:25 p.m. @MollyMetro People are told they have a choice between love and a garbage disposal unit. I say fuck love, fuck garbage, EAT POP INSTEAD.” After popular celebrity gossip website *Oh No They Didn’t* posted a story about record execs cutting some of her touring perks after she badmouthed them to *Rolling Stone*, she tweeted from the first page of Debord’s *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*: “12-03-09, 10:22 a.m. @MollyMetro I obviously can speak with complete freedom. Above all, I must take care to not give too much information to just anybody.”

Although most of her fans didn’t identify the real writer of some of her Tweets, savvy readers could’ve picked up some revealing hints about Molly’s inner life from her choice of quotation sources. *Gawker.com* wrote a short piece titled “Is Molly Metropolis A Secret Guy Debord Fan?” The answer, of course, was yes.

*Elle* put Molly on their December 2009 cover. She returned the favor by giving interviewer Eliza L. Pinkett her most revealing interview to that point. She told Pinkett stories from her childhood, teetering on the edge of talking about racism without fully committing to a serious dialogue: “Growing up, I was very theatrical and dramatic and strange, and I had this gigantic mane of wild, really thick hair. Most of my friends were white girls with thin hair,

they didn't know how to help me look good. It was the 90s so everyone was trying to have that really straight Jennifer [Aniston] look." She also talked about the difficulties of dating as a superstar, "What I don't understand are the guys who don't want to be with a successful woman. It's so sexist! It's like, don't they want to be with the best version of me? The one that sells hundreds of thousands of records and gets to spend every night with thousands of my Pop Eaters? If a guy can't deal with that, then he's the one that has a problem, not me."

Molly couldn't keep Debord out of the *Elle* interview, explaining fame to Pinkett in Debordian terms: "In the past, being a pop star meant specializing in the 'seemingly lived,' superficially representing one personality type or another. Like, one pop star is the pretty virginal one, and one is the wild child, and one is the unlucky-in-love one. But I'm not superficial, I'm not a type, I'm a woman! I don't want my fans to get some simulation of life from watching me, I want them to listen to my music and feel that it describes, and improves, their own life. I want them to identify with me, but also know that I'm my own person."\*

By the time the *Elle* profile was published, on the eve of her disappearance, Molly Metropolis's following had become increasingly passionate and fervent. The creativity and ferocity she devoted to what would've otherwise been standard pop songs caught the attention of "highbrow" critics and thinkers, as well as teenage pop devotees. She insisted on her and her fans' non-conformity with society, even as she sold millions of records, as music critic Tesfaye Likke wrote in his controversial article "Eulogy for Molly Metropolis—2 Years Later": "Molly made her 'Pop Eaters' out to be more punk than the mall-punks they grew up with, more rebellious than the pseudo-Che Guevara disciples they sat next to in Econ 101, and more revolutionary than all the kids living in filth at

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\* Here, Molly's riffing off of two moments from Debord's book *Society of the Spectacle*: "Being a star means specializing in the seemingly lived," and "The consumption celebrity superficially represents different types of personality." —Catie Disabato

Occupy Wall Street. She created a scene where people could claim non-conformity by listening to music made by the most popular artist in the country. And she made that paradox feel logical. Her inexplicably powerful charisma trumped better judgment. That quality is rare in a musician, and hasn't been seen since Kurt Cobain took his own life.”\*

When Molly Metropolis vanished during her massive Apocalypse Ball tour, she left 152 dates unperformed, costing her record company upwards of twenty-five million dollars and disappointing thousands of fans who had given her their hearts, souls, and money. At the time of her disappearance, Molly Metropolis had more than forty million Twitter followers, and fan sites by the hundreds. The abrupt end of millions of parasocial relationships became the greatest and most frequently broadcast loss. “She was a part of my actual life!!!” a typical (though with a marginally greater grasp of grammar and spelling) YouTube commenter exclaimed. “I’m going to miss her because I really really felt like she was talking to me—she answered a question from my twitter in an interview once and it was so amazing.”† Molly often Tweeted her exact location, providing a link to a map with a drop-pin, making her physical person even more present in her fans’ realities than all other pop culture phenoms before her.

After Molly disappeared, a few kooks came out of the woodwork to offer elaborate explanations. A popular Illuminati conspiracy theory website called The Vigilant Citizen weighed in with their particular brand of insanity. On August 12, 2009, the website had published a long article called “Molly Metropolis: An Illuminati Puppet,” which claimed Molly was a mind-controlled puppet and that every time she posted for a picture with her hair over her eye (which, admittedly, happened a lot in her early press photos and

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\* “Eulogy for Molly Metropolis,” last modified January 10, 2012; [www.vulture.com/2012/01/eulogy-for-molly-metropolis.html](http://www.vulture.com/2012/01/eulogy-for-molly-metropolis.html).

† ValerieVamp22, January 22, 2010 (2:32 a.m.), comment on aPOPcalypse\_hereine, “I Can’t Seem to Find Molly”; [www.youtube.com/watch?v=CoXL44DcJeeN](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CoXL44DcJeeN).

the music videos for her *Cause Célèbrety* singles) she was making herself into the All-Seeing Eye. The Vigilant Citizen wrote: “Those who have passed Illuminati Symbolism 101 know that the All-Seeing Eye is probably its most recognizable symbol.”

According to The Vigilant Citizen, Molly Metropolis disappeared because her “Delta” or “killer” programming had been activated and she completed her “final Illuminati operation,” then vanished to hide the evidence of her actions.\* With the story, The Vigilant Citizen ran an early publicity photo with Molly dressed in a black T-shirt with a deep V-neck; she holds the back of her hand up to her left eye to reveal the tattoo of an eye inside a triangle that Molly has on her palm. Needless to say, the police never investigated “Delta programming/evil Illuminati mission” as a possible explanation for her disappearance.

Leaving behind the wildest conspiracy theorists, most people argued over whether Molly Metropolis had been kidnapped, killed, or had left of her own volition. Various broadcast news reporters and Internet commentators fought out these three opposing viewpoints until they had nothing new to say.

On January 8, Molly Metropolis was scheduled to play the first of two shows at the United Center, the heart of Chicago’s ice-covered Near West Side. Despite a windchill of ten degrees below freezing and system-wide delays on the L, ticket holders arrived early and in droves. Girls and boys—the most conservative dressed in leather and leotards, the most ostentatious in full costume as Molly Metropolis herself—lined up outside of Will Call, giggling and jostling each other with excitement. The dance floor was crowded by 5 p.m., with sweaty teenagers jockeying for the spots closest to the stage.

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\* “Why Did Molly Disappear?: Molly Metropolis’s Final Illuminati Mission Complete,” last modified February 6, 2010; [vigilantcitizen.com/musicbusiness/why-did-molly-disappear](http://vigilantcitizen.com/musicbusiness/why-did-molly-disappear).

Molly performed songs from *Cause Apocalyptic*, at the time still unreleased, as well as all the singles from *Cause Célèbrety*, to a gyrating crowd of three thousand Pop Eaters, as her dedicated fans had christened themselves, riffing off an interview Molly gave to MTV.com: “I want to live in a world where the only thing you need to drink is music and the only thing you need to eat is pop culture.”

The show began with the projected image of a glowing black-and-white skyline, not specific to any city. A “chopped and screwed” version of the opening melody of “Apocalypse Dance” then played, as the projected city started to degrade and crumble. The sound of a pre-recorded intro filled the room: “My Pop Eaters. The ones who eat pop for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. You are the city kids. The ones who ran away to the city, the ones who are born there, the ones who dream of it. I’m not talking about L.A. or Chicago or even New York City. My name is Molly Metropolis”—here, the recording pauses for a burst of applause—“and I’m the city where you live. And in my city, we live every night like it’s our last.”

The recorded voice faded and the fallen city turned translucent to reveal Molly Metropolis in a dress of bronze metallic lace sparkling against her light brown skin, her arms reaching toward the sky in a V. The music cut out, and she belted the opening lyrics of “Apocalypse Dance” *a cappella*: “Tonight / might be your last chance / t-t-tonight / to get one last dance.”

As the *Chicago Tribune*’s music critic Bran Hollis Brooks pointed out in his review of the show, when a concertgoer is used to the pop shows of artists like Britney Spears, Rihanna, and Christina Aguilera, seeing Molly Metropolis perform is an aurally surreal experience. At the time, most other pop stars lip-synced to album cuts of their hit songs while devoting their stage energy to dancing—but Molly actually sang while she performed. The airbrushed, auto-tuned album might be more conventionally beautiful, but nothing makes a concert feel more like a concert than hearing

someone sing live. In the years since Molly Metropolis debuted, most new pop stars have followed her model.

As with all of his Molly Metropolis coverage, Brooks spent a good portion of his review (published before her disappearance became public knowledge) re-examining the “phenomenon of Molly Metropolis” and attempting to draw some satisfying conclusion about the nature of her appeal, though obviously flummoxed by his own appreciation of her. Like a dog staring confusedly at his own reflection, Burns wrote, “Perhaps, in a long year of job loss and economic decline, America needs an oddity to gawk at like Depression-era Americans visiting freak shows. Molly Metropolis is no Bearded Lady, but she scratches the same cultural itch.”\*

After the concert, Molly Metropolis held an after party at the Peninsula Hotel on the Miracle Mile with a small group of dancers and friends, including Nicolas Berliner. They kept the hotel bar open until 3 a.m., two hours past the usual closing time, after which Molly retired alone to her private suite.

On January 9, Molly woke just after 9 a.m. and ordered a breakfast of fruit, yogurt, granola, orange juice, coffee, and the Peninsula’s signature Truffled Popcorn. At 11 a.m., her driver took her to the concert venue for a brief rehearsal with her choreographer. That afternoon, Molly decided to visit the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), again with a group of dancers and friends that included Nicolas Berliner, as well as her assistant Regina Nix and several other members of her close-knit group of creative collaborators. Although the museum was less than half a mile from the hotel, Molly insisted on driving herself there in the sporty convertible she had rented for her thirty-six hour stay in Chicago. She asked Berliner to ride shotgun. According to Berliner, Molly initiated an emotional, personal conversation in the car. She told her friend that she treasured the few minutes they were able to have

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\* *Chicago Tribune*, “Review: Molly Metropolis at the United Center,” by Bran Hollis Brooks.

together, apart from the rest of the crew, and that she wished they were able to spend more time alone. She even asked after Berliner's imprisoned girlfriend, Marie-Hélène Kraus, a subject Molly often avoided. She proposed a "weekend getaway" for Berliner and herself after the tour was over.

At the MCA, Molly had the opportunity to view pieces by Jeff Koons (including "Pink Panther," "Rabbit," and "Three Ball Total Equilibrium Tank"), as well as "The Unicorn Tapestries," on loan from The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. She also signed autographs for fans and art lovers. While they walked through the galleries of the MCA, Molly convinced her bodyguards that she would be fine driving from the museum to the venue by herself. She craved "space to think." Apparently Metro, as all her bodyguards called her, left her security team behind as often as she could, whenever she felt safe, especially in cities like Chicago where the paparazzi was considerably less present than in New York and Los Angeles. Molly left the museum alone at about 2:15 p.m. That was the last anyone saw of her.

By 3:15 p.m., Molly's tour manager, Florence Tse, began to get worried. Molly had a phone interview scheduled for 3:20 p.m. and they couldn't find her. By 5:30 p.m., when Molly was late for her call time at the venue, her staff and colleagues were on high alert. Despite her flashy, indulgent persona, Molly was a punctual person, and when she didn't show up on time, she called ahead. According to Tse, Molly "never arrived for anything more than five minutes after she said she would be there."

Tse called Molly's cell phone multiple times. Several of her dancers called or sent text messages; no one received a reply. Nix was also M.I.A. and didn't pick up her cell phone or Molly's. An hour and a half before Molly's set was scheduled to begin, the doors opened and the audience quickly filled the theater. Minutes before the Scissor Sisters' opening set was scheduled to start, Nix arrived at the venue, breathless from exertion, emotionally

overwhelmed, and in possession of Molly's cell phone. Nix had conducted an exhaustive search of the hotel grounds and nearby boutiques, working herself into an anxious fit before hurrying to the theater. Nix had left both her phone and Molly's on silent, and in her rush to find Molly she had forgotten to check her missed calls and messages.\*

Smelling disaster, Tse instructed the theater manager, Lilia Greene, to speak to the audience before the second opening act, the singer-songwriter Lissie. Greene informed the well-dressed throng that Molly Metropolis was suffering from food poisoning and the price of the tickets (minus processing fees and shipping costs, if applicable) would be refunded. Tse called SDFC. The head of their in-house public relations team, Kelly Applebaum, immediately issued a press release. Quoting the release, *The Hollywood Reporter* called Molly's absence "a sudden illness," and published Tweets from fans angrily leaving the venue. Someone logged into Molly Metropolis's official Twitter account using the iPhone Twitter application and wrote: "To all my amazing Chicago monsters. I would give anything in the world to be with you right now and not cold & alone."†

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\* *Cyrus K. Archer didn't have a chance to fill in the missing links in this account of the day Molly Metropolis disappeared. Molly gave Nix her phone just before the museum trip earlier that day. Molly often left her phone with Nix when she didn't feel like dealing with incoming calls or messages, so Molly getting rid of her phone didn't seem unusual to Nix. According to Molly's dancers and friends, Molly was an unreliable phone user and often forgot to return calls and texts, which was part of the reason that they weren't particularly worried when she didn't return messages on the day she disappeared. According to Nix, she discovered Molly was missing when she went to Molly's hotel room to "give her the heads up it was time to go to sound check," but found the hotel room empty, and Molly nowhere to be found. Then Nix began her small-scale search. —Catie Disabato*

† Nix believes it "must've been Kelly [Applebaum]," who tweeted this. Applebaum believes it "must've been Gina [Nix]." Any number of the dancers and PR support staff knew or had access to Molly's Twitter password, and her account had been previously hacked at least once. Despite vehement denials, Nix is the most likely suspect because she was in possession of Molly's phone at the time. The final suspect is, of course, Molly Metropolis herself. The police used the fact that no one would step forward to claim authorship of the Tweet as possible evidence that Molly had chosen to disappear willingly.

A quiet search party—consisting of dancers, security personnel, Berliner, and Nix—scoured the dark and icy city. Applebaum’s staff monitored news sources and gossip sites for any Molly Metropolis sightings. They didn’t find anything, no trace of Molly Metropolis in Chicago and no whisper of her whereabouts on the Internet. They wouldn’t find her rental car for two more weeks, abandoned in a region on the border between Michigan and Indiana called Michiana, in the driveway of a rarely used lake house. All of her clothes, costumes, and personal possessions were left behind at the venue and the hotel; not a single shoe or pair of underwear was missing.

Molly Metropolis didn’t appear the following morning. Applebaum informed Molly’s family and called the police. Normally, the CPD waits forty-eight hours to file a missing persons report, but Molly Metropolis’s fame made it unlikely that she could move idly around the city without being spotted, so police Sergeant Jordan Pierce decided to waive the usual time limit. Pierce and a team of detectives interviewed each member of Molly’s touring crew. Nix gave the longest interview; Berliner gave the shortest.

The next day, SDFC executives and Applebaum officially canceled Molly’s January 12 show in Detroit. In their official statement to the press, Applebaum and SDFC claimed Molly Metropolis still suffered from food poisoning–related complications, namely “dehydration and exhaustion.” They closed the release with, “Molly Metropolis apologizes to fans in Chicago and Detroit and will appear at scheduled Atlantic City and New York City performances.”

Applebaum did all she could to hide the truth, but the Gossip Media smelled a rat. Gossip websites *The Superficial* and *TMZ* speculated that Molly was suffering from complications from drug use or anorexia. Perez Hilton, on his influential gossip blog *PerezHilton.com*, posted an entry titled, “Where Have All the Mollies Gone?” accompanied by a concert photo from a previous tour date, with a Photoshopped dribble of a white

substance spilling out of Molly's nose, meant to allude to cocaine use (a common characteristic of Hilton's altered images). Perez thought the food poisoning story was "too convenient," the kind of things celebs' reps always say.

On January 14, a freezing and overcast Monday in Chicago, the chief of the CPD, Jody Peter "J.P." Weis, and Applebaum, speaking on behalf of SDFC Records, called a 9:30 a.m. joint press conference. They announced that Molly Metropolis had been missing since January 9 and they detailed the actions taken to find her. The video of the press conference was uploaded to YouTube where it has been viewed approximately 250 million times, as of this writing.

Elsewhere in Chicago on January 14, Caitlin Taer was nursing three separate obsessions: becoming a professional music critic, the Molly Metropolis song "Apocalypse Dance," and the prices of hardwood flooring—none of which helped to improve her unsatisfactory post-collegiate life and, despite growing up near the city, her hatred of Chicago winters.

Short and curvaceous, with curly dirty blonde hair and a small smattering of freckles, Taer was also a trendy dresser, who spent most of the summer in long jean shorts and thin backless T-shirts. When winter set in, she wore skinny jeans and giant, thick sweaters. She also wore a black down winter coat that covered her from chin to ankle.

Born and raised in a southern suburb of Chicago called Flossmoor, Taer spent her childhood dreaming of living in Chicago, according to her journals. At age eight, she compulsively played and sang along with a cassette tape of Frank Sinatra's "My Kind of Town (Chicago)," given to her by her father, and covered her walls with black-and-white poster prints of the city's impressive skyline at night with the word "Chicago" in a white cursive along the bottom—the kind of images purchased by tourists.

On warm weekends in the spring, her mother would take her shopping on Michigan Avenue. They woke up early and walked to the train station on sidewalks bracketed by dewy grass. They traveled to the city on the Metra Electric Line, from the train station in downtown Flossmoor to the Randolph Street Station in the middle of downtown Chicago, at the shopping district along Michigan Avenue known as the Miracle Mile.

Because the train took her to Chicago, Taer also developed a passion for Metra Electric. She didn't want to play with the electric train sets her parents bought her to try to feed her obsession, but they had to watch her closely because she would occasionally run away to the train, sometimes just to sit by the tracks and watch it go, sometimes to try to climb aboard.

Once when she was ten, she made it all the way into the city by smartly sticking near a woman with three other kids; the conductors assumed she was with the family. When the train reached Randolph Street, its final stop, young Taer followed a familiar path from the platform to the underground station's exit, emerging onto the intersection of Randolph Street and Michigan, directly into the bustle of the Loop, full of hope. Unfortunately, she didn't know where to go next. The rush hour crowds were thick, and commuters, in their hurry, jostled her. A homeless man started shouting. Very quickly, Taer realized that she shouldn't be in the city alone. She began crying and screaming loudly until a security guard from the train station noticed her. After the security guard calmed her down enough to figure out where Taer came from, a young conductor escorted her home. He let her play with his Game Boy and bought her Skittles, which her mother would never let her eat. Taer's love of the city remained untarnished. The story of her solo visit to Chicago quickly became family lore.\*

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\* When I interviewed Taer's family members, several of them told me slightly different versions of this story. I choose to include the version told to me by Taer's paternal grandmother, Louisa Collins Taer.

In 2000, Taer began her freshman year at Homewood-Flossmoor High School. Physically, she had matured earlier than most of her female classmates and attracted attention, mostly mocking, from the boys. She wore baggy shirts to hide her breasts (“They seemed to grow, like, every second that year,” Taer recalled in one of her journals) and defensively shouted “asshole” at every boy she caught looking down her shirt. The taunts didn’t stop until her senior year, when such teasing suddenly seemed immature.

Gina Nix attended the same high school. The girls knew each other marginally. They didn’t run in the same circles, but Taer’s best friend played on the same field hockey team as Nix, and sometimes they hung out at sports parties. Nix didn’t care much about the typical social hierarchies, but Taer was hung up on them.

“At these parties,” Nix told me during our first interview, in my Chicago sublet’s sunny kitchen, “I would just be, like, leaning on the wall having a beer, relaxed, and Cait would be very tense. I didn’t know her well enough to understand that was just her default mode. She was very intense, very intense. Very intense eyes. And she thought because I played field hockey and she was on the newspaper, which I guess was nerdy, that I should be some kind of bitch to her, which I never was. At that stage in my life, I couldn’t handle people that were so keyed up and I think she didn’t trust people who appeared to be okay with everything. She said she didn’t like ‘chill people,’ I remember that. She told me that at a party once and I thought she was insulting me. Later, she told me that I made her nervous because she thought I was cool.”\*

During those high school years, Taer and Nix were quietly going through twin crises of sexuality. Both in the early stages of coming to terms with being a lesbian, they receded from the conversation whenever anyone said the word “gay” and barely dated anyone. Nix used her devotion to sports as an excuse; Taer pre-

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\* In my conversations with Nix, she added: “Let’s be real—Cait probably wanted to fuck me, and was having emotional problems about it. Maybe I was having emotional problems about wanting to fuck her.”—Catie Disabato

tended to have an unending crush on a boy who didn't like her back. Nix explored lesbian porn links on her brother's computer. Taer fantasized about a friend from gym class who took off her shirt in the locker room to show off the quarter-sized hickeys her boyfriend had left on her breasts. Besides the newspaper for Taer and field hockey for Nix, high school bored them both.

Taer went to Oberlin College\* in Ohio. Nix went to the University of Chicago (U of C), where she met Molly (still going by her given name, Miranda) in a nineteenth-century fiction class. Nix and Taer didn't stay in touch. If Facebook hadn't been invented their first year of college, they might never have thought of each other again. Instead, they "Friended" each other sometime during their college years and remained marginally aware of each other's love lives and music tastes.

Nix and Taer graduated college in May of 2008. Molly Metropolis hired Nix as her new assistant, while Taer moved back to Chicago to pursue a career in music journalism. As of January 14, when the CPD announced Molly's disappearance, Taer still wasn't progressing in her occupation of choice. Very occasionally, she wrote for the popular music news and criticism website Pitchfork.com and the *Chicago Tribune* music blog *Sound Effects*, for which she was barely paid. Taer never wrote professionally about Molly, but wrote about her frequently on her personal Tumblr blog, [caitmusic.tumblr.com](http://caitmusic.tumblr.com). She posted the audio of "Apocalypse Dance" with the following caption:

**THIS. THIS FOREVER.**

I'm so deeply in love with this song, it's a little bit sick.

There are just a few perfect pop songs in this world—"Like a Prayer," "PYT," "Toxic," etc.—and this has joined the

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\* *Cyrus taught English and creative writing at Oberlin College while Caitlin Taer matriculated there. She didn't take any of Cyrus's classes, but they almost certainly crossed paths. Archer taught in the same departments Taer studied in. —Catie Disabato*

ranks of Prince, of Justin Timberlake, of Madonna. This is the Molly song people will play forever.

Because her work with the *Chicago Tribune* and *Pitchfork* wasn't translating into more paid opportunities with other outlets, Taer worked as a barback and sometimes bartender at a bar called Rainbo, in a neighborhood known as the Ukrainian Village. (Deceptively named, Rainbo is a dive with a reputation for being a favorite of local musicians, not a gay bar.) Sometimes, she sold clothes to resale store Buffalo Exchange for grocery money. Taer lived in Humboldt Park, a grungy but cheap and gentrifying area near the more expensive and yuppie-filled Wicker Park neighborhood. Her apartment was on the top floor of an unkempt walk-up on the corner of North Monticello and West Thomas Street, with no architectural distinctions to speak of and at least two warped window frames that let in cold air.

She spent each day's otherwise empty hours obsessing about her carpet. Taer hated her apartment's carpeting with an intense fervor most people generally reserve for sentient beings. She paid for a steam cleaning, a huge expense in relation to her income, but while her roommate's dust-related allergy attacks stopped for a few months, the cleaning didn't improve the color or texture of the dingy gray-white carpet.

Taer petitioned her landlord for a flooring upgrade; she preferred Brazilian Cherry Wood, but would be satisfied with anything, really, so long as it wasn't carpeting. Her landlord refused. Taer wanted to move, but didn't want to break her lease or deal with a subletter. She pouted, instead, to her diary: "It's like I'm trapped in hell." Her frustration didn't subside until Molly's disappearance distracted her.

On January 14, scrolling through her Facebook page's News Feed, Taer clicked on a link one of her friends posted to the

YouTube video of Weis and Applebaum's press conference.\* She watched the full thirty-minute press conference, lying in bed, scribbling dismayed thoughts into her journal. When Weis mentioned that Taer's old acquaintance Regina Nix was the last person to see Molly Metropolis, Taer got out of bed. She quickly read through articles from the *Trib*, CNN, and *Oh No They Didn't*, looking for quotes from Nix. She called her editor at the *Chicago Tribune*, David Hurwitz, and asked if they had spoken to Nix. He hadn't, but one of his journalists had been trying to contact her for a longer, more thoroughly researched piece on the hours before Molly Metropolis disappeared. If Taer got an interview with Nix, she could get a contributing credit on the piece. She called in sick to her shift at Rainbo, put on a heavy sweater and her quilted coat, and caught the Metra Electric Train Line from the Millennium Station (a renamed and refurbished Randolph Street Station) to Flossmoor. Taer was hoping Nix was hiding out at her parents' house.

Taer wrote in her journal while riding on the Metra, her handwriting shaky due to the train's constant motion:

I know it's not really a journalistic hunch like in the movies, but I'm pretty sure Gina went home. I was thinking about that party at Rachel's senior year when everyone just knew Gina was having sex with Christopher Brooks, of all fucking people, in the bedroom. A few of us went around the yard and looked through the windows, which was terrible of us. She didn't leave her mom's house for the rest of the summer. That's where she goes to hide.

If she didn't find Nix at home, Taer planned to ask Nix's mother to help find her.

After arriving in Flossmoor, Taer walked to her own house, ate lunch with her mother, and asked to borrow the family car. She

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\* To put together Taer's discovery of Molly Metropolis's disappearance, Cyrus drew both from Taer's Tumblr posts and her notebook. —Catie Disabato

drove through Flossmoor's small downtown to a neighborhood called Heather Hill and tentatively knocked on Nix's door. Nix's mother, Diane, answered and led Taer to the small living room at the back of the house. Nix was lying on the couch, wrapped in a blanket, listening to Philip Glass with her eyes closed. Diane left them alone.

Nix unwrapped herself and stood up. She was tall, and thinner than she had been in high school; her athletic body had given way to a more sinewy look. She had thick, slightly wavy brown hair, which she wore past her shoulders, with long bangs swept over her forehead and pinned back. Her nose came to a sharp point.

Nix initially refused to let Taer interview her, denying Taer access the same way she would eventually, temporarily, deny me. Taer convinced Nix to change her mind with self-effacing honesty. Taer told Nix the interview was her first real chance to impress her editors. She explained she was working at a bar and hated her life. She explained her frustrations with her carpet. Nix laughed at her a little bit, but it worked. She agreed to give Taer a few quotes, if SDFC would let her. Nix called Applebaum, who agreed to let Nix give the interview, and coached Nix on what she could and couldn't say.

Taer turned on her iPhone's voice recorder and Nix talked for three minutes about visiting the MCA and Molly insisting on leaving without her bodyguards. Their conversation was as follows:\*

"Does she usually go to museums or do other tourist things while on tour?" Taer asked.

"No, she doesn't usually do this kind of cultural tourism; not in the U.S., at least. When she goes out of the country, there is more of that kind of thing," Nix said.

"I guess what I'm asking is, was it unusual behavior for her to go to the museum?"

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\* As with this conversation, all further dialogue is taken from Caitlin's various audio recordings, captured by her iPhone's built-in voice recorder and saved to her computer.

“Yes. Sort of. I don’t want to say ‘yes’ because she is always doing unusual things. Was this unusual behavior? Yes. Was unusual behavior a matter of course? Yes. I’m not just talking about the crazy outfits and the weird videos. She doesn’t act like a usual person. Even though she never acts *normal*, you get used to her, and you can predict how she’s going to act or respond to something. This wasn’t predictable behavior. Molly is just as crazy as everyone thinks she is, but at the same time, she is the most level-headed, clear-thinking, sharp person I’ve ever met. No one is like her. And she is nice to everyone. Can I tell you something off the record? And you won’t print it?”

“Yeah, sure. Like, legally, I’m not going to be allowed to print something you say is ‘off the record.’ My editor will listen to this recording. The fact-checker, I mean, they’ll listen to it.”

“Okay. Well, off the record: I’m pretty sure [Molly] had some deep dark secrets she was keeping. I wouldn’t be surprised if there was this huge part of Molly and her life that no one knew about, that she somehow kept hidden, and she just decided to go do that instead. Or it consumed her, without her being able to stop it.”

Nix told Applebaum she had given Taer this strange, almost rambling, conspiracy theory-esque quote, and Applebaum asked her to put it on the record, for reasons Nix still doesn’t understand.\* Taer and her editors included the quote in the *Tribune* article. It was the starting gun for a thousand more conspiracy theories, opinion pieces, blog posts, and status updates. It became one of the most enduring sentiments of the early days of Molly Metropolis’s disappearance.

It also makes Nix seem unbalanced and spastic; she’s not. Nix

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\* Although they spoke to Cyrus, neither Kelly Applebaum nor anyone on the SDFC public relations team returned repeated calls and e-mails for comment on this decision or any other part of the book. My best guess as to Applebaum’s motivations here is that the SDFC team assumed a conspiracy theory controversy would help sell Cause Célèbrety and eventually Cause Apocalyptic. —Catie Disabato

has a steady temperament. She's more inclined to recede than to babble. Molly's disappearance brought out an extreme in her.

As Taer turned off the voice recorder and awkwardly started to leave, Nix burst into tears. She cried into the corner of her blanket, apologizing and trying to stop. When she couldn't, she hid her face and asked Taer to leave. Instead, Taer grabbed Nix's upper arm and squeezed it. Nix hated when people said "don't cry" to try to comfort a crier, and she expected that out of Taer. According to Nix, Taer subverted expectations and said, "You keep on fucking crying for as long as you need to. I'm just going to hold onto your arm like this."

They sat together for a long time. Nix cried, and Taer held her arm. Taer wrote that she was attracted to people who expressed their deep emotions honestly and even more attracted if the person wasn't usually effusive; it made Taer feel special. She latched onto Nix that afternoon.

Nix captured Taer's attention, but Molly Metropolis captured her imagination. Taer wanted to know everything about Molly's possible secret life. Her pursuit of Molly Metropolis began that night, perhaps even in those quiet moments while Nix wept and she held her arm. Taer's Molly Metropolis idolatry was already the embodiment of pop star fixation, but with the added hook of a mystery, it developed into a full-blown obsession. Over the next few weeks, she investigated Molly's secret activities and the deeper mystery of her disappearance. As Taer sunk into her obsession, she too became progressively more secretive, until she also disappeared on a rainy weekend in Chicago.



HOUSE

OF

DICHOTOMIES

A  
NOVEL

BRENDAN DUFFY

# HOUSE *of* ECHOES

A NOVEL

BRENDAN DUFFY



BALLANTINE BOOKS

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

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FIRST EDITION

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*December 23, 1777*

*Dearest Kathy,*

*It is over now, sister, but for how long?*

*From our window I still see the Drop. I see the fields and forest where we once played. I can still see our brothers tumble in the grass and hear the elder tree whistle as the wind tears through its branches. However, I know in my heart that it is all gone. It is gone and it shall not return in this life.*

*I am cold, Kathy. I see my breath and I cannot feel my feet, but I do not care. Not even fear is left in my heart. Fear has departed with hate and anger, and hope has been a stranger for longer still. Now there is nothing left but me, and I cannot face my reflection.*

*There are demons in us, Kathy. I see that now. Our blood is cursed, and doom haunts us always. It is too late for us, but I pray it is not too late for you.*

*Should this letter find its way to you, sister, you will think me mad. You may not understand now, but you must stay far from this place. Forget that you ever called it home. Do not even whisper its name to the*

*children I pray you will one day have. I wish you many children, Kathy.  
If there is any goodness left in this land, I pray it will find its way to you.*

*Remember me as I was, dear sister, when we slept in peace and our  
every dream seemed possible. I cannot sleep anymore.*

*Forgive me.*

*Your Bess*

# 1

There were times in each day when Ben believed a happier life waited only for them to claim it. He was a dreamer by trade, and it didn't seem far-fetched to hope their troubles would depart as quickly as they had surfaced. Such optimism was purest in the clear mornings when he took Hudson on the day's first walk.

Spring had come late but suddenly. The last of the snow had melted only weeks ago; now the grass was nearly to Ben's waist. He monitored Hudson's progress through the fields by reading the furrow carved by the beagle's passage.

The dew had evaporated but its chill lingered, and the breeze carried its own bite. The wind was strong and invigorating on this part of the Drop—the plateau that sat in the lap of two mountains, hulking cousins of the Adirondack Range. The updraft from the valley sent the acreage undulating as if it were a single breathing thing.

He put his hand to his eyes to shield them against a gust and did his best to keep track of the dog. Hudson had picked up the scent of something and filled the air with his ecstatic baying. No one was happier about the Tierneys' new life in the mountains than the beagle. His previous circumstances having amounted to little more than

a Manhattan apartment, Hudson hardly knew what to do with a thousand acres of field, forest, and lake. If he missed his dog-walk runs and leashed jaunts down the avenues, he hid it well.

Ben smiled and dropped his hand to his pocket, searching for his phone before remembering that he'd left it back at the Crofts, their home on the Drop. He hardly carried it around anymore, but like a phantom limb he sometimes imagined its presence.

He watched the dog dart from the field and across the gravel drive that connected the Crofts with the county road nearly a mile away. The husk of a shattered outbuilding was just a hundred yards off the drive, on the near side of another copse of trees, and the beagle made straight for it.

Ben cupped his hands around his mouth and called Hudson's name. Ruined structures of uncertain purpose were scattered across the Drop, but Ben had picked his way through this particular one not long after he and Caroline had closed on the property. The place was a mess. The roof had caved in, and the rotting floor was on the brink of collapse under the weight of rusting farming equipment and other scrap. Anyone could see it was a death trap.

He called Hudson again, but he was too far away; Ben could feel his shout whipped back to him by the steady wind from the valley.

Clearing these outbuildings was something Ben had wanted taken care of before they moved in, but that was a battle he'd lost. Caroline thought that they contributed to the ambience. She imagined the guests at their inn roaming the grounds, delighting in the discovery of some ancient building from a forgotten time. She said this would give their guests a sense of ownership over their stays at the Crofts, so that the Tierneys' inn would become a place they'd return to year after year.

Their son, Charlie, was forbidden from venturing anywhere near the ruined buildings, but even an eight-year-old was easier to control than a beagle that had just plucked a tantalizing smell from the air.

Ben broke into a run when he cleared the tall grass. He'd lost sight of Hudson, but a mournful howl told him the dog was close by.

The wind backed off as Ben ran across the gravel drive, and he didn't need to be a dog to pick out the scent that had captured Hudson's attention. It was a musky smell with metallic notes, the tang of an animal, a tease of death that hadn't yet turned sweet.

Ben reached the building and was greeted by Hudson, eyes big and beseeching, tongue wagging.

"In trouble again," Ben said.

He crouched to give Hudson a rough rub around his neck, and the beagle's panting slowed.

"You stink, too." His hands came away from the dog, smeared red. He resisted the impulse to wipe them on his jeans.

Hudson gave a short bark and executed a small circle in front of Ben.

"All right, show me," Ben told him, and followed the dog around the shattered building.

He wasn't surprised by the death; he had guessed as much from the smell. It was the blood that caught him short.

The animal looked as if it had burst. The creature's entrails were spread over several yards in two perpendicular streaks of intersecting gore.

"No, Hudson," Ben said, as the dog started sniffing the mess.

The smell was stronger here, but not as bad as Ben had expected. The pools of blood were liquid, rippling in the breeze. The absence of birds and other scavengers made Ben think this hadn't been here long. A fresh kill.

His eyes scanned the ruined canvas of the animal and settled on a pair of prim gray hooves. A deer, Ben thought with some relief. The anonymous quality of the shredded viscera had made his imagination spin.

The beagle walked through the carnage and began nosing around the edge of the woods.

"Might have been a bear," Ben told Hudson.

He'd heard coyotes at night, but the men in town told him there were black bears in the woods. They'd also told him that there were

wolves and mountain lions up here on the Drop, but he'd actually seen the bear tracks for himself along the edge of the lake.

"Come on," he said.

Hudson started to bark at the trees.

"We'll have to hose you down before you go inside."

Ben headed back toward the gravel drive, hoping the dog would follow. But Hudson wouldn't stop growling at the forest. Ben squinted to see what might have caught the beagle's attention. He was a good dog and rarely fussed without a reason.

"Let's go, Hud." Ben turned away from the woods and took some of yesterday's bacon out of a plastic bag he kept in his pocket. "Look what I've got for you."

Hudson veered around and licked the bacon fragments from Ben's hand.

"Come on, you smelly dog," he said, rubbing Hudson on the side of one ear. He took off in a jog back to the Crofts, and the beagle trotted after him.

A great elm stood a solitary watch on the lip of the Drop, and when Ben reached its shadow he glanced back at the woods by the ruined building. All he saw were trees rocking gently in the updraft from the valley.

## 2

The Crofts was a monster.

The lawyer who'd handled the sale told Ben it had been the original home of the Swann family, the first colonists to settle the Drop. It had begun as a simple residence, but he said they'd added to it over the years. Then again, that had been obvious.

Rising to four floors, the house had sixty-five rooms, five entryways, and four staircases. Though sections of the building had been constructed centuries apart, its exterior was wrapped in uniform walls of gray granite. It sat like a castle on the lip of the Drop, overlooking the village of Swannhaven and the rest of the valley.

It had been a farming estate and was ancient by the metric of the New World, built back when agriculture was the only game in the rambling North Country. It hadn't been a fully operational farm since the 1940s, but the outlines of the old fields remained, as did the bones of stone walls and survivor strains of wheat, rye, and barley grown wild.

Ben had seen castles a third its size. And while the scale of the place was imposing, its opulence was tempered by its condition.

Parts of the residence hadn't been inhabited in decades, its last owners spinster sisters who'd lived their entire lives within these walls. Ben didn't know what two old women were doing so far from the village in such a huge house, but he could see it hadn't involved much in the way of home maintenance. Water stains marked the ceilings, warped planks buckled the floors, and windows rattled in their frames.

Sometimes he looked at the Crofts and saw a sprawling monument to impetuous decision-making. But in moments of hope, Ben saw an ember waiting to be rekindled. They were ready to put their sweat into the place; he hoped only that the Crofts would accept it.

"Windy out there," he told Charlie when he opened the side door and stepped into the kitchen. He made right for the sink, giving the soap dispenser a double pump before nudging the handle to hot.

From their first tour of the place, Caroline had been convinced they could renovate the entire estate by themselves. Ben had his doubts. He had insisted that contractors add air-conditioning, install bathrooms in the guest rooms, and upgrade the plumbing and electrical. He could take his chances sanding floors and painting walls, but he thought anything involving pipes, wires, or gas lines was worth paying for. It had taken a team of live-in workers some months to get the house into shape before the Tierneys moved in.

Though budget-conscious, Caroline had taken up cooking again and spared no expense in updating the kitchen in a modern French country style. Two walls of custom-made cabinets flanked a professional Wolf range with two large ovens. The original floor had been ripped up in favor of wide-plank antique walnut. Gray granite counters gleamed under inset lighting.

When they weren't working to renovate the rest of the house, they spent most of their waking hours here. At first it had been only for meals, then Charlie had begun reading in one of the corners instead of in his own room, then Ben and Caroline had moved their laptops to a side table. Ben told Caroline it might have been withdrawal from their close city living that led them to cluster together in

this small room, but the truth was that he felt like an intruder anywhere else in the vast place.

“Where’s Hudson?” Charlie asked through a full mouth. He and Bub were seated at the table, which held four plates of pancakes, each stacked six inches high.

“He made a mess of himself out there,” Ben told him. “I’ll clean him off after I eat.” He watched the last of the blood-tinged water swirl out of sight.

“Mom made pancakes,” Charlie said.

“I can see that.” Ben dried his hands and kissed Bub on the head. The baby gurgled and showed him the pancake he was playing with.

“What are in these things?” he asked, examining Bub’s breakfast.

“I made two batches,” Caroline said. The pantry door slammed and a moment later she was halfway to the counter. She’d always been beautiful in jeans and killer in the right dress, but untucked flannel and blurry with flour was a relatively new look for her. “One with cherries and one with raspberries. I thought they might be good with chocolate, so I’m going to melt some down, add cream and maybe a dash of vanilla.” She emptied a bag of chocolate pieces into a saucepan fitted over a water bath.

“Are we expecting company?” Ben asked, pointing to the plates of pancakes.

“I’m trying out a recipe for the guests, Ben. I wasn’t sure about quantities.”

She clicked the burner until a burst of blue fire blossomed under the water bath. As she churned the chocolate, her foot beat a rhythm against the floor. Ben had wondered, as he did on all of his morning walks, what kind of day they would have together. The towering stacks of pancakes were a bad omen, and the note that had crept into Caroline’s voice when she spoke his name was more troubling still. But it was only eight-thirty, and Ben was not ready to count the day as a loss.

Ben kissed Charlie on the forehead as he sat down next to him. “Do you recommend the cherry or raspberry?” he asked him.

“I like them both,” Charlie said.

Ben leaned into Charlie. “I’m going to need your feedback on this one. I mean, how many pancakes would you say you’ve eaten in your time?”

“A lot.” He had a smear of syrup on his cheek, and Ben rubbed it away with a napkin.

“I’ll say. And not just ones made by Mom or me, right? You’ve eaten these things in restaurants across the tristate area. And what about when we went to California? You had some there, didn’t you?”

“They were good.”

“So you’re speaking from the position of having some pretty formidable experience under your belt in the arena of pancake eating.” Ben was talking to Charlie, but he was watching Caroline stir the saucepan at the stove. “Now, you should stop me if I’m overselling your credentials.”

“I will,” Charlie said.

“So how do these *stack* up?” A stupid pun, but some days he’d try anything. He was grateful to see the side of Caroline’s mouth twitch. Charlie was spare with his smiles, but not nearly as spare as his mother. Her face was as delicate and perfect as a doll’s, and these days almost as inexpressive.

“They’re good,” Charlie said after a moment. “Sweet.”

“Follow-up question: Do you think that the quart of maple syrup you’ve poured on them has anything to do with that?”

A smile, small but undeniable, opened across Caroline’s face.

“Maybe,” Charlie said.

Ben speared three pancakes of both varieties off plates in front of him. “These are excellent,” he said after he’d eaten one of each.

Caroline brought her tea over and sat at the table. The ghost of a smile lingered on her face, and that made some of the tension ebb from Ben’s shoulders. “Your phone buzzed while you were out.”

Ben reached back to pick it off the counter. There was a missed call and voice mail from the lawyer who’d been handling his grand-

mother's estate. More bad news, Ben expected; the man never had any of the good variety.

"Any luck on those butterflies, Charlie?" Ben asked. He slipped the phone into his pocket.

Charlie had become very attached to a book that Ben had given him before they'd moved up here. It was about Hickory Heck, a boy who'd left his city life to live in the wild. Heck made his own clothes, gathered his own food, and he'd even hollowed out his own home under a massive tree. One of Heck's many fantastic nature-themed adventures involved filling mason jars with butterflies of every color and training them to dance in the candlelight that illuminated his cozy burrow. Charlie had found some caterpillars a few days ago and put them in a jar filled with leaves. He hoped to teach them to dance when they turned into butterflies.

"I think they just need to eat some more. I gave them leaves, but they don't like the dandelions," Charlie said. "I don't know why. You'd think they would."

"I called someone about getting a truck up here to take away that mess in the basement," Caroline said.

The Crofts had been filled with the detritus of the house's previous inhabitants. Furniture had been left to molder, along with stacks of newspapers and magazines, piles of warped boxes, and dozens of broken appliances from past decades. One of the first things Caroline had Ben do was to move it all into the basement.

"If I were a caterpillar, I'd eat dandelions," Charlie said.

"Me too," Ben said. "And you *know* Bub would eat them, too, if we gave him a chance."

"But the man I talked to won't carry it out of the basement himself," Caroline said.

"Did you offer to pay him extra?"

"Of course, but he said he had a bad back and no insurance. Besides, I don't really want anyone from the village inside until we've finished fixing up the place."

“When’s he coming?”

“Tomorrow, sometime in the morning. He wasn’t specific.”

“Okay.” Ben tried to keep his face expressionless, but Caroline still heard something in his voice.

“What was I supposed to do, Ben? We need that crap out of here.”

He could see the cords of her neck tense, and he didn’t need to look under the table to know that her well-muscled runner’s legs were jackhammering away at the antique walnut.

“It’s just that it’ll take a long time to get all of that outside,” Ben said.

“What else were you going to do today?”

“I was going to sand the floor in one of the second-floor bedrooms,” Ben said. “And the bookstore in Exton called. My order’s ready. I was hoping to pick it up.”

“Maybe it won’t take as long as you think,” Caroline said.

But the garbage in the basement took up rooms and rooms of space. Much of it had been there before Ben had added to it with the junk from the rest of the house. He was sure that Caroline had no idea how much was down there.

“You’re probably right.”

“I can help you, Dad,” Charlie told him.

“Thank you, buddy,” he said. It was rare for Charlie to volunteer for indoor work on a sunny day when the forests and fields waited just beyond the door. Ben saw that today could still be a good day, and that was enough to buoy him. He pulled the boy out of his chair and onto his lap. Charlie was too big for this, but this morning he let Ben get away with it. His hair was dark and thick like Ben’s.

Caroline picked Bub out of his chair and wet a napkin with her tongue to scrub the cherry juice from his face. Bub’s hair was blond and fine like his mother’s.

“What books did you order?” Caroline asked.

“A couple that people have been talking about, and a few more that sounded interesting.”

“Do you have an idea?”

She was asking about his next book. Ben enjoyed how mysterious his process seemed to Caroline. To her analytical mind, this whole part of his life was opaque.

“An idea,” he said. He drew his fork through the syrup to see the glistening script it left behind. “But not much more than that.”

The truth was that he’d written a good hundred fifty pages of what he’d thought would be his third book, but the novel had soured on him since he’d moved up here. It was a problem he couldn’t account for. His last literary thriller had been a success, and he’d begun this next project with an abundance of confidence, but it had somehow fallen apart. It was as if the gravity had dissipated at the core of the thing, and the pieces had drifted apart. He was just beginning to admit to himself that it had all been a terrific waste.

He looked up to smile at her. “If it turns into anything, I’ll let you know.” Charlie stirred restlessly on his lap. “This one’s had too much sugar to sit still,” Ben said.

“Best thing to do with energy is to put it to work,” Caroline said.

Ben moved Charlie back to his chair and stood up. “Help Mom clean up here, okay, buddy?”

“Where are you going?” Caroline asked.

“Hudson found a dead raccoon,” Ben said. “Made a mess of himself. I have to wash him off and I want to bury the thing so he doesn’t get into it again.”

“Can I see?” Charlie asked.

“It’s really stinky, Charlie.” He ruffled the boy’s hair. “Help Mom with the dishes, and I’ll be back soon.”

“Don’t come back stinky,” Caroline said.

Ben was halfway out the door when he turned around. “And I saw more bear tracks by the lake, so if you guys go outside, make sure to bring a whistle.” He’d read on the Internet that bears were afraid of loud noises. He’d bought a set of whistles for that purpose.

“It would be cool to see one, wouldn’t it, Dad?”

Ben thought about the eviscerated deer, about the long red streaks that had been drawn over the ground with its insides.

“No, buddy. I don’t think so.”

He hosed Hudson off in the shed. As the beagle shook himself dry, Ben stood out of range to listen to the lawyer’s voice mail. The saga of his grandmother’s estate had gone on for months longer than he’d expected. The meager price they’d gotten for her tiny house in New Jersey, a few thousand dollars in savings, and a tract of virtually worthless land attached to a derelict farmhouse here in Swannhaven were the extent of the estate’s assets. Neither Ben nor his brother, Ted, had known that Grams owned land up here—land inherited from her own parents, Ben assumed. But it was on a trip to see this old farmstead that he’d learned the vast house between the mountains was for sale. It was then that the notion of an escape from the city had been born.

Caroline handled their finances, but at the time of Grams’s death, Ben hadn’t wanted to put any further stress on her. Such matters were beyond his expertise, but his grandmother’s legacy barely amounted to six digits, and Ben had expected it would be a simple matter to deal with the estate. In this, he’d been wrong. There were times when he thought that the lawyer was taking him for a ride, eking out every possible penny, one billable hour at a time. Other times Ben thought this was just another example of how their luck had suddenly soured.

According to the voice mail, Ben’s mother was the newest problem. While Grams had bequeathed her daughter a few thousand dollars, she’d split the majority of her assets between her two grandsons. All Ben’s mother had to do was sign a few documents to receive the behest, but these signatures had proved elusive. Which could only mean she wanted something more.

Over the last decade, Ben had made it a personal mission to indulge the woman as little as possible. As with all addicts, her needs

were an abyss that only deepened with each shovelful of good intentions you tossed in. But every phone call and certified letter the lawyer wasted in prodding her cost money. As Ben deleted the voice mail, he knew he would have to call her himself, despite the fact that this was surely exactly what she wanted.

“Clean again, but how long will it last, Hud?” he said once the dog finished shaking himself dry. Ben stooped to rub the beagle’s head and got a lick to his face.

After he dropped Hudson just inside the kitchen door, Ben returned to the shed for a shovel. With it hoisted over his shoulder, he made his way to the ruined building off the drive.

Birds were all over the deer when Ben got there. The nasty black things moved only when he menaced them with the shovel. When they hopped away, they scattered blood from the ends of their glossy wings. Either ravens or crows—he’d have to look up the difference. Whatever they were, an entire ugly flock of them.

Ben dug a shallow hole a few feet from the tree line, then heaped the guts into it. He was again struck by the damage the animal had taken. Other than the hooves and the odd intestine, he couldn’t identify many of the body parts. He guessed that the bear had taken the rest of it, but he didn’t see how it could have eaten the head or so much of the hide. It occurred to him that he didn’t even know if bear ate deer or would be able to catch one in the first place. Perhaps there were wolves after all, he thought. Ben had believed that the howls they heard at night were coyotes, but he could only guess at what lived in the dark of the old forest.

Once he’d scraped up as much of the animal as he could, he did his best to cover the hole. By the time he was finished, he knew that it wouldn’t fool any of the scavengers in the forest. Wouldn’t even fool the crows. A dozen of them were perched on what remained of the fallen building’s roof, utterly motionless as they watched with their obsidian eyes.

Ben trudged back up to the shed to rinse the shovel. He’d have to walk Hudson on the upper fields by the lake until nature disposed of

the animal's remains. The trees by the lake were older than the rest. Standing in their shadow made Ben feel like a child. The first time Hudson had seen the lake's mirror surface, he couldn't resist throwing himself into it, and it had taken Ben ten minutes to coax him out. Ben smiled at the memory, then the sound of wings shook him from his thoughts.

He turned around to see the group of startled crows aloft, cawing as they filled the air with their dancing shadow bodies. A murder, he remembered. That's what a flock of crows is called.

# 3

Ben didn't like the cellar.

A single stained bulb lit its front room, casting the space in a murky orange; the light wavered as if it might desert its station at any moment. The air was musty with the rot of ancient upholstery and the moldering that takes grip when moisture meets neglect. Chairs, tables, old mattresses, piles of ragged clothes, broken clocks, boxes of photos, and bundles of newspapers were arranged around the room. Ben grimaced—a claustrophobe's nightmare.

The cellar had many rooms; even Ben wasn't sure how many. Only one set of stairs reached this floor, and the space was too packed to traverse. At first he'd thought that if he spent an extended amount of time working down here, he'd get used to the noises from the pipes and the heavy presence of the rooms just beyond his sight. Instead, he shuttled back and forth, carrying things outside, and every time he came back down the stairs, he had to reassure himself that nothing had occupied the space while he'd been gone.

Considering what Charlie had gone through back at his old school, Ben wouldn't have blamed him for giving the cellar a wide berth. But the boy often surprised him, and Ben was happy for his

company. When they'd finally cleared a path through the junk he'd put in the cellar a few weeks ago, they began on the junk that had been there before. More of the same: clumps of ancient periodicals fossilized into solid blocks, fragments of broken furniture, and pieces of rusted sewing machines. He was glad when they reached an empty light socket. He held his breath as he screwed in a new bulb. Ben vanquished more of the dark but paid for the privilege with the sight of another century's worth of mess in the rooms within the light's range.

"Not that, Charlie," Ben told him, and Charlie put down the rocking chair he was trying to lift. "How about the newspapers?"

Charlie looked suspiciously at the towers of newspapers. "They smell."

"Everything down here smells, buddy."

"Do you think Hickory Heck's burrow is like this?" Charlie asked.

Ben smiled; he remembered when he'd been young and could get so caught up in the world of a book.

"It's probably dark like this, but I bet it smells a lot better," Ben said. "It probably smells like earth and rain where Heck lives. That's a nicer smell, isn't it?"

"A lot nicer," Charlie said.

"Everyone working hard down here?" Caroline asked as she came down the stairs. Her hair was pulled back, and a smear of blue paint stretched from her nose to her cheekbone. She was flushed and grimy from painting one of the second-floor rooms. Ben thought she looked beautiful like this. "God, there's a lot."

"We're making a dent. Aren't we, Charlie?" Ben said. He put down the box he'd been unburying from a pile of ancient couch cushions and reached around to the small of Caroline's back, pulling her toward him.

"I'm filthy," she said, pushing him away.

"So am I." He kissed her neck.

"Those old ladies must have been crazy to keep all this junk."

"I'm going up," Charlie said, as he headed to the stairs. His skinny arms strained under the weight of a packet of bundled newspapers.

"Is he going to hurt his back?" Caroline asked Ben.

"Kids can't hurt their backs," he said, stooping down to the storage box to test its weight. "Thirty-four-year-old men with old track injuries, however . . ."

"Poor baby." She laid both hands on his shoulders. "A morning around this house is better than a session at Equinox," she said, prodding his muscles with the tips of her fingers. She hardly ever touched him like this anymore.

"Are you hitting on me? Tell me again how filthy you are."

"What's in this thing?" she asked. She bent down to get a better look at the box he'd uncovered.

"Just clothes, but they're packed in there pretty tight. I might need your help carrying it up."

"I wish they'd cleaned out the place," she said, referring to the bank from which they'd bought the Crofts. "You'd think it would be standard to do something like that."

Few things about their purchase of the Crofts had been standard. After the death of the spinster sisters, a local bank had taken possession of the property on account of unresolved debts. When that bank collapsed last summer, it was bought by a larger bank, which had to sell itself for pennies on the dollar a few months later to an even larger bank. This last bank, headquartered almost a thousand miles away and saddled with the same toxic assets that had sunk the previous two, was happy to rush the sale of the Crofts to the Tierneys. A year ago the local bank might have laughed at their offer on the property, but times had changed. With the local staffs of the two previous banks terminated, a lawyer from the city had rushed north to manage the sale, and many a corner was cut in the name of expediency.

Caroline opened the box and pulled out a pair of matching floral-print sundresses. Yellow tulips against red cotton, the flowers ar-

ranged as if they had rained from heaven. The house had stood for over two centuries, and the little sundresses made Ben wonder how many children had been born and raised within its walls. It was hard to imagine the people who had lived here before them when all he could do was guess from the ruined things they'd left behind.

The baby monitor clipped to Caroline's waist emitted a short blast of noise. Ben and Caroline listened until they were sure that Bub hadn't woken up.

"Baby dream," Ben said.

"There's a big pile up there, Mom," Charlie said on his way back down the stairs.

"How big is this truck that's coming tomorrow, anyway?" Ben asked her.

"Don't tell me you're giving up already."

"It's just that there's a big difference between filling up a van and filling up an eighteen-wheeler. If he doesn't have enough room for it tomorrow, I'm not sure we want all this rotting on the lawn."

"I hate the idea of all this stuff down here," Caroline said.

"Actually, some of it isn't too bad. This is a nice little piece, isn't it?" He turned his flashlight on a small dark-wood captain's desk with inlaid leather. "What do you think?"

"No, Ben. It's all got to go." Her voice got hard-edged as she shook her head, her blond locks coming loose to whip at the air. "That's not the style we're going with. The last thing I want is for this to look like a patchwork of different styles. I *hate* that."

"I'm sorry, you're right." Ben nodded quickly. He hadn't meant to wind her up, but these days almost anything could do it. "A clean slate. Don't worry, I remember."

"I mean, that's why we're killing ourselves to get this right, isn't it?"

"Yes, of course," he said. "I'll bring some more of this outside; then if you could give me the guy's number, I'll find out how big his truck is. If it's on the small side, I'll schedule him again for his next available slot. Okay? We want all this out as soon as possible."

“Otherwise it’s just festering down here.”

“Yep.” Ben found himself nodding again, and soon Caroline was nodding as well.

Bub’s gurgles came out of the baby monitor as digitized spurts laced with static. The sound sent Caroline for the stairs.

“If you could put the guy’s number on the kitchen island?” he called after her. When he turned back, he saw Charlie trying to pick up the captain’s desk. “Leave the big stuff for me, okay? How about you get some of those couch cushions?” Charlie picked one off the floor. “No, not that one, Charlie. Get one of the really disgusting ones. Yes, that one. Thank you. That’s a huge help.” He watched Charlie lumber up the stairs with a cushion as large as himself.

Ben stooped to pick up the captain’s desk. He thought it was better to get rid of it now, in case Caroline saw it down here again and thought he’d forgotten. It had been a stupid thing to say to her. He knew better, but more than that he knew in his guts that he didn’t want to keep any of these old things. No matter how much the Tierneys made the Crofts their own, the presence of the house’s former inhabitants would linger if given the chance. He felt this in the way that every empty room seemed to recoil at his presence when he walked the halls on sleepless nights. Better to throw it all away and be done with it. Better not to give the ghosts any furniture of their own to sit on.

But it was still a shame. The desk was made of good wood, which could be worked to a glossy depth with a little polish. He tested its weight and was surprised by its heft. He checked the drawers to see if anything heavy had been stashed there, but they were wedged full with nothing more than old paper that disintegrated in his hands. Peering through a large keyhole, he saw that there was a compartment under the writing surface, but it was locked. He tried to force it, but it wouldn’t budge. The lock had been built to last.

Bending from his knees, he hoisted the desk to his chest, wincing at the strain. As he lifted it, he felt something shift inside. Something heavy enough that he had to adjust his balance to compensate.

Threading his way between mounds of junk, he crossed the room and started up the stairs.

His sweaty hands grappled the desk's worn contours, but just as he found a better grip, his trailing leg went through the planks of a stair. Ben fell backward, shoving the desk to the side as he lost his balance. Ribbons of pain bolted up from his shin as his center of gravity shifted with the fall. He caught the banister. One of the spokes broke, but the next one held. The desk picked up momentum as it descended. Ben didn't watch, but he heard the old thing scream as it splintered against the wall at the foot of the stairs.

"Dad?"

He heard Charlie padding back down the hallway. The boy poked his head through the doorway.

Ben swiveled so he could see the foot of the stairs.

The weight of the desk had worked against it at impact. Its final gasp was a haze of ancient paper remnants, exhaled like the release of an earthbound spirit.

"Help me out here, buddy?"

Charlie walked down to Ben. He peered into the hole Ben's leg was wedged in. When he looked up, a rare smile filled his little face.

"I think you liked Mom's pancakes too much," he said.

Ben braced himself against Charlie's shoulder and the banister to lift his calf out of the hole. He sat down heavily on the stairs. Charlie sat next to him as Ben hoisted the leg of his jeans.

"Does it hurt?" Charlie asked.

Skin along his calf had bunched up, and the flesh below was already turning purple.

"Not really. Going to be sore tomorrow, though."

"Do you still need help carrying stuff?"

"I think we earned ourselves a break, don't you?"

Charlie scampered back up the stairs, but Ben walked down them. He pulled the desk away from the wall to examine the damage. The lock on the lid of the desk had loosened but not enough for

him to pry it open. But the side panel had splintered, and he forced his weight against it until it broke away with a satisfying crunch.

He pulled the flashlight out of his pocket and positioned the desk so that he could shine the light into the hole in its side. Upstairs, Charlie was calling Caroline to come look at Ben's leg.

The hollow space was filled with scrolls of thick paper. Ben slid one through the hole and unraveled it to find a schematic of the Crofts and a small map of the grounds. He removed another to find a similar document dated a few years after the first. While interesting, these architectural plans didn't explain the shifting weight within the desk. Once Ben had removed all of the blueprints from the compartment, he finally saw what looked like a thick black box. He used the back end of the flashlight to break away more of the cracked wood to make space for the object. When he pulled it out, he saw that it wasn't a box; it was a book. A black book with a metal cross embedded in its front cover. A Bible. Ben again tested its heft, but it didn't seem large enough to justify its weight. The cover was thorny and ridged, as if it had been bound with dragon skin.

"Are you okay?" Caroline called from the top of the stairs.

On impulse, Ben slid the Bible into a pile of yellowed linens, out of sight.

"Foot went right through the stair. Didn't draw blood, but it'll leave a nasty bruise." He walked back up the steps, pausing at the one with the hole in it. "Rotted through."

"Makes you wonder about the rest of the place," she sighed.

Before signing on the dotted line, Ben had warned Caroline about the thousand things that could go wrong in an old house like this. Rotting wood, vermin infestations, toxic mold, leaky roofs, rusty water, noisy pipes, warped floors, lousy insulation. But none of that had mattered to her at the time. She'd wanted her clean slate.

"Better that it happened to me than to you or Charlie," he said, resuming his climb up the stairs. "I'm hungry."

"Already?" she asked. "It's barely noon."

“I want to ice this. May as well eat while I do.”

The hall was wide, white, and cold. More than a dozen other rooms had doors that opened onto this hall. Huge rooms with wooden floors with inlaid ebony borders, and tall windows with once-proud moldings that stretched to the soaring ceilings. Each one, imperious, alien, and staggeringly empty.

“I had something planned for lunch. But it’ll be a little while before it’s ready.”

“Need help?”

“What, you don’t trust me in the kitchen?” she asked.

Ben looked at her and was grateful to see a playful twist to her lips. Caroline was an excellent cook, but during their busy years she’d rarely flexed those talents. The exceptions had been special occasions, when she might spend days on a perfect meal. The first birthday Ben had spent with her, she’d baked him a staggering chocolate cake filled with hazelnut pastry cream, wrapped in seamless fondant, topped with blown-sugar flowers. He still remembered the awe of the moment when that extraordinary cake had been set in front of him, back when it seemed that Caroline could do anything.

“It’s mostly the fact that you’re making food in the first place. No Thai takeout, no hermetically sealed packages from FreshDirect.”

“I was thinking cucumber, yogurt, lemon, and dill sandwiches on whole-wheat bread. And I was going to boil down some of that tomato soup from two nights ago, add some cream, and toast some croutons.” She slid her toned arm inside his as they walked down the hallway to the kitchen. Even with a few bumps along the way, today was going better than Ben could have hoped.

“Very civilized. Maybe too civilized for a humble laborer like me,” Ben said. They didn’t banter like this much anymore, and he had missed it.

Caroline’s pregnancy with Bub, coupled with the stress of her bank going under, had awakened something inside her. Ben thought of it as the Wolf. One night, after a bad day, he’d written on the back

of a Con Ed bill, *He skirted the forest as close as he dared. Though he could not see it or hear it, he knew the Wolf was there.*

Even with medication, Caroline had been lost to him for weeks, broken and raging in a way that Ben hadn't thought possible. Trying to care for her, Charlie, and a newborn all on his own had almost undone him. After Charlie's problem at school, Caroline thought that a change in geography would be good for all of them. She thought that the million tasks necessary for turning the Crofts into an inn would keep the Wolf at bay and help bring all of them close again. From the outside, it was a crazy idea—moving hundreds of miles to restore a decaying house with a second-grader and a baby. But their old life no longer fit them. Something had to change.

“You'll like it.”

He let himself believe her. She knew him as well as anyone. And he knew her. That's why there was always a flame of fear in the back of his mind. The Crofts was the perfect distraction for Caroline. There were so many things to do. But Ben didn't know what would happen to them after all the walls were painted and the floors sanded. Caroline wanted to believe that this was a whole new life, but it wasn't. Not really. Ben knew that no matter how far you run, you're still yourself when you get there.

## 4

Ben had a city person's bias against cars in general and big cars in particular. But he loved his big black Ford Escape: the way its shocks absorbed the irregularities of country roads, the way it hummed when he accelerated on steep inclines. A sedan wasn't practical up here—and, besides, the Escape was a hybrid. Caroline had one in silver.

He had the windows open, and his iPod blared the exuberant yet wistful sound of an album his brother had gifted him through iTunes. An A&R man for a record label, Ted was more likely to send Ben the music of the moment than to call. Which was fine with Ben. He liked the songs Ted sent, and the exchange reminded him of when they'd shared a room as teenagers. They'd do their homework on opposite ends of a folding table while listening to the radio, sometimes springing up in unison to press record when the opening chords of an admired song sounded through the speakers of their plastic Casio.

Their grandmother had died almost nine months ago, but Ted still had not seen the ruined farmhouse she'd left them. He'd promised to visit, but Ted's promises were generously bestowed and un-

evenly honored. Ben knew his brother would show up eventually, and he'd be glad to see him. But sometimes a little of Ted went a long way.

After lunch, Ben had confirmed that the vehicle the man was using to pick up the junk was just a bit larger than the one Ben was currently driving and that he'd have to reschedule tomorrow's pickup, anyway. Caroline wasn't happy to hear this, but she cleared Ben to drive to the bookstore in Exton, as long as he picked up a few things from the general store in Swannhaven while he was out.

Over the last few weeks he'd learned that the locals kept fluid business hours, so Ben decided to get the groceries first. He turned onto the village's primary thoroughfare. If it had a name, he didn't know it. It flanked an overgrown village square that Ben had once walked through. He'd been surprised by the buckling cobblestone plaza, the scattered remnants of broken stone benches, the rusted iron fountain at its center. It had once been a handsome place, but the good years were long gone.

Only a dozen ramshackle structures bordered the square. Harp's General Store was sandwiched between a building that served as the village's police station/municipal building/post office and the Lancelight, a little diner where Caroline and Ben had once eaten. Other than a mechanic's shop and a small church, the rest of the buildings on the street were residences. Their condition made it hard to tell how many were occupied.

There was no sign of life in the village this afternoon. From what Ben had seen, it was like this most of the time. Sunday mornings were the exception. After attending service at the church down the street, many of the villagers gathered at the Lancelight for coffee and breakfast. The Tierneys had discovered this firsthand a few weeks ago when they'd eaten brunch at the diner.

Though they'd first been mistaken for motorists searching for the interstate, they were soon seated, their orders taken. Their waitress had been polite, but Ben noticed the surreptitious glances and whispers of patrons. As the diner grew more crowded, it seemed to Ben

that he and his family became more and more the center of its attention. The villagers had reacted to them as if they were not just new to town but new to the planet. In the weeks since, that had yet to change.

Ben parked on a patch of barren ground outside Harp's. He could have gotten his groceries from one of the supermarkets in Exton or North Hampstead, but he made it a point to buy from the village when he could.

"In and out," Ben told Hudson as he cracked the windows and put the Escape into park.

Hudson whimpered.

"You go in there and you'll get sliced up and labeled as beef. I'll only be a minute."

A bell tinkled when he walked in. It was the kind of place Ben imagined might have greeted frontiersmen a hundred fifty years ago. The floors were dusty wood planks, and what little fresh produce the store had was displayed in shallow barrels along the front windows. The proprietor also fit the bill. Walter Harp wore a wreck of a face and lips blistered by chewing tobacco. Deputy Simms, who seemed to spend more time here than at the police station next door, was working on the same look, though Harp had a forty-year head start.

"Afternoon, Mr. Tierney." Walter Harp offered a toothy smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Hello, Mr. Harp, Deputy," Ben said with as much enthusiasm as he could muster. Addressing everyone with an honorific was something he was still getting used to. He had to work to make it sound right.

"Anything I can help you with?"

"Just have to pick up a couple things." Ben made for the refrigerated closet, the store's single concession to the past century.

"We got some rain on the way if you can believe the radio," the deputy said. Some of his nasal drawl got lost in the mug of coffee that covered his mouth.

"Yeah?" Ben pulled out two dozen eggs and two jugs of milk.

They sold a local label of milk, and their eggs were so fresh that their shells were dotted with mud and hay.

“Heard that Henry Bishop is heading out to the Crofts tomorrow to help you with some of the Swanns’ old things.”

“We had to reschedule, but, yeah. Lot of old stuff up there,” Ben said. He piled the eggs and milk on the counter.

“Shame it has to go,” Deputy Simms said.

Harp nodded. “Bound to be some nice things.”

“The Swanns were nice people, a fine family,” the deputy said. “Took in all kinds of kids. Filled that house with them.”

“Yeah? Foster kids? That kind of thing?” Ben grabbed a can of the peaches that Charlie liked. He guessed they were no more healthy than a cup of sugar, but they sometimes bought him a smile.

“Real saints they were,” Harp replied, adding up the groceries.

“Oh, and four of those apples, if you don’t mind.”

“How’s that pretty wife of yours?” the deputy asked.

“She’s well, thanks.” Ben made eye contact with the deputy for the first time. He guessed the man was in his late twenties—about thirty years too young to say something like that without it sounding like a threat. “Happy to be out of the city.”

The deputy nodded and smiled, displaying the black coin of dip wedged in his gums.

“You make sure that roof’s fixed up right, Mr. Tierney,” Harp told him. He took the twenty Ben handed him. “Easiest way to take down a house is to pull off a couple a shingles and wait a season. Hard winters here, too. Rain and snow’s a bother, but the wind’s the real curse. Especially up on the Drop.”

“Thanks. I think we’re in good shape,” Ben said. This wasn’t true, but he didn’t see what business it was of theirs.

Harp frowned and handed him his change.

“The heat, too,” the deputy said. “Gonna need that as much as a roof. Even with that good-lookin’ lady to warm you.” He stretched his arms behind his back casually, letting his muscles tense against his uniform.

“Well, so far so good,” Ben said. He gathered the bags up into his arms.

“I can come up and look at it, if you like,” the deputy said. Ben caught the man send a wink and a smirk Harp’s way. “Be my pleasure.”

“I’ll let you know if it gives me any trouble.” Ben backed into the store’s door. “Have a good day, guys.”

“Nope, that fella don’t need help from the likes of us,” he heard the deputy mutter before the door slammed shut behind him.

Ben put the groceries in the cooler he kept in the back of the Escape and closed the trunk. It wasn’t until he was back on the county road, music blaring again, that he let himself feel anger. He indulged himself by revising the scene in the store. He edited his dialogue, adding an edge that his character otherwise lacked. With this tweak, the confrontation escalated. Instead of leaving with a friendly nod, Ben ended the encounter by throwing the deputy out the store’s window. He closed the chapter by leaving the man’s body lying on the pavement, a stripe of blood stretching from his split lip. A satisfying conclusion, one any reader would cheer for.

He was almost out of the valley, a good ten miles from the Crofts, and he had yet to see another car on the county road. There was no reason for anyone but locals to take this route. He’d heard that Swannhaven had only forty households. Most were scattered across the floor of the valley on tired dairy farms, like the one his grandmother was born on.

When Ben reached the highway, the Escape roared its approval.

The battery of signage confirmed that he’d left the remote and insular world that the Crofts and Swannhaven comprised. There was Montreal up ahead and Boston to the east. The signs told him that he could go anywhere on this road. There was strong Canadian beer, or seafood that had been swimming freely an hour before landing on his plate. Turn around and in only three thousand miles he could watch the sun set over the ocean.

The young man on his iPod sang about crashing a party thrown

by the friend of a friend in a sweltering studio off the Bowery. He crooned about vodka and getting high and a girl with green eyes and arms covered with tattoos. The singer didn't pretend to have it all figured out, but he knew enough that life was good and every moment was a gift.

Ben liked songs like this, but today he skipped to the next track.



# hausfrau

a novel

jill alexander essbaum

ANNA WAS A GOOD WIFE, MOSTLY.

It was mid-afternoon, and the train she rode first wrenched then eased around a bend in the track before it pulled into Bahnhof Dietlikon at thirty-four past the hour, as ever. It's not just an adage, it's an absolute fact: Swiss trains run on time. The S8 originated in Pfäffikon, a small town thirty kilometers away. From Pfäffikon, its route sliced upward along the shores of the Zürichsee, through Horgen on the lake's west bank, through Thalwil, through Kilchberg. Tiny towns in which tiny lives were led. From Pfäffikon, the train made sixteen stops before it reached Dietlikon, the tiny town in which Anna's own tiny life was led. Thus the ordinary fact of a train schedule modulated Anna's daily plans. Dietlikon's bus didn't run into the city. Taxicabs were expensive and impractical. And while the Benz family owned a car, Anna didn't drive. She did not have a license.

So her world was tightly circumscribed by the comings and goings of locomotives, by the willingness of Bruno, Anna's husband, or Ursula, Bruno's mother, to drive her places un-

reachable by bus, and by the engine of her own legs and what distance they could carry her, which was rarely as far as she'd have liked to go.

But Swiss trains really do run on time and Anna managed with minimal hassle. And she liked riding the trains; she found a lulling comfort in the way they rocked side to side as they moved forward.

Edith Hammer, another expatriate, once told Anna that there was only one reason the Swiss trains ever ran late.

“When someone jumps in front of one.”

Frau Doktor Messerli asked Anna if she had ever considered or attempted suicide. “Yes,” Anna admitted to the first question. And to the second, “Define ‘attempt.’”

Doktor Messerli was blond, small-bodied, and of an ambiguous but late middle age. She saw clients in an office on Trittligasse, a cobbled, lightly trafficked street just west of Zürich's art museum. She'd studied medical psychiatry in America but had received her analytic training at the Jung Institute in Küsnacht, a Zürich municipality not less than seven kilometers away. Swiss by birth, Doktor Messerli nonetheless spoke an impeccable, if heavily accented, English. Her *w*'s masqueraded as *v*'s and her vowels were as open and elongated as parabolic arches: *What dooo yooo sink, Anna?* she'd often ask (usually when Anna was least likely to give an honest answer).

There was a television commercial that promoted a well-known language school. In the ad, a novice naval radio operator is shown to his post by his commanding officer. Seconds into his watch the receiver pings. “Mayday! Mayday!” a markedly American voice grates through the speaker. “Can you hear us? We are sinking! We are sinking!” The operator pauses then leans toward his transmitter and replies, quite graciously, “Dis

is dee Germ-ahn Coast Guard.” And then: “What are yooo *sinking* about?”

Anna would invariably shrug a sluggard’s shrug and speak the only words that seemed worth speaking. “I don’t know.”

Except, of course, Anna most always did.

IT WAS A DRIZZLY afternoon. Swiss weather is mutable, though rarely extreme in Kanton Zürich, and typically not in September. It *was* September, for Anna’s sons had already returned to school. From the station Anna walked slowly the culpable half kilometer up Dietlikon’s center street, lingering over shop windows, biding small bits of time. All postcoital euphorics had evaporated, and she was left with the reins of ennui, slack in her hand. This wasn’t a feeling she was new to. It was often like this, a languor that dragged and jaded. The optometrist’s on-sale eyeglass display dulled her. She yawned at the *Apotheke*’s pyramid of homeopathic remedies. The bin of discount dishtowels by the SPAR bored her nearly beyond repair.

Boredom, like the trains, carried Anna through her days.

*Is that true?* Anna thought. *That can’t be entirely true.* It wasn’t. An hour earlier Anna lay naked, wet and open atop a stranger’s bed in an apartment in Zürich’s Niederdorf district, four stories above the old town’s wending alleys and mortared stone streets upon which kiosks vended doner kebabs and bistros served communal pots of melted Emmental.

*What little shame I had before is gone,* she thought.

“IS THERE A DIFFERENCE between shame and guilt?” Anna asked.

“Shame is psychic extortion,” Doktor Messerli answered. “Shame lies. Shame a woman and she will believe she is fundamentally wrong, organically delinquent. The only confidence she will have will be in her failures. You will never convince her otherwise.”

IT WAS ALMOST 3:00 P.M. when Anna reached her sons’ school. Primarschule Dorf was positioned next to the town square between the library and a three-hundred-year-old house. A month earlier on the Swiss national holiday, the square was thick with citizens eating sausages and swaying like drunkards to the live music of a folk band under a sky made bright with fireworks. During army maneuvers, soldiers parked supply trucks in sloppy diagonals next to the square’s central fountain, which on summer days would be filled with splashing, naked children whose mothers sat on nearby benches reading books and eating yogurt. Bruno had finished his reserve duty years earlier. All that was left of the experience was an assault rifle in the basement. As for Anna, she didn’t care for paperbacks and when her sons wanted to swim she took them to the city pool.

That day, the traffic in the square was thin. A trio of women chatted in front of the library. One pushed a stroller, another held a leash at the end of which panted a German shepherd, and a final one simply stood with empty hands. They were mothers waiting on their children and they were younger than Anna by a factor of ten years. They were milky and buoyant in places where Anna felt curdled and sunken. They wore upon their faces, Anna thought, a luminous ease of being, a relaxed comportment, a native glow.

Anna rarely felt at ease inside her skin. *I am tight-faced*

*and thirty-seven years*, Anna thought. *I am the sum of all my twitches*. One mother tossed her a wave and a genuine, if obligatory, smile.

SHE'D MET THIS STRANGER in her German class. *But Anna—his cock's been in your mouth*, she reminded herself. *He's not really a stranger anymore*. And he wasn't. He was Archie Sutherland, Scotsman, expatriate, and, like Anna, language student. *Anna Benz, Language Student*. It was Doktor Messerli who had encouraged her to take the German course (and, by a backspin of redoubtable irony, it was Bruno who'd insisted she see a psychotherapist: *I've had enough of your fucking misery, Anna. Go fix yourself*, is what he'd said to her). Doktor Messerli then handed Anna a schedule of classes and said, "It's time you steer yourself into a trajectory that will force you into participating more fully with the world around you." The Doktor's affected speech, while condescending, was correct. It was time. It was past time.

By the end of that appointment and with some more pointed cajoling, Anna conceded and agreed to enroll in a beginner's German class at the Migros Klubschule, the very class she should have taken when, nine years prior, she arrived in Switzerland, tongue-tied, friendless, and already despairing of her lot.

An hour earlier Archie had called to Anna from his kitchen: *Would she take a coffee? A tea? Something to eat? Was there anything she needed? Anything? Anything at all?* Anna dressed cautiously, as if thorns had been sewn into the seams of her clothes.

From the street below, she heard the rising cries of chil-

dren returning to school post-lunch and the voices of American sightseers who grumped about the pitch of the hill atop which Zürich's Grossmünster was built. The cathedral is a heavy building, medieval gray and inimitable, with two symmetric towers that rise flush against the church's façade and jut high above its vaulted roof like hare's ears at attention.

Or cuckold's horns.

"WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN a need and a want?"

"A want is desirable, though not essential. A need is something without which you cannot survive." The Doktor added, "If you cannot live without something, you won't."

*ANYTHING AT ALL?* LIKE Doktor Messerli, Archie spoke a magnificently accented English intoned not by the shape-shifting consonants of High Alemannic, but by words that both roiled and wrenched open. Here an undulant *r*, there a queue of vowels rammed into one another like a smithy's bellows pressed hotly closed. Anna drew herself to men who spoke with accents. It was the lilt of Bruno's nonnative English that she let slide its thumb, its tongue into the waistband of her panties on their very first date (that, and the Williamsbirnen Schnaps, the pear tintured eau-de-vie they drank themselves stupid with). In her youth Anna dreamed soft, damp dreams of the men she imagined she would one day love, men who would one day love her. She gave them proper names but indistinct, foreign faces: Michel, the French sculptor with long, clay-caked fingers; Dmitri, the verger of an Orthodox church whose skin smelled of camphor, of rockrose, of sandalwood resin and

myrrh; Guillermo, her lover with matador hands. They were phantom men, girlhood ideations. But she mounted an entire international army of them.

It was the Swiss one she married.

*If you cannot live without something, you won't.*

Despite Doktor Messerli's suggestion that she enroll in these classes, Anna *did* know an elementary level of German. She got around. But hers was a German remarkable only in how badly it was cultivated and by the herculean effort she had to summon in order to speak it. For nine years, though, she'd managed with rudimentary competence. Anna had purchased stamps from the woman at the post office, consulted in semi-specifics with pediatricians and pharmacists, described the haircuts she desired to stylists, haggled prices at flea markets, made brief chitchat with neighbors, and indulged a pair of affable though persistent Zeugen Jehovas who, each month, arrived on her doorstep with a German-language copy of *The Watchtower*. Anna had also, though with less frequency, given directions to strangers, adapted recipes from cooking programs, taken notes when the chimney sweep detailed structural hazards of loose mortar joints and blocked flues, and extracted herself from citations when, upon the conductor's request, she could not produce her rail pass for validation.

But Anna's grasp of grammar and vocabulary was weak, her fluency was choked, and idioms and proper syntax escaped her completely. Occurring monthly, at least, were dozens of instances in which she commended a task into Bruno's hands. It was he who dealt with local bureaucracy, he who paid the insurance, the taxes, the house note. It was he who filed the paperwork for Anna's residency permit. And it was Bruno who handled the family's finances, for he was employed as a mid-

level management banker at Credit Suisse. Anna didn't even have a bank account.

DOKTOR MESSERLI ENCOURAGED ANNA to take a more active role in family matters.

"I should," Anna said. "I really should." She wasn't even sure she knew what Bruno did at work.

THERE WAS NO REASON Anna couldn't join the mothers chatting in the square, no rule forbidding it, nothing that prevented her from sharing in their small talk. Two of them she knew by sight and one by name, Claudia Zwygart. Her daughter Marlies was in Charles's class at school.

Anna didn't join them.

BY WAY OF EXPLANATION, Anna offered the following self-summary: *I am shy and cannot talk to strangers.*

Doktor Messerli sympathized. "It is difficult for foreigners to make Swiss friends." The problem runs deeper than a lack of command of German, itself problem enough. Switzerland is an insular country, sealed at its boundaries and neutral by choice for two centuries. With its left hand it reaches out to refugees and seekers of asylum. With its right, it snatches freshly laundered monies and Nazi gold. (Unfair? Perhaps. But when Anna was lonely she lashed out.) And like the landscape upon which they've settled, the Swiss themselves are closed at their edges. They tend naturally toward isolation, conspiring to keep outsiders at a distance by appointing not one, two, or three, but

four whole national languages. Switzerland's official name is in yet a fifth: *Confoederatio Helvetica*. Most Swiss speak German however, and it is German that's spoken in Zürich.

But it's not precisely German.

Written German in Switzerland is standard schoolbook Hochdeutsch. But the Swiss speak Schwiizerdütsch, which isn't standard at all. There is no set orthography. There is no pronunciation key. There is no agreed-upon vocabulary. It varies from canton to canton. And the language itself leaps from the back of the throat like an infected tonsil trying to escape. This is only a minor exaggeration. To the non-Swiss ear it sounds as if the speaker is construing made-up words from the oddest rhythms and the queerest clipped consonants and the most perturbing arrangement of gaping, rangy vowels. It is impervious to all outside attempts to learn it, for every word is shibboleth.

Anna spoke the barest minimum of Schwiizerdütsch.

ANNA DIDN'T JOIN THE other mothers. Instead, she scuffed the sole of a brown clog against the sidewalk's curb. She fiddled with her hair and pretended to watch an invisible bird flying overhead.

It is hard to love a man outside his native tongue. And yet, it was the Swiss one Anna married.

The school bell rang and children spilled from the building and into the courtyard. Anna noticed Victor first, roughhousing with two friends. Charles followed close behind, caught in a throng of jabbering children. He ran to Anna when he spotted her, hugged her, and began prattling about his day without Anna's prompting. Victor lingered with his pals and dragged his feet. This was Victor being Victor—standoffish and mod-

erately aloof. Anna indulged his reticence and settled on just mussing his hair. Victor grimaced.

Anna experienced her first pinpricks of guilt as they walked toward the house (she couldn't really call them pangs). They were scattershot and nondebilitating. This level of indifference was fairly new to her pathology. It rendered her queerly self-satisfied.

The Benzes lived no more than a hundred meters away from Primarschule Dorf. Their house would be visible from the schoolyard but for the *Kirchgemeindehaus*, the nineteenth-century timber-framed parish hall of the village church, which stood exactly between the two. Anna did not usually walk her children home. But it was an hour after the fact and she still felt Archie's hands on her breasts; a moderate remorse was in order.

They moved to Switzerland in June of ninety-eight. Anna, pregnant and exhausted, had no wherewithal for debate. She telegraphed her compliance in long, silent sighs and hid her many anxieties inside one of her heart's thousand chambers. She looked for a bright side, a glass half full. Who, after all, wouldn't snatch the chance to live in Europe were it offered? In high school Anna locked herself in her room most nights and obsessed over the many *elsewheres* her men would one day take her. In those limp, submissive dreams she gave her men entire charge. Bruno had worked for Credit Suisse for years. They wondered, Would he take a Zürich post? Anna was married and pregnant and more or less in love. That was enough. *This will be enough*, she thought.

And so they moved to Dietlikon. It was close enough to Zürich to be serviced by two city trains. It was near a large shopping center. Its roads were safe and its houses were well

kept and the town's motto held great promise. It was printed on the website and on pamphlets. It was posted on the sign in front of the *Gemeinde*, and noted on the first page of the *Kurier*, Dietlikon's small weekly newspaper: *Menschlich, offen, modern*. Personal. Open. Modern. Anna poured all optimism into those three words.

Dietlikon was also Bruno's hometown. His *Heimatort*. The place to which the prodigal returned. Anna was twenty-eight. Bruno at thirty-four strode effortlessly back into his native space. Easy enough to do—Ursula lived just a short walk away on Klotenerstrasse in the house in which she raised Bruno and his sister Daniela. Oskar, Bruno's father, was over a decade dead.

Bruno argued a good case. Living in Dietlikon would merit their children (*We're having more? Are you sure?* They hadn't even really deliberated the first) a wholesome, unbounded childhood, safe and stable. Once she settled into the idea of it (and after Bruno swore that all future children would be discussed prior to their conception), Anna was able to concede the move's virtues. So when it did happen, rarely in those first months, that she grew lonesome or wistful for people, things, or places she never dreamed she would miss, she consoled herself by imagining the baby's face. *Will I have a ruddish-cheeked Heinz to call me Mueti? A Heidi of my own with blond and braided hair?* And Bruno and Anna were, more or less, in love.

THE QUALIFICATION "MORE OR less" troubled Doktor Mes-serli.

Anna explained. "Is that not always the case? Given any two people in a relationship, one will always love more, the other less. Right?"

\* \* \*

AT EIGHT, VICTOR WAS Anna's eldest child. Charles was six. They were indeed the ruddish-toned, milk-fed children Anna had imagined. They were ash blond and hazel eyed. They were all boy, rowdy, absolutely brothers, and without a doubt the sons of the man Anna had married.

"BUT YOU HAD MORE children, yes? It must not have been entirely terrible."

*Of course not. It hadn't been terrible at all. Not always. Not everything had not always been terrible.* Anna doubled her negatives, tripled them. Ten months earlier Anna had given birth to a black-haired, bisque-skinned daughter whom she named Polly Jean.

And so they were the Benz family and they lived in the town of Dietlikon, in the district of Bülach, in the canton of Zürich. The Benzes: *Bruno, Victor, Charles, Polly, Anna*. A plain and mostly temperate household who lived on a street called Rosenweg—Rose Way—a private road that cul-de-sacked directly in front of their house, which itself lay at the foot of a slow, sloping hill that crested a half kilometer behind their property and leveled off at the base of the Dietlikon woods.

Anna lived on a dead end, last exit road.

But the house was nice and their yard was larger than nearly all the other ones around them. There were farmhouses to their immediate south, whose properties abutted fields of corn, sunflower, and rapeseed. Eight fully mature *Apfelbäume* grew in their side yard and in August when the trees were pregnant with ripe, heavy apples, fruit tumbled from the branches

to the ground in a *thump-tha-thump-thump* rhythm that was nearly consistent with light rainfall. They had raspberry bushes and a strawberry patch and red currants and black currants both. And while the vegetable garden in the side yard was generally left untended, the Benzes enjoyed, behind a thigh-high picket fence in front of their property, a spate of rosebushes, blooms of every shade. *Everything comes up roses on Rosenweg*. Sometimes Anna thought this to herself.

Victor and Charles barreled through the front door. They were greeted before they passed through the boot room by a dour-faced Ursula pressing her finger to her lips. *Your sister's asleep!*

Anna was grateful for Ursula—really she was. But Ursula, who was usually never blatantly unkind to Anna, still treated her as a foreign object, a means to the end of her son's happiness (if indeed "happy" was the word for what Bruno was, and Anna was almost sure it wasn't) and the vessel by which her grandchildren—whom she deeply loved—were carried into the world. The help that Ursula offered was for the children's sake, not Anna's. She had been a high school English teacher for thirty years. Her English was stilted but fluent and she conceded to speak it whenever Anna was in the room, which sometimes Bruno didn't even do. Ursula shooed her grandsons into the kitchen for a snack.

"I'm taking a shower," Anna said. Ursula raised an eyebrow but then lowered it as she followed Victor and Charles into the kitchen. It was no concern of hers. Anna took a towel from the linen closet and locked the bathroom door behind her.

She needed the shower. She smelled like sex.

“WHAT CAN’T YOU LIVE WITHOUT?”

This, Anna asked Archie as they shared, incautiously, a cigarette in bed. Anna didn’t smoke. She was wrapped in a top sheet. It was Friday.

“Whiskey and women,” Archie said. “In that order.”

Archie was a whiskey man. Literally. He stocked it, stacked it, and sold it in a shop he owned with his brother, Glenn.

He laughed in an up-for-interpretation way. Archie and Anna were new lovers, green lovers, *ganz neue Geliebte*. Nearly virgin to each other, they still had reason to touch. Archie was ten years older than Anna, but his brown-red curls had not yet begun to thin and his body was taut. Anna responded to his laughter with laughter of her own: the sad, empty laughter of knowing that the newness, nice as it was, wouldn’t last. Novelty’s a cloth that wears thin at an alarming rate. So Anna would enjoy it prior to its tattering. Because tatter it surely would.

“IF,” DOKTOR MESSERLI ASKED, “you are miserable, then why not leave?”

Anna spoke without reflection. “I have Swiss children. They belong to their father as much as to me. We are married. I’m not really miserable.” Then she added, “He wouldn’t accept a divorce.”

“You have asked him.” This wasn’t a question.

Anna had not asked Bruno for a divorce. Not directly. She had, however, in her most affected and despondent moments, hinted around the possibility. *What would you do if I went away?* she’d ask. *What if I went away and never came back?* She would pose these questions in a hypothetical, parenthetically cheerful voice.

Bruno would smirk. *I know you’ll never leave because you need me.*

Anna couldn’t deny this. She absolutely needed him. It was true. And honestly Anna had no plans to leave. *How would we split the children?* she wondered, as if the children were a cord of wood and the divorce an axe.

“Anna,” Doktor Messerli asked, “is there someone else? Has there ever been anyone else?”

The lunch hour folded into early afternoon. Archie and Anna shared a plate of cheese, some greengage plums, a bottle of mineral water. Then they set everything aside and fucked again. Archie came in her mouth. It tasted like school paste, starchy and thick. *This is a good thing I am doing*, Anna said inside herself, though “good” was hardly the right word. Anna knew this. What she meant was *expedient*. What she meant was *convenient*. What she meant was *wrong in nearly every way but justifiable as it makes me feel better, and for so very long I have felt so very, very bad*. Most accurately it was a shuffled

combination of all those meanings trussed into one unsayable something that gave Anna an illicit though undeniable hope.

But all things move toward an end.

That night, after she had put the children to bed and washed the dinner plates and scoured the sink to the unimpeachable shine that Bruno demanded (Doktor Messerli asked “Is he truly that much an ogre?” to which Anna responded *no*, which translated as *sometimes*), Anna spread her notebooks on the table and began her German exercises. She’d fallen behind. Bruno was locked in his office. Separate solitudes were not an unusual arrangement between them, and Bruno retreated to his office most nights. Left alone, Anna would either read or watch television or put on a jacket and take an evening walk up the hill behind the house.

The house, when Anna was alone inside it, often assumed a pall of unbearable, catatonic stillness. *Has it always been like this?* Anna would be lying if she’d said it had. They’d shared good times, Bruno and she. It would be unfair to deny it. And even if he barely tolerated what he called her “melancholic huffs” or her “sullen temperaments,” Bruno too, if pressed, would have admitted a love and fondness for Anna that, while often displaced by frustration, held an irrefutable honor in his heart.

IT WAS JUST THE previous Monday that Anna steeled and sent herself to school for the first time since college. The class at the Migros Klubschule was called German for Advanced Beginners. This was the course intended for anyone pre-equipped with a minor to moderate knowledge of the language but who lacked a rigorous understanding of grammar and a nuanced usage of syntax.

Migros is the name of the largest chain of supermarkets in Switzerland and Switzerland's biggest employer. More people work for Migros than any Swiss bank worldwide. But Migros is bigger than supermarkets alone. There are Migros-owned bookshops, Migros-owned gas stations, Migros-owned electronics outlets, sports stores, furniture dealers, menswear shops, public golf courses, and currency exchanges. Migros also governs a franchise of adult education centers. There isn't a Swiss city of significant population where at least one Migros Klubschule doesn't exist. And it's not just language classes they offer. You can study most anything at the Migros Klubschule: *cooking, sewing, knitting, drawing, singing*. You can learn to play an instrument or how to read the future with tarot cards. You can even learn how to interpret dreams.

DOKTOR MESSERLI, AT THE onset of Anna's analysis, asked Anna to pay attention to her dreams. "Write them down," the Doktor instructed. "I want you to write them down and bring them to our meetings and we will discuss them."

Anna protested. "I don't dream."

The Doktor was undeterred. "Nonsense. Everyone dreams. Even you."

Anna brought a dream to her next appointment: *I am sick. I beg Bruno for help but he won't give it. Someone films a movie in another room. I am not in it. A dozen teenage girls kill themselves for the camera. I don't know what to do so I do nothing.*

Doktor Messerli arrived at an immediate interpretation. "It's a sign of stagnancy. The movie's being made and you're not in it. This is why the girls do not survive. The girls are you.

You are the girls. You do not survive. You are ill with inaction, a patron sitting passively in a dark theater.”

Anna’s passivity. The hub from which the greater part of her psychology radiated. Everything came down to a nod, an acquiescence, a *Yes, dear*. Anna was aware of this. It was a trait she’d never bothered to question or revise, which, through the lens of a certain desiccated poignancy, seemed to be its proof. Anna was a swinging door, a body gone limp in the arms of another body carrying it. An oarless ocean rowboat. *Am I as assailable as that?* Yes, it sometimes seemed. *I have no knack for volition. My backbone’s in a brace. It’s the story of my life.* And it was. The very view from her kitchen window looked out upon it. Triangulated by the street and the apple trees and the path that led up the hill an invisible marquee flashed over a secret door that led into that same dark theater she dreamed of. Anna didn’t need to see it to know it was there. The titles changed but the films were all of a sort. One week it was *You Could Speak Up, Have Your Say!*, the next it was *You’re No Victim, You’re an Accomplice*. And *Not Choosing Is Still a Choice* was held over for years.

Then there were the children. Anna hadn’t longed to be a mother. She didn’t yearn for it that way other women do. It terrified her. *I’m to be responsible for another person? A tiny, helpless, needy person?* Still, Anna got pregnant. And then again and then again. It seemed to just happen. She never said *Let’s do this* and she never said *Let’s not*. Anna didn’t say anything at all. (Nor in this case, did Bruno. That discussion regarding future progeny? *It never happened.*)

But it wasn’t as terrible as she’d feared and for the most part and for most of the time, Anna was glad to be someone’s mother. Anna loved her children. She loved all her children.

Those beautiful Swiss children that a firmer-footed Anna would never have known. So Anna's passivity had merit. It was useful. It made for relative peace at the house on Rosenweg. Allowing Bruno to make decisions on her behalf absolved her of responsibility. She didn't need to think. She followed along. She rode a bus that someone else drove. And Bruno liked driving it. Order upon order. Rule upon rule. Where the wind blew, she went. This was Anna's natural inclination. And like playing tennis or dancing a foxtrot, or speaking a foreign language, it grew even easier with practice. If Anna suspected there was more to her pathology, then that was a secret she kept very close.

“WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN passivity and neutrality?”

“Passivity is deference. To be passive is to relinquish your will. Neutrality is nonpartisan. The Swiss are neutral, not passive. We do not choose a side. We are scales in perfect balance.” Doktor Messerli spoke with something that might have been pride in her voice.

“Not choosing. Is that still a choice?”

Doktor Messerli opened her mouth to speak, then changed her mind.

ANNA SAT AT THE dining table for almost a half hour fumbling through homework before Bruno emerged from his office like a marmot from a burrow. He came to the table, yawned, and rubbed his eyes. Anna saw their sons in that gesture. “How's the class?” Bruno asked. Anna couldn't recall the last time Bruno asked after her. She surged with a momentary affection for him

and reached around his waist with her arms and tried to draw him closer into her. But Bruno—impervious or obstinate—did not respond in kind. He reached down and rifled through her papers. Anna dropped her arms.

Bruno picked up a page of exercises and gleaned it for accuracy. “*Du hast hier einen Fehler,*” he said in a voice he intended to be helpful, but one that Anna interpreted as condescending. She had made a mistake. “This verb goes at the end,” Bruno said. He was right. In both the future and the past tense, the action comes at the end. It is only in the present tense that the verb is joined to the noun that enacts it. Bruno returned her work absently. “I’m going to bed.” He didn’t bend to kiss her. Bruno shut the bedroom door behind him and went to sleep.

Anna lost all interest in her exercises.

She checked the wall clock. It was after eleven but she wasn’t tired.

“A DREAM IS A psychic statement,” Doktor Messerli explained. “The more frightening the dream, the more pressing the need to look at that part of yourself. Its purpose is not to destroy you. It simply fulfills its compulsory task in a highly unpleasant manner.” And then she added, “The less attention you pay, the more terrifying the nightmares become.”

“And if you ignore them?”

Doktor Messerli’s face took on a cast of gravity. “Psyche will be heard. She demands it. And there are other, more threatening ways of capturing your attention.”

Anna didn’t ask what those were.

THAT LATE IN THE evening, most of the houses on Rosenweg were entirely dark, their inhabitants already asleep. It took years for Anna to become habituated to this, how Switzerland, machine that it is, powered down at night. Shops closed. People slept when they were meant to. In the States if you couldn't or didn't want to sleep, you could always shop at a twenty-four-hour supermarket, wash clothes at a twenty-four-hour Laundromat, eat pie and drink coffee at a twenty-four-hour diner. The television networks ran viewable programming the entire night. So much never shut off. Lights always burned somewhere. It was an insomniac's solace.

DOKTOR MESSERLI ASKED ABOUT Anna's insomnia. How long had she suffered, how it presented. How she curbed it. Anna had no real answer and instead replied, "Sleep won't solve my situation." Even to Anna's ears it sounded canned.

WHEN ANNA STEPPED OUTSIDE, the porch lamp, sensitive to motion, flickered on. The front steps led to the driveway. The driveway opened up to the street. The playground in the yard of the *Kirchgemeindehaus* was across the way. Anna crossed the street and stepped over a small wooden fence and took a seat on a wooden swing intended for very young children. She was uneasy and perturbed and the night air was just damp enough to be cruel.

Even Anna would admit she prowled Dietlikon's streets too often in the dark hours. In her second month in the country, Bruno woke in the middle of the night and Anna was gone. She wasn't in the house or the attic or the yard. He ran outside and

called for her. When she didn't answer, he called the *Polizei*. *My wife is gone! My wife is pregnant!* The officers came to the house and asked insinuating questions and swapped readable looks. Had they fought recently? Did she take anything with her? What was their marriage like? Did he know if she'd been seeing anyone? Bruno screwed his face into a question mark and forced his fists into his pockets. *She is pregnant and it's two A.M.!* By the time he steered them from that line of questioning Anna had come home. She'd barely crossed the threshold when Bruno threw himself around her as if she were a soldier back from battle. One policeman said something low and curt in Schwiizerdütsch that Anna didn't understand. Bruno answered with a grunt. The officers left.

When they were alone and out of earshot, Bruno dug his fingers into Anna's shoulders and shook her. *Who are you fuck-ing? Who were you with?* She'd embarrassed him in front of the policemen. *No one, Bruno—never! I swear!* Bruno cursed at her and called her a whore and a cunt. *Who did you suck off? Whose cock was in your mouth? Nobody's, Bruno, I swear!* That was the truth. Anna and Bruno were in a version of love and Anna had gone for a walk because she couldn't sleep. *It was just a walk! That's it!* And whose cock would it have been, in any case? This she thought but did not say. It took almost an hour, but Bruno finally came to believe her. Or said he did.

A neighbor's cat hissed and sputtered at what was likely a hedgehog. Three minutes later, the quarter-hour toll of the church bell rang.

WHEN SHE PRESENTED HERSELF for the first of her German classes, Anna was empty of expectation. She was not fully in-

different to first-day-of-school jitters, even at her age. At breakfast she told her sons that she was starting school. Charles sweetly offered his pencil box. Charles was like that. Victor was silent; he had no opinion. Ursula made a show of snapping out a dishtowel.

The Deutschkurs Intensiv met mornings, five days a week. That first day, Anna arrived six minutes late and knocked into a woman with her book bag as she tried to wedge past and take the last seat at the table. It was a modest-sized class, fifteen students whose ages varied and whose nationalities and reasons for expatriation diverged. Their teacher was Roland, a tall Swiss man whose first command was that they go around the room and introduce themselves using whatever German they already knew. He pointed to a blond woman with heavy-lidded eyes and a darting gaze. Her name was Jeanne and she was French. The woman next to her, Martina, was also blond but ten years younger than Jeanne. She told the room she came from Moscow, that she loved music but hated dogs. Then a woman Anna's age introduced herself as Mary Gilbert and said she was from Canada and that she'd come here with her children and her husband, who played left wing for Zürich's hockey team. She'd only been in Switzerland two months. Mary apologized for her ham-fisted German but she'd finished the basic class and there was no place for her but here. It didn't really matter. Everyone's German was unmistakably foreign, slow and littered with mistakes.

Then the man sitting next to Mary leaned forward. His accent, even over broken German, was irrefutably Scottish. Glaswegian, Anna would come to learn. His name was Archie Sutherland. As he talked, his eyes scanned the perimeter of the table. By the time his introduction was over, he'd locked his

gaze on Anna, who sat across the room at an angle from him. He ended with a small, slight wink, intended for her alone. She blushed beneath her clothes.

Something in Anna started to burn.

There was Dennis from the Philippines. Andrew and Gilian, both from Australia. Tran from Vietnam. Yuka from Japan. Ed from England. Nancy from South Africa. Alejandro from Peru, and two other women whose names Anna didn't catch. They made all together a little UN.

When Anna introduced herself, she flashed a sincere-seeming smile (a trick she'd taught herself) and spoke the words she'd practiced in her head. *Ich bin Anna. Ich bin in die Schweiz für nine years. Mein Mann ist a banker. Ich habe three children. Ich bin from America. Ich bin, ich bin, ich bin.* When she couldn't lay her tongue to the German word, she substituted an English one. Anna hated introducing herself. It was like opening a door.

Anna looked to Archie. She was compelled by how strong his hands seemed, even from across the table. A man's hands always did her in. *A cock wants a hole. There are only so many. But a man can put his hands anywhere he wants, anyplace I ask him to.*

While standing in line in the cafeteria during their first coffee break, Archie leaned toward Anna and spoke in a low, purling voice rarely heard outside of chapels or alcoves in museums.

"Anna, is it?"

"It is."

"I'm Archie."

"So I heard." Anna was tentative, but kittenish. *Volley and lob. He wants a game of ping-pong. Sure, she thought, I'll play.*

Archie took a chocolate croissant from a line of plated pastries and put it on his tray. “You want one?”

Anna shook her head. “Not a big pastry fan.” The line moved forward at an even clip. The *Kantine* was crowded, but the Swiss cashier was efficient.

“So what do you nosh on when you fancy a bite?”

*Oh, this man’s good*, Anna thought. “A bite? Or a bite to eat?”

Archie put on an act of impatience. It was husky and hot. “What do you eat, woman?” Anna responded with a blushing, sidelong glance and a half-cocked smirk. They moved forward again. Archie grinned. “Banker husband, you say?”

“I say indeed.” The reply was all cheek. *Am I flirting? I’m totally flirting*. It had been a while. *I’m going to play this out*.

“And what about Anna? What does Anna do when she isn’t learning German?”

Anna held for a beat before answering. “Anna does what Anna desires.” *Say anything with confidence*, Anna thought, *and the world will believe it’s true*.

Archie’s laugh was sportive, vulpine. “Good to know.” They’d reached the head of the line. Anna paid for her coffee then turned briefly back to Archie and presented a terminal smile before walking away.

Back in the classroom, Roland reviewed a list of German prepositions: *under, against, on top of, from behind*.

Later, at the end of their second break, Archie cornered Anna by the trash cans. “What are you doing this afternoon?”

A dozen chaste answers came to mind. Anna ignored every one. She put her hand on Archie’s arm and brought her mouth very close to his ear. “You,” she whispered. And that was all.

*Well how about that?* Anna thought as she walked away. A woozy, tinny thrill shot through her. *Yes, how about it.* The inquiry was irrelevant. The answer to every question that day was yes.

But they were not arduous assents. She'd said yes before.

After class, Anna telephoned Ursula and told her there were errands she needed to run in the city and she wouldn't be back until three. Then Anna and Archie took the number 10 tram from Sternen Oerlikon, where the streets ray out from an interior middle like a five-point star, to Central, a stop at the north end of Zürich's Niederdorf district. From there it was a five-minute walk to Archie's flat. What followed was an hour and a half of uninhibited sex.

On Tuesday and again on Wednesday Anna followed Archie home after class. On Thursday and Friday, they skipped school altogether.

ANNA TWIRLED HERSELF IN the swing, winching the chains so that they lifted her higher off the ground than she was to begin with. Then she pulled up her feet and let herself spin quickly down. She accomplished this multiple times unto dizziness.

Eventually the church bells rang their midnight toll. A low, wormish feeling of a reckoning approached her. Only in the present tense is the subject married to its verb. The action—*all* action, past and future—comes at the end. At the very end, when there is nothing left to do but act.

Even so, Anna was back inside the house before the chime of the twelfth bell.

JONATHAN  
GALASSI

*Muse*

A NOVEL

### III

#### Home at Last

Paul had felt at home the moment he'd walked into the cramped, ill-lit P & S lobby. The place looked more like his idea of the offices of a porn magazine (there seemed to be one upstairs, down the hall from the rehab center on the eighth floor) than a temple of contemporary literature. A broken couch and frosted glass dividers fought for attention with certificates for the National Book Awards, Pulitzer Prizes, and National Book Critics Circle Awards won by house authors appended helter-skelter over the receptionist's rickety desk alongside less prepossessing announcements, such as the American Book Designers Federation 1969 honorable mention for typography. P & S specialized in Nobel Prizes, in fact, but there were no plaques for them, just the gold medals that Paul had noticed on Homer's desk during their interviews. Later that morning, he was given a cramped cubicle on the south side of the hallway (Homer had called it "a nice office with a window" at lunch), equipped with a boxy Korean computer console and a telephone, both of which appeared to be in working order.

Manuscripts from literary agents would show up in neat gray or powder-blue boxes on his pockmarked old school desk, or in battered manila envelopes if they were coming from writers without representation, and he'd read through them with the requisite show-me detachment. In 90 percent of cases, you could tell within a page or two whether the writer could write. Ninety percent of the time, box or no box, he or she could not. Every so often, though, the words would cohere, the sentences would follow one on another with lockstep plausibility, and Paul would begin to feel an unsettling combination of elation and fear—elation at the linguistic

and psychological aptness of what he was reading, and fear, as he went on, that this undeniably gifted writer would veer off and spoil her creation before he could finish the stack of pages.

When, miraculously, the work was actually fine, Paul would run into Homer's office half crazed with excitement, shouting, "We have to do this!" Which, remarkably enough in Paul's experience, was music to Homer's ears. "Go, go, go, baby!" he'd shout back, as if cheering on a two-year-old at the track. Paul would hondle, as Homer put it, with the writer's agent over the advance—usually no more than \$25,000 or \$30,000 in those halcyon days—and often enough, *mirabile dictu*, the manuscript, and its author, would be theirs to coax and hover over and massage into a living, breathing printed and bound novel or book of stories or poems or essays or work of reportage that could be trumpeted to booksellers and reviewers and that increasingly endangered species, the retail book buyer, as something not to be missed.

Many P & S books turned out to be a bit more "specialized"—or should we say *Impetus-like*?—than popular taste called for. Paul subscribed to the saw of Larry Friedman at Howland, Wolff that a publisher could either lead public taste or run after it. He wanted to lead, to introduce new voices, to make the common reader a little less common, which was the firm's stated mission, after all; but sometimes he got tired of hearing how difficult their books were to sell from the travelers, a group of hard-boiled, hard-drinking commission salesmen and -women, old-timers who at heart were as devoted to good books as anyone in the office, if not more so, but who had to make a buck, as did Homer and Co., though the editors often seemed unaware that this was a fundamental aspect of their work. So the sales and marketing departments, under cool, supercompetent Maureen Rinaldi and market-wise Seth Berle, who seemed like different species but functioned beautifully together in spite or because of it, would tart up the new Brooks or Burns or Burack with a stunning jacket and an only mildly misleading tagline and pass it off as

far more easy to digest than it was. Paul would sometimes mutter, not too loudly, that it was P & S's job to put over a few good books on the unsuspecting public—not that they were fooled all that often.

Still, in his years at the firm he had managed to discover a number of writers who had developed into an identifiable group, indeed almost a generation of their own, who had made a notable cultural contribution *and* were sought after by readers. George Howe Nough's *Nightshade*; Julian Entrekin's *Subtle Specimens*; Nita Desser's breakout second novel, *Mud Rambling*; and Eric Nielsen's *Show Me the Mountain* were books that went a long way toward defining the aesthetic and the preoccupations of their moment. Nielsen and Entrekin in particular had become enormous best sellers and major prizewinners (Paul sometimes referred to them around the office as "Hemingway and Fitzgerald") and Nielsen, with his fourth novel, *The Insolent Hours*—Paul was particularly chuffed that he'd come up with the title—had emerged as the novelist of the moment.

What Paul loved best was working with the authors on their texts. Some manuscripts—the ultimate rarities—showed up on his desk virtually letter-perfect and simply needed to be printed, but most called for pruning, or even sometimes having an extra limb or two lopped off. Some writers wanted their hand held as their book developed year after year—though over and over he had watched writers learn to write their books by . . . writing them; by the time they'd got to the end, they recognized that what had to be done was to go back to the beginning and recast the first half in the light of what had come together in the second. And some writers simply wanted to bask in the sunlight of his approval. What the great Pepita Erskine really loved was sitting at the long table in Paul's office and going over her manuscript with him, word by word. She radiated

joy at his undivided but critical attention, and Paul himself never felt more wanted or appreciated than during these chaste lovefests. The fact that she could walk past him in the square the day after one of their editorial trysts without recognizing him hardly mattered.

Over the decade, book by book, season by season, Paul and Daisy Kenneally and Maureen and Seth et al. managed to extend the company's literary franchise, for a new generation. Paul would call Morgan every now and then and tell her about the incredible manuscripts he'd read and sometimes even acquired, or the bullets he'd dodged, or the masterpieces that had heartbreakingly gotten away—and about his boss's day-in-day-out outrageousness.

“You won't believe what Homer did last night!” he'd dish. “He called Tim Tudow”—a top-notch if not exactly top-flight Hollywood-style literary agent with an unwavering Cheshire cat smile—“a ‘toothpaste salesman.’ To his face!”

Morgan would listen with the requisite beguilement or outrage when he recounted the internecine squabbles, the gossip, the good old low-down fun that made P & S—and publishing—so enjoyable. She'd snort at the amorous entanglements of Paul's fellow workers, or the underhanded tactics of their competitors and the outrageous advances they had been willing to pay—as high as \$100,000 for a first novel!—or the outlandish fights Homer would pick with other publishers, whom he was only too happy to sound off about publicly to anyone who would listen, especially if he or she happened to work for a major newspaper.

“Music to my ears,” she'd croon in her blue-sky Iowa accent, taking another late-night sip of Chardonnay during their phoned-in drinks date. “The human comedy! It's keeping me young.”

For Paul, like many of his fellows, the company had turned out to be a haven in a heartless world. His work was his life, apart from an occasional fling that went nowhere. Many of the writers he'd fetishized as a student were house authors, and some of them had now become "his," their previous editors having retired or moved on to higher-paying jobs elsewhere. Everyone understood that any author with any kind of profile was automatically the personal property of Homer. Nevertheless, Pepita Erskine and Orin Roden and all the women's heartthrob, the divine Padraic Snell, took Paul's calls and had errands for him to run, and he'd been thrilled to run them. Until, in the eyes of many in the tight-knit community of agents and writers and journalists and other editors, Paul and P & S had become more or less synonymous. Recognizing which, as he lay awake on his sagging daybed wedged in between the stacks of books and galleys and manuscripts in his West Nineteenth Street walk-up, he would sometimes shake his head in grateful wonder.

Still, the writer Paul cared most about, the ever-incandescent Ida Perkins—"the bitch that got away," Homer would mutter when he was feeling competitive and resentful, which he did when he wasn't feeling triumphant—was nowhere near Union Square. Paul looked on in envy while she racked up prizes all over the world, appeared on *Charlie Rose* and Bill Moyers's shows and even, one unforgettable January afternoon, for a full hour on *Oprah*, gave sell-out readings at the biggest venues, appeared in the gossip columns with her fancy acquaintances, and sold an outlandish number of books for a poet. And as he watched it all, book after book, year after year, he felt the unassuageable ache of unrequited passion transmute into bittersweet longing. He and Ida were like an old couple by now; they'd been through a lot together, and they would always be each other's—if only in his head.

He'd experienced a more immediate kind of pain around Elspeth Adams when he'd been a student in her poetry workshop at NYU, so overwhelmed with love and insufficiency he'd been virtually speechless. Being in her presence, when he'd gotten to know her, had been so much what he wanted that he couldn't enjoy it; he was literally sick with reverence. He'd get a stomachache when he was invited to Miss Adams's apartment for dinner. She was a grandmotherly figure, richly if soberly dressed, without pretension but with the quiet dignity of someone who knows her worth. She insisted on calling her students by their last names; to her, he was "Mr. Dukach" and she was "Miss Adams"—no ersatz "Ms." for her. Paul loved this, like everything else about her. He was enchanted by the purr of her smoke-enriched voice, her lowball rapier irony, her politely expressed disdain for everything noisy and showy about her contemporaries. Poets like Audrey Dienst-frey, who performed for rapt audiences with a rock band for backup, moaning incantations about the vicissitudes of her genitalia, were anathema to Miss Adams, though it was a nearly open secret that she had had a series of rocky affairs with generally younger women. She had one of the steeliest intelligences he had ever encountered. Her sense of herself, of her womanhood, was multilayered, not easy to parse.

He'd last seen her when he was still at HW, at the Modern Language Association convention in New York. John Adams (no relation) had premiered his "Starlight" song cycle based on a group of wonderful poems from her Pulitzer Prize-winning collection, *Intergalactica*, sung by the ethereal Viridiana Bruck. A few months later, aged sixty-six, she'd had a heart attack and died alone in her apartment overlooking the Brooklyn Heights Promenade.

Her suddenly expanded circle of intimates referred to Elspeth by her given name now that she was gone, but Paul hesitated before saying it when, to his amazement, he'd become the editor responsible for her work, once Georges Savoy had finally retired. He felt an intense

loyalty and responsibility to Miss Adams and her work, though deep down he had always considered Ida a more ambitious and more adventurous writer. He cherished Miss Adams's letters to him, which he kept in his copy of her *Collected Poems*, the binding of which was in danger of giving way, and he'd hung her photograph next to Ida's above the desk in his apartment.

As he grew into his life at work, though, Paul found he had gradually lost a degree of the awe for the writers he worked with. They no longer left him tongue-tied, though their talent often still amazed him. Eventually, Miss Adams had had to become Elspeth to Paul, too. You couldn't work with someone for too long, even if she was gone, without somehow ending up on a first-name basis. He'd come to appreciate that writers were just like everyone else, except when they were more so. It sometimes seemed that they'd been able to develop their gifts thanks to a lack of inhibition, an inner permission to feel and react, that made them seem self-absorbed and less than sensitive to the existence of anyone else.

Pepita Erskine was a prime example. She'd grown up black and dirt-poor in Detroit, but by dint of her brilliance and courage and strength of personality, she'd made herself into an intellectual and moral force to be reckoned with, even as a very young woman. She'd driven cross-country to New York after a noisy career at Berkeley, where she'd been a thorn in the side of radical student leader Ronnie Morrone, whom she'd accurately called out as both racist and sexist, and had gone on to make her mark nationally as a counterculture columnist at *The Daily Blade*.

In excoriating the self-congratulatory liberal clerisy, Pepita had refused with remarkable success to be labeled a black or a woman writer, or a left-winger, or a sexual renegade. She was also an indefatigable culture vulture, hoovering up every civilizing tidbit she could get her hands

on—poetry, literary theory, dance, music, theater, film. She was an insatiable maw of desire and need to know, to experience, to opine. And her insatiability extended to the creators themselves, for Pepita had boundary issues. Approbation, in someone as constitutionally critical as she, often got confused with passion, and her affairs with the writers, dancers, and artists she looked up to were widely known. Paul referred to them as her “seminars”—private sessions

with the masters in their fields, held at their feet and sometimes in their beds. Men or women, it made no difference to Pepita, as long as her chosen objects could give her a run for her formidable mental money and momentarily assuage her need for recognition and response. She was literally enamored with art—arguably somewhat less so with the individuals who created it, who often turned out to have inconvenient needs and egos of their own, which on occasion dwarfed even hers.

Homer always referred to Pepita as Pootie. He had nicknames for many of his current favorite—or unfavorable—allies or antagonists. (Sometimes it was hard to tell the difference.) The Nympho, the Dauphin, the Dwarf, and the Slightly Used Canadian, whatever that meant, were only some of the characters in the eternal soap opera that was publishing for Homer.

One day Paul got up the courage to ask him, “Why do you call Pepita Pootie, Homer?” To which he answered matter-of-factly, “Because she’s such a sweet little pootie-tat.”

Right. Of the attributes that could be assigned to Pepita—brilliance, originality, courage, stridency, arrogance, neediness, narcissism—sweetness was not first among them. Indeed, her nickname around the office, “the Purring P,” told you everything you needed to know about her relations with the staff. Homer’s moniker showed that he had been on the receiving end of Pepita’s cat’s—or bear’s—paw often enough; indeed, it was clear to one and all that she had him in her thrall.

After all, it was Pepita's voice—insolent, belabored with Germanic Seriousness, lightened and enlivened by a dash of jive, and insistent on its own unimpeachability—that had become the hallmark of P & S style. At a critical point in its history, Pepita's intellectual reach and tropism for controversy had lent the house an aura of urgent cultural significance that it had never let go of. Pepita Erskine, the scourge of white liberalism, had become white liberalism's dangerous darling—and the quintessential P & S author. She certainly thought so, and Homer concurred, and they had a correspondingly intense relationship—part father-daughter, part professional, part flirtatious (Paul had heard they'd been lovers; he couldn't be sure, but he knew that for Homer no complicated relationship with a woman could fail to be sexual in some sense)—and 100 percent transactional.

Paul remembered how, long before he worked for Homer, he'd run into him with Pepita in the old restaurant at One Fifth Avenue. They were sitting side by side on a banquette, wearing matching black leather jackets and exuding a bonhomie that felt faintly postcoital to Paul. Meredith Gethers, the agent who was Paul's lunch date, brought him to the table to say hello. Homer, who, unsurprisingly, had no memory of their having met, failed to catch her introduction—Homer's hearing was already starting to fail—and thundered, “What'd you say your name was, son? Don't leave me sitting here with my cock in my hand.”

One of Pepita's most notable seminars had been with Dmitry Chavchavadze, the émigré Georgian poet. The fact that he lived in Atlanta, where he held an endowed chair at Emory University, confused matters, for people were often unsure which kind of Georgian he was. On his arrival in New York in 1982 after being expelled from Brezhnev's Soviet Union, Dmitry had been lionized by Manhattan's glitterati, until they bumped up against his hard-line rightist

politics, by which time it was too late. Before you could say *Bozhe moi*, Pepita and Dmitry had become inseparable.

Pepita, who had a gorgeous ebony complexion set off with cherry-red lipstick and a high-teased Afro, dressed like a Seven Sisters coed of yesteryear in flared corduroy skirts and penny loafers, while Dmitry, with his soul patch and filled-out figure, looked like what he was, an aging émigré intellectual on the dole in America's groves of academe. Their seminar lasted only a few months, for in Dmitry, Pepita's ego had more than met its steely match. Paul used to say that you didn't get to be Dmitry Chavchavadze or Pepita Erskine by being nice (her war with Susan Sontag over the black characters in Jean Genet's dramas had gone practically nuclear). But Dmitry, with his unmovable detestation of Communism, his intransigent commitment to poetic formalism, and his bludgeoning disdain for his intellectual inferiors, took the cake.

Dmitry's hatred of his Soviet tormentors meant that he approved of all anti-Communists, first among them Ronald Reagan, and considered left-leaners "dangerous fools"—and it was during their short-lived liaison that Pepita's notorious rightward shift had begun. From the hammer-and-tongs opponent of midcult conformism of her early essays, she reemerged in her later years as a defender of the much-maligned and soon-to-disappear literary canon, the ultimate Great Books girl she'd once been in Black Bottom, where, as a bucktoothed teenager, she'd inhaled volume after volume of the Modern Library.

Dmitry was considered the most important Georgian poet of the century, and the Swedish Academy had concurred, ennobling him unprecedentedly early, at the age of thirty-eight. His poems in Russian were said to be at once hypnotically lyrical and cynically disaffected, but some saw the English-language versions, which he insisted on creating himself, as an unintentional pastiche that relied on an insufficient familiarity with his target language. Still, his status as a

freedom fighter combined with his brilliance and take-no-prisoners implacability conferred impregnable authority on Dmitry. “Is sheet!” he’d shout, about the work of a writer he didn’t rate, which was most of them. “Sheet! Sheet! Sheet!!” This turned out to be a surefire argumentative technique, since few had the temerity to disagree—except, on occasion, the fearless Pepita. And their relationship came a cropper over . . . who else but Ida Perkins?

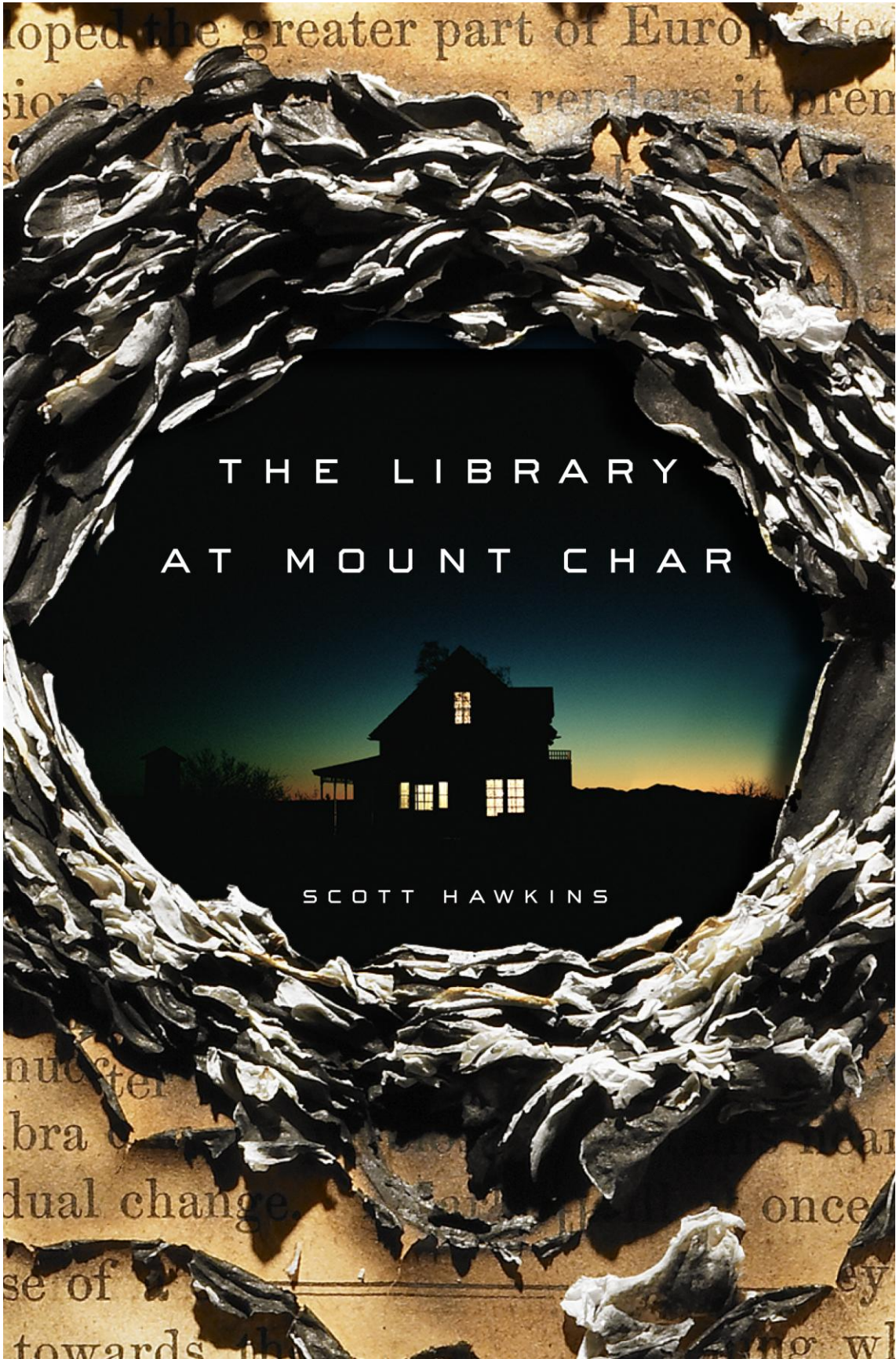
Dmitry had met Ida and A.O. in Venice soon after he’d been expelled from the Soviet Union. Needless to say, he had nothing but contempt for Outerbridge, whom he derided as an apologist for the worst criminal in modern history. So their encounter, as one might have expected, had not gone well. Homer’s cousin Celine Mannheim, the modernist collector, who was Arnold’s landlady in Venice—he and Ida lived in a flat that looked over Celine’s luxuriant garden on Dorsoduro—had given a reception in honor of Dmitry’s arrival and had been shocked to come upon her glamorous new social trophy making a scene, insulting her tenant in her own salon. Ida, needless to say, had been outraged, and she’d gone on the record about it. “Georgian Honor,” her scathing takedown of Dmitry’s Stalinist anti-Stalinism, had occasioned the longest-running exchange of letters in the history of *The Protagonist*, the savage old-left review. Pepita, to the surprise of many, had taken Arnold’s (and Ida’s) part, and this had proven intolerable for Dmitry.

“Mr. Chavchavadze, for all his political shrewdness, has failed to take on board Arnold Outerbridge’s vital role in denouncing the defensive Babbitry of prewar American society, and the promise of an alternative, however eventually disillusioning, that the Soviet Union once held out,” Pepita wrote in the fifth *réplique* of her fourteen-letter exchange with Dmitry, which was to prove fatal to their relationship.

“They’re all alike,” he’d been heard to mutter after breaking off their increasingly bitter dialogue—though he left it unspecified who precisely “they” were: Americans, writers, fellow-traveling socialist roaders, women, blacks? It could have been any or all.

Still, Pepita and Dmitry, together or apart, were always and only themselves. Pepita knew what she knew, and brooked no disagreement. But Dmitry was her match, a monument to the egoism of the transcendently gifted. They were insufferable, both of them, to each other as much as to anyone else—maybe even to themselves, once in a blue moon. Yet, like Pepita, Dmitry, despite his dagger goatee and rotund belly, had undeniable charisma. Even his put-downs of other poets—except for Snell and Vezey, Homer’s other Aces, who were automatically exempted—were deliciously piquant. Dmitry knew he was bad, and there was a twinkle in his eye when he was at his most obstreperous, as if he was sharing a joke with you: the joke of his own outrageousness.

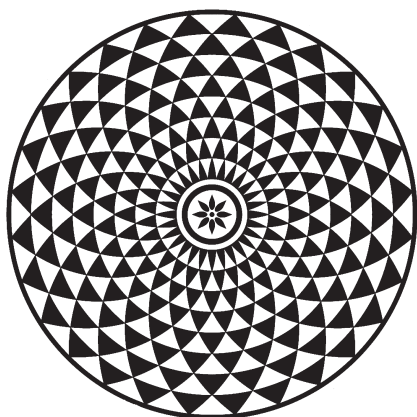
“Publishing would be so wonderful without those wretched authors,” one of Homer’s disenchanted colleagues once said. Not to Paul. He floated on a sea of entrancement, pistol-whipped by the vagaries of his writers’ oversize neediness and self-absorption yet buoyed by the rewards of helping their work see the light of day. He, who was so beset by doubt—about his own talents, his eligibility for love, his capacity for happiness—never for a minute questioned the value of what he was doing. He was made for it, and he knew it. So he kept his head down, at one with his work, while his life flew by.



THE LIBRARY  
AT MOUNT CHAR

SCOTT HAWKINS

THE LIBRARY AT  
MOUNT CHAR



SCOTT HAWKINS



CROWN PUBLISHERS  
NEW YORK

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

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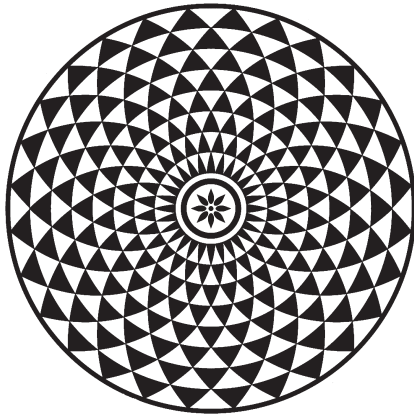
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First Edition

PART I



THE LIBRARY AT  
GARRISON OAKS

## Chapter 1

### Sunrise

#### I

Carolyn, blood-drenched and barefoot, walked alone down the two-lane stretch of blacktop that the Americans called Highway 78. Most of the librarians, Carolyn included, had come to think of this road as the Path of Tacos, so-called in honor of a Mexican joint they snuck out to sometimes. *The guacamole*, she remembered, *is really good*. Her stomach rumbled. Oak leaves, reddish-orange and delightfully crunchy, crackled underfoot as she walked. Her breath puffed white in the predawn air. The obsidian knife she had used to murder Detective Miner lay nestled in the small of her back, sharp and secret.

She was smiling.

Cars were scarce but not unheard-of on this road. Over the course of her night's walk she had seen five of them. The one braking to a halt now, a battered Ford F-250, was the third that had stopped to take a closer look. The driver pulled to the opposite shoulder, gravel crunching, and idled there. When the window came down she smelled chewing tobacco, old grease, and hay. A white-haired man sat behind the wheel. Next to him, a German shepherd eyed her suspiciously from the passenger seat.

*Ahhh, crap.* She didn't want to hurt them.

"Jesus," he said. "Was there an accident?" His voice was warm with concern—the real kind, not the predator's fake that the last man had tried. She heard this and knew the old man was seeing her as a father might see his daughter. She relaxed a little.

“Nope,” she said, eyeing the dog. “Nothing like that. Just a mess at the barn. One of the horses.” There was no barn, no horse. But she knew from the smell of the man that he would be sympathetic to animals, and that he would understand their business could be bloody. “Rough delivery, for me and for her.” She smiled ruefully and held her hands to frame her torso, the green silk now black and stiff with Detective Miner’s blood. “I ruined my dress.”

“Try a little club soddy,” the man said dryly. The dog growled a little. “Hush up, Buddy.”

She wasn’t clear on what “club soddy” was, but she could tell from his tone that this was a joke. *Not the laugh-out-loud sort, the commiserating sort.* She snorted. “I’ll do that.”

“The horse OK?” Real concern again.

“Yeah, she’s fine. The colt, too. Long night, though. Just taking a walk to clear my head.”

“Barefoot?”

She shrugged. “They grow ’em tough around here.” This part was true.

“You want a lift?”

“Nah. Thanks, though. My Father’s place is over that way, not far.” That was true too.

“Which, over by the post office?”

“It’s in Garrison Oaks.”

The old man’s eyes went distant for a moment, trying to remember how he knew that name. He thought about it for a while, then gave up. Carolyn might have told him that he could drive by Garrison Oaks four times a day every day for a thousand years and still not remember it, but she didn’t.

“Ohhh . . .” the old guy said vaguely. “Right.” He glanced at her legs in a way that wasn’t particularly fatherly. “Sure you don’t want a lift? Buddy don’t mind, do ya?” He patted the fat dog in the seat next to him. Buddy only watched, his brown eyes feral and suspicious.

“I’m good. Still clearing my head. Thanks, though.” She stretched her face into something like a smile.

“Sure thing.”

The old man put his truck into gear and drove on, bathing her in a warm cloud of diesel fumes.

She stood watching until his taillights disappeared around a curve. *That's enough socializing for one night, I think.* She scrambled up the bluff and slipped into the woods. The moon was still up, still full. Americans called this time of year "October" or, sometimes, "Autumn," but the Librarians reckoned time by the heavens. Tonight was the seventh moon, which is the moon of black lament. Under its light the shadows of bare branches flashed across her scars.

A mile or so later she came to the hollow tree where she had stashed her robe. She shook the bark out of it and picked it clean as best she could. She saved a scrap of the bloody dress for David and tossed the rest, then wrapped herself in the robe, pulling the hood over her head. She had been fond of the dress—silk felt good—but the rough cotton of the robe comforted her. It was familiar, and all she really cared to know of clothing.

She set out deeper into the forest. The stones under the leaves and pine straw felt right against the soles of her feet, scratching an itch she hadn't known she felt. *Just around the next ridge,* she thought. *Garrison Oaks.* She wanted to burn the whole place to ashes but, at the same time, it would be kind of nice to see it again.

*Home.*

## II

Carolyn and the rest were not born librarians. Once upon a time—it seemed long ago—they had been very American indeed. She remembered that, a little—there was something called *The Bionic Woman* and another something called Reese's Peanut Butter Cups. But one summer day when Carolyn was about eight, Father's enemies moved against him. Father survived, as did Carolyn and a handful of other children. Their parents did not.

She remembered the way Father's voice came to her through black smoke that smelled like melting asphalt, how the deep crater where their houses had been glowed dull orange behind him as he spoke.

“You are Pelapi now,” Father said. “It is an old word. It means something like ‘librarian’ and something like ‘pupil.’ I will take you into my house. I will raise you in the old ways, as I myself was raised. I will teach you the things I have learned.”

He did not ask what they wanted.

Carolyn, not ungrateful, did her best at first. Her mom and dad were gone, gone. She understood that. Father was all that she had now, and at first it seemed that he didn’t ask so much. Father’s home was different, though. Instead of candy and television there were shadows and ancient books, handwritten on thick parchment. They came to understand that Father had lived for a very long time. More, over the course of this long life, he had mastered the crafting of wonders. He could call down lightning, or stop time. Stones spoke to him by name. The theory and practice of these crafts were organized into twelve catalogs—one for each child, as it happened. All he asked was that they be diligent about their studies.

Carolyn’s first clue as to what this actually meant came a few weeks later. She was studying at one of the lamplit kiosks scattered here and there around the jade floor of the Library. Margaret, then aged about nine, sprinted out from the towering, shadowy shelves of the gray catalog. She was shrieking. Blind with terror, she tripped over an end table and skidded to a stop almost at Carolyn’s feet. Carolyn motioned her under her desk to hide.

Margaret trembled in the shadows for ten minutes or so. Carolyn hissed questions at her, but she wouldn’t speak, perhaps could not. But Margaret’s tears were streaked with blood, and when Father pulled her back into the stacks she wet herself. That was answer enough. Carolyn sometimes thought of how the hot ammonia of Margaret’s urine blended with the dusty smell of old books, how her screams echoed down the stacks. It was in that moment that she first began to understand.

Carolyn’s own catalog was more dull than terrifying. Father assigned her to the study of languages, and for almost a year she waded through her primers faithfully. But the routine bored her. In the first summer of her training, when she was nine years old, she went to Father and stamped her foot. “No more!” she said. “I have read enough books. I know enough words. I want to be outside.”

The other children cringed back from the look on Father's face. As promised, he was raising them as he himself had been raised. Most of them—Carolyn included—already had a few scars.

But even though his face clouded, this time he did not hit her. Instead, after a moment, he said, "Oh? Very well."

Father unlocked the front door of the Library and led her out into the sunshine and blue sky for the first time in months. Carolyn was delighted, all the more so when Father walked out of the neighborhood and down to the woods. On the way she saw David, whose catalog was murder and war, swinging a knife around in the field at the end of the road. Michael, who was training to be Father's ambassador to beasts, balanced on a branch in a tree nearby, conferring with a family of squirrels. Carolyn waved at them both. Father stopped at the shore of the small lake behind the neighborhood. Carolyn, fairly quivering with delight, splashed bare-foot in the shallows and snatched at tadpoles.

From the shore Father called out the doe Isha, who had recently given birth. Isha and her fawn, called Asha, came as commanded, of course. They began their audience by swearing loyalty to Father with great sincerity and at some length. Carolyn ignored that part. By now she was thoroughly bored with people groveling to Father. Anyway, deer talk was hard.

When the formalities were out of the way Father commanded Isha to instruct Carolyn alongside her own fawn. He was careful to use small words so that Carolyn would understand.

Isha was reluctant at first. Red deer have a dozen words for grace, and none of them applied to Carolyn's human feet, so large and clumsy when seen next to the delicate hooves of Asha and the other fawns. But Isha was loyal to Nobununga, who was Emperor of these forests, and thus loyal in turn to Father. Also she wasn't stupid. She voiced no objection.

All that summer Carolyn studied with the red deer of the valley. It was the last gentle time of her life, and perhaps the happiest as well. Under Isha's instruction she ran with increasing skill through the footpaths of the lower forest, bounded over the fallen moss oak, knelt to nibble sweet clover and sip morning dew. Carolyn's own mom had been dead about a year at that point. Her only friend was banished. Father was many things,

none of them gentle. So when, on the first frosty night of the year, Isha called Carolyn over to lie with her and her child for warmth, something broke open inside her. She did not weep or otherwise show weakness—that was not in her nature—but she took Isha into her heart wholly and completely.

Not long after, winter announced itself with a terrible thunderstorm. Carolyn was not afraid of such things, but with each flash of lightning Isha and Asha trembled. The three of them were a family now. They took shelter together beneath a stand of beech, where Carolyn and Isha held Asha between them, cuddling to keep her warm. They lay together all that night. Carolyn felt their slight bodies tremble, felt them jerk with each crack of thunder. She tried to comfort them with caresses, but they flinched at her touch. As the night wore on she searched her memory of Father's lessons for words that might comfort them—"don't worry" would be enough, or "it will be over soon" or "there will be clover in the morning."

But Carolyn had been a poor student. Try as she might, she could find no words.

Shortly before dawn Carolyn felt Isha jerk and drum her hooves against the earth, kicking away the fallen leaves to expose the black loam below. A moment later the rain flowing over Carolyn's body ran warm, and the taste of it was salty in her mouth.

The lightning cracked then, and Carolyn saw David. He was above her, standing on a branch some thirty feet away, grinning. From his left hand dangled the weighted end of a fine silver chain. Not wanting to, Carolyn used the last light of the moon to trace the length of that chain. When lightning flashed again, Carolyn stared into the lifeless eye of Isha, spitted with her fawn at the end of David's spear. Carolyn stretched her hand out to touch the bronze handle protruding from the deer's torso. The metal was warm. It trembled slightly under her fingertips, magnifying the faint, fading vibrations of Isha's gentle heart.

"Father said to watch and listen," David said. "If you had found the words, I was supposed to let them live." He jerked the chain back to himself then, unpinning them. "Father says it's time to come home," he said,

coiling the chain with deft, practiced motions. "It's time for your real studies to begin." He disappeared back into the storm.

Carolyn rose and stood alone in the dark, both in that moment and ever after.

### III

Now, a quarter century later, Carolyn knelt on all fours behind the base of a fallen pine, peeping through a thick stand of holly. If she angled her head just so, she had an unobstructed view down the hill to the clearing of the bull. It was twenty yards or so wide and mostly empty. The only features of note were the bull itself and the granite cairn of Margaret's grave. The bull, a hollow bronze cast slightly larger than life, stood in the clearing's precise center. It shone mellow and golden in the summer sun.

The clearing was bounded on the near side by the stand of wild cedar in which Carolyn now hid. On the far side, David and Michael stood at the edge of a sheer drop-off cut into the hill to make a little more room for Highway 78. Across the road, twenty feet or so below, the weathered wooden sign marking the entrance to Garrison Oaks hung from a rusty chain. When the breeze caught it right you could hear the creak all the way up here.

Carolyn had snuck in very close indeed, close enough to count the shaggy, twining braids of Michael's blond dreadlocks, close enough to hear the buzz of flies around David's head. David was amusing himself by quizzing Michael about his travels. Seeing this, Carolyn winced. Michael's catalog was animals, and he had learned it perhaps a bit too well. Human speech was difficult for him now, even painful—especially when he was fresh out of the woods. Worse, he lacked guile.

Emily had visited the librarians' dreams the night before, saying that David required them to assemble at the bull "before sundown." That was different from "as soon as possible," a distinction that no one but Michael would overlook. Still, it might be for the best. Jennifer had been stuck

alone with David for weeks, the two of them waiting on news of Father. Now, as David tormented Michael, Jennifer—the smallest and slightest of the librarians—worked at tearing down Margaret’s grave. She trudged back and forth across the clearing, stooped over from the weight of head-sized chunks of granite, her strawberry-blond hair drenched in sweat. Still, after weeks alone with David, lugging granite in the hot sun was probably a relief.

Mentally, Carolyn sighed. *I suppose I should go down there and help them.* If nothing else, this would encourage David to divide his attentions among three victims rather than two.

But Carolyn did not lack guile. She would listen first.

David and Michael stood looking down over Garrison Oaks. Michael, like his cougars around him, was naked. David wore an Israeli Army flak jacket and a lavender tutu, crusty with blood. The flak jacket was his. The tutu was from the closet of Mrs. McGillicutty’s son. This was at least partly Carolyn’s fault.

When it became clear that they could not return to the Library, at least not in the near term, Carolyn had explained to the others that they would need to wear American clothes in order to blend in. They nodded, not really understanding, and set about rummaging through Mrs. McGillicutty’s closets. David chose the tutu because it was the closest thing he could find to his usual loin cloth. Carolyn thought about explaining why this was not “blending in,” then decided against it. She had learned to take her giggles where she could find them.

Her nose wrinkled. The wind smelled of rot. *Is Margaret back as well?* But no, she realized, the rot was David. After a while you didn’t notice so much, but she had been away. Flies buzzed around his head in a cloud.

A year or two ago, David took up the practice of squeezing blood from the hearts of his victims into his hair. He was a furry man and any one heart yielded only a few tablespoons, but of course they added up quickly. Over time, the combination of hair and blood hardened into something like a helmet. Once, curious, she asked Peter how strong this would be. Peter, whose catalog included mathematics and engineering, looked up at the ceiling for a moment, thinking. “Pretty strong,” he said meditatively. “Clotted blood is harder than you’d think, but it’s brittle.

The strands of hair would tend to alleviate that. It's the same principle as rebar in concrete. Hmm." He bent to his pad and scribbled numbers for a moment, then nodded. "Yeah. Pretty strong. It would probably stop a twenty-two. Maybe even a nine-millimeter." For a while David had dripped it into his beard as well, but Father made him chisel this off when it became difficult to turn his head. All that was left was a longish Fu Manchu mustache.

"Where were you?" David demanded, shaking Michael by the shoulders. He spoke in Pelapi, which bore no resemblance at all to English, or any other modern language. "You've been off playing in the woods, haven't you? You finished up weeks ago! Don't lie to me!"

Michael was close to panic—his eyes rolled wildly, and he spoke in fits and starts, conjuring the words with great effort. "I was . . . uh-way."

"Uh-way? Uh-way? You mean *away*? Away where?"

"I was with . . . with . . . the small things. Father *said*. Father said to study the ways of the humble and the small."

"Father wanted him to learn about mice," Jennifer translated, calling over her shoulder, grunting at the weight of her rock. "How they move. Hiding and the like."

"Back to work!" David screamed at her. "You're wasting daylight!"

Jennifer plodded back to the pile and hoisted another rock, groaning under the load. David, six-foot-four and very muscular, tracked this with his eyes. Carolyn thought he smiled slightly. Then, turning back to Michael: "Gah. Mice, of all things." He shook his head. "You know, I wouldn't have thought it possible, but you might be even more useless than Carolyn."

Carolyn, safe in her hiding blind, made a rude gesture.

Jennifer dropped another rock into the underbrush with a dry crash. She straightened up, panting, and wiped her forehead with a trembling hand.

"Carolyn? What? I . . . not know . . . I . . ."

"Stop talking," David said. "So, let me get this straight—while the rest of us have been killing ourselves trying to find Father, you were off playing with a bunch of *mice*?"

"Mice . . . yes. I thought—"

A flat crack rang out across the clearing. Carolyn, who had long experience of David's slaps, winced again. *He leaned into that one.*

"I did not ask what you *thought*," David said. "Animals don't *think*. Isn't that what you want to be, Michael? An animal? Come to that, isn't it what you actually are?"

"As you say," Michael said softly.

David's back was to her, but Carolyn could picture his face clearly. He would be smiling, at least a bit. *If the slap drew blood, perhaps he'll be giving us a look at his dimples as well.*

"Just . . . shut up. You're giving me a headache. Go help Jennifer or something."

One of Michael's cougars rumbled. Michael interrupted it with a low yowl, and it went silent.

Carolyn's eyes narrowed. Behind David, she saw from the grasses on the western edge of the valley that the wind was shifting. In a moment the three of them would be downwind of *her*, rather than vice versa. In her time among the Americans Carolyn had gotten acclimated to the extent that their smells—Marlboro, Chanel, Vidal Sassoon—no longer made her eyes water, but Michael and David had not. With the wind coming from the west she would not stay hidden long.

She took the risk of staring directly at their eyes—Isha had taught her that to do so was to invite notice, but sometimes it was unavoidable. Now she was hoping for them to be distracted by something north of her. Sure enough, after a moment Michael's glance was drawn to a moth fluttering to a landing on the cairn. David and the cougars followed his gaze, as predators will do. Carolyn took advantage of the moment to slip back into the underbrush.

She circled down the hill, south and east. When she was a quarter mile distant she doubled back, this time walking without any particular caution, and announced her arrival by purposefully cracking a dry twig underfoot.

"Ah," David said. "Carolyn. You're louder and clumsier than ever. You'll be a real American soon. I heard you blundering up all the way from the bottom of the hill. Come here."

Carolyn did as she was told.

David peered into her eyes, brushed her cheek gently. His fingers were black with clotted blood. “In Father’s absence, each of us must be mindful of security. The burden of caution is upon us all. You do understand?”

“Of cour—”

Still stroking her cheek, he punched her in the solar plexus with his other hand. She had been expecting this—well, this or something like it—but still the air whooshed out of her lungs. She didn’t go to her knees, though. *At least there’s that*, she thought, savoring the coppery taste of her hate.

David studied her for a moment with his killer’s eyes. Seeing no hint of rebellion, he nodded and turned away. “Go help them with the cairn.”

She forced herself to draw a deep breath. A moment later the fog around the corners of her vision cleared. She walked over to Margaret’s cairn. Dry autumn grasses brushed against her bare legs. A truck roared by on Highway 78, the sound muffled by the trees. “Hello, Jen,” she said. “Hello, Michael. How long has she been dead?”

Michael didn’t speak, but when he came near he gave her neck an affectionate sniff. She sniffed back, as was polite.

“Hello, Carolyn,” Jennifer said.

Jennifer dropped the stone she carried into the underbrush and wiped the sweat from her brow. “She’s been down since the last full moon.” Her eyes were very bloodshot. “So, that’s what? About two weeks now.”

Actually, it was closer to four weeks. *She’s stoned again*, Carolyn thought, frowning a little. Then, more charitably, *But who could blame her? She’s been alone with David*. All she said was, “Wow. That’s quite a bit longer than usual. What’s she doing?”

Jennifer gave her an odd look. “Looking for Father, of course. What did you think?”

Carolyn shrugged. “You never know.” Just as Michael spent most of his time with animals, Margaret was most comfortable with the dead. “Any luck?”

“We’ll see shortly,” Jennifer said, and looked pointedly at the pile of rock. Carolyn, taking the hint, walked over to the pile and hefted a medium-sized stone. They worked in silence with quick, practiced efficiency. With the three of them at it, it wasn’t long before the pile was

gone, scattered throughout the surrounding underbrush. The ground beneath it had sunk only a little since the burial. It was still relatively soft. They squatted down on their knees and dug at it with their hands. Six inches down, the smell of Margaret's body was thick. Carolyn, who hadn't done this in some time, stifled a gag. She was careful to make sure David didn't see. When the hole was about two feet deep she touched something squishy. "Got her," she said.

Michael helped brush away the dirt. Margaret was bloated, purple, rotting. The sockets of her eyes boiled with maggots. Jennifer hoisted herself out of the grave and went to gather her things. As soon as Margaret's face and hands were uncovered, Carolyn and Michael wasted no time getting out of the pit.

Jennifer took a little silver pipe out of her bag, lit it with a match, and took a deep hit. Then, with a sigh, she hopped down and began her work. Stoned or not, she was very gifted. A year ago Father had paid her the ultimate compliment, surrendering the white sash of healing to her. She, not Father, was now the master of her catalog. She was the only one of them he had honored in this way.

This time the murder wound was a vertical trench in Margaret's heart, precisely the width and depth of David's knife. Jennifer straddled the corpse and laid her hand over the wound. She held it there for the span of three breaths. Carolyn watched this with interest, noting the stages at which Jennifer said *mind*, *body*, and *spirit* under her breath. Carolyn was careful to give no outward sign of what she was doing. Studying outside your catalog was—well, it wasn't something you wanted to be caught at.

Michael moved to the other side of the clearing, away from the smell, and wrestled with his cougars, smiling. He paid the rest of them no attention. Carolyn sat with her back against one of the bull's bronze legs, close enough to watch as Jennifer worked. When Jennifer took her hand away the wound in Margaret's chest was gone.

Jennifer stood up in the grave. Carolyn guessed this was to get a bit of fresh air rather than for any clinical purpose. The stench was bad enough over where Carolyn was, but in the pit it would be overwhelming. Jennifer took a deep breath, then knelt again. She furrowed her brow, brushed

away most of the insects, then knelt and put her warm mouth over Margaret's cold one. She held the embrace for three breaths, then drew back, gagging, and set about rubbing various lotions on Margaret's skin. Interestingly, she applied the lotion in patterns, the glyphs of written Pelapi—first *ambition*, then *perception*, and finally *regret*.

When that was done, Jennifer stood up and scrambled out of the grave. She started toward Carolyn and Michael, but after two steps her eyes widened. She cupped her hand over her mouth, bolted into the underbrush, and retched. When her stomach was empty she walked over to join Carolyn. Her steps were slower and shakier than before. A thin film of sweat glistened on her brow.

"Bad?" Carolyn asked.

By way of answer Jennifer turned her head and spat. She sat down close and laid her head on Carolyn's shoulder for a moment. Then she fished out her little silver pipe—American, a gift from Carolyn—and fired it up again. Marijuana smoke, thick and sweet, filled the clearing. She offered it to Carolyn.

"No thanks."

Jennifer shrugged, then took a second, deeper drag. The coal of the pipe flared in the polished bronze of the bull's belly. "Sometimes I wonder . . ."

"Wonder what?"

"If we should bother. Looking for Father, I mean."

Carolyn drew back. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah, I—" Jennifer sighed. "No. Maybe. I don't know. It's just . . . I wonder. Would it really be that much worse? If we just . . . let it go? Let the Duke, or whoever, take over?"

"If the Duke repairs himself to the point where he can start feeding again, complex life will be history. It wouldn't take long, either. Five years, probably. Maybe ten."

"Yeah, I know." Jennifer fired up her pipe again. "So instead we have Father. The Duke . . . well, at least his way would be painless. Peaceful, even."

Carolyn made a sour face, then smiled. "Had a rough couple of weeks with David, did you?"

“No, that isn’t—” Jennifer said. “Well, maybe. It actually *was* a pretty goddamn rough couple of weeks, now that you mention it. And where have you been, anyway? I could have used your help.”

Carolyn patted her shoulder. “I’m sorry. Here, give me that.” Jennifer passed the pipe. She took a small puff.

“Still, though,” Jennifer said. “Doesn’t it ever get to you? Serious question.”

“What?”

Jennifer waved her arm, a gesture that took in the grave, Garrison Oaks, the bull. “All of it.”

Carolyn thought about it for a minute. “No. Not really. Not anymore.” She looked at Jennifer’s hair and picked a maggot out. It squirmed on the end of her finger. “It used to, but I adjusted.” She crushed the maggot. “You can adjust to almost anything.”

“You can, maybe.” She took the pipe back. “I sometimes think the two of us are the only ones who are still sane.”

It crossed Carolyn’s mind to pat Jennifer’s shoulder or hug her or something, but she decided against it. The conversation was already more touchy-feely than she was really comfortable with. Instead, by way of changing the subject, she nodded in the direction of the grave. “How long will it be before . . . ?”

“I’m not sure,” Jennifer said. “Probably a while. She’s never been down this long before.” She grimaced and spat again. “Blech.”

“Here,” Carolyn said. “I brought you something.” She rummaged in her plastic shopping bag and pulled out a half-empty bottle of Listerine.

Jennifer took the bottle. “What is it?”

“Put some in your mouth and swish it around. Don’t swallow it. After a few seconds spit it out.”

Jennifer looked at it, dubious, trying to decide if she were being made fun of.

“Trust me,” Carolyn said.

Jennifer hesitated for a moment, then took a sip. Her eyes went wide.

“Swish it around,” Carolyn said and demonstrated by puffing out first her left cheek, then her right. Jennifer mimicked her. “Now, spit it out.” Jennifer did. “Better?”

“Wow!” Jennifer said. “That’s—” She looked over her shoulder at David. He wasn’t looking, but she lowered her voice anyway. “That’s amazing. It usually takes me hours to get the taste out of my mouth!”

“I know,” Carolyn said. “It’s an American thing. It’s called mouth-wash.”

Jennifer ran her fingers over the label for a moment, an expression of childlike wonder on her face. Then, with obvious reluctance, she held the bottle out to Carolyn.

“No,” Carolyn said. “Keep it. I got it for you.”

Jennifer didn’t say anything, but she smiled.

“Are you done?”

Jennifer nodded. “I think so. Margaret is set, at any rate. She’s heard the call.” She raised her voice. “David? Will there be anything else?”

David’s back was to them. He was standing at the edge of the bluff, looking across Highway 78 to the entrance to Garrison Oaks. He waved his hand distractedly.

Jennifer shrugged. “I guess that means I’m done.” She turned to Carolyn. “So, what do you think?”

“I’m not sure,” Carolyn said. “If Father is out among the Americans, I can’t find him. Have you learned anything?”

“Michael says he’s not among the beasts, living or dead.”

“And the others?”

Jennifer shrugged. “So far it’s just us three. They’ll be along presently.” She stretched out on the grass and rested her head on Carolyn’s lap. “Thank you for the—what did you call it?”

“Listerine.”

“Lis-ter-ine,” Jennifer said. “Thank you.” She closed her eyes.

All that afternoon the other librarians filtered in, singly and in pairs. Some carried burdens. Alicia held the black candle, still burning as it had in the golden ruin at the end of time. Rachel and her phantom children whispered among themselves of the futures that would never be. The twins, Peter and Richard, watched intently as the librarians filled out the twelve points of the abbreviated circle, studying some deep order that everyone else was blind to. The sweat on their ebony skin glistened in the firelight.

Finally, just before sunset, Margaret stretched a pale, trembling hand up into the light.

“She’s back,” Jennifer said to no one in particular.

David walked over to the grave, smiling. He reached down and took Margaret’s hand. With his help she rose on shaky legs, dirt raining down around her. David lifted her out of the grave. “Hello, my love!”

She stood before him, no taller than his chest, and tilted her head back, smiling. David dusted off the worst of the dirt, then lifted her by the hips and kissed her, long and deep. Her small feet dangled limp six inches over the black earth. It occurred to Carolyn that she could not think what color garment Margaret had been buried in. It might have been ash-gray, or the bleached-out-flesh tones of a child’s doll left too long in the sun. Whatever color it actually was, it had blended well against Margaret herself. *She is barely here anymore. All that’s really left of her is the smell.*

Margaret wobbled for a moment, then sat down in the pile of soft earth next to the grave. David tipped her a wink and ran his tongue along his teeth. Margaret giggled. Jennifer gagged again.

David squatted down next to Margaret and ruffled her dusty black hair. “Well?” he called out to Richard and Peter and the rest, “What are you waiting for? Everyone’s here now. Take your places.”

They were gathered into a rough circle. Carolyn watched David. He eyed the bull, uneasy, and in the end stood so that his back was to it. *Even now, he doesn’t like looking at it.* Not that she blamed him.

“Very well,” he said. “You have all had your month. Who has answers for me?”

No one spoke.

“Margaret? Where is Father?”

“I do not know,” she said. “He is not in the forgotten lands. He does not wander the outer darkness.”

“So, he’s not dead, then.”

“Perhaps not.”

“*Perhaps?* What does that mean?”

Margaret was silent for a long moment. “If he died in the Library, it would be different.”

“Different how? He wouldn’t go to the forgotten lands?”

“No.”

“What, then?”

Margaret looked shifty. “I shouldn’t say.”

David rubbed his temples. “Look, I’m not asking you to talk about your catalog, but . . . he’s been gone a long time. We have to consider all possibilities. Just in general terms, what would happen if he *had* died inside the Library? Would he—”

“Don’t be *ridiculous*,” Carolyn said, not quite shouting. Her face was red. “Father can’t be *dead*—not in the Library, and not anywhere bloody else!” The others muttered agreement. “He’s . . . he’s *Father*.”

David’s face clouded, but he let it go. “Margaret? What do you think?”

Margaret shrugged, not really interested. “Carolyn is probably right.”

“Mmm.” He didn’t seem convinced. “Rachel? Where is Father?”

“We do not know,” she said, spreading her hands out to indicate the silent ranks of ghost children arrayed behind her. “He is in no possible future that we can see.”

“Alicia? What about the actual future? Is he there?”

“No.” She ran her fingers through her dirty-blond hair, nervous. “I checked all the way to the heat death of normal space. Nothing.”

“He’s not in any futures and he’s not dead. How is that possible?”

Alicia and Rachel looked at each other and shrugged. “It is indeed a riddle,” Rachel said. “I cannot account for it.”

“That’s not much of an answer.”

“Perhaps you ask the wrong questions.”

“Do I?” David walked over to her, grinning dangerously, jaw muscles jumping. “Do I *really*?”

Rachel went pale. “I didn’t mean—”

David let her grovel for a moment, then touched a finger to her lips. “Later.” She sank to the ground, trembling visibly in the moonlight.

“Peter, you’re meant to be good with all that abstract crap. Figures and so forth. What do you think?”

Peter hesitated. “There are aspects of Father’s work that I was never allowed to see—”

“Father kept things from all of us. Answer my question.”

“When he disappeared he was working on something called regression completeness,” Peter said. “It’s the notion that the universe is structured in such a way that no matter how many mysteries you solve, there is always a deeper mystery behind it. Father seemed very—”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. Do you know where Father is or don’t you?”

“Not exactly, but if you follow that line of thinking, it might explain—”

“Never mind.”

“But—”

“*Stop talking.* Carolyn, get with Peter later and translate whatever he says into something normal people can understand.”

“Of course,” she said.

“Michael, what about the Far Hill? Was there any sign there?”

The Far Hill was the heaven of the Forest God, where all the clever little beasts went when they died—something like that, at any rate. Carolyn hadn’t been aware that it was real. For that matter, she hadn’t been certain that the Forest God was real until just now.

“No. Not there.” His speech was better now.

“And the Forest God? Is he—”

“The Forest God is sleeping. He has massed no armies against us. Among his pack there were the usual intrigues, but nothing that concerns us directly. I see no reason to think—”

“Think? You? That’s almost funny.” He turned away. “Emily, what about—”

“There’s something else,” Michael said. “We are to have a visitor.”

David glared at him. “A visitor? Why didn’t you tell me earlier?”

“You hit me in the mouth,” Michael said. “You told me to be quiet.”

David’s jaw muscles jumped again. “Now I’m telling you to not be quiet,” he said. “Who is coming?”

“Nobununga.”

“What? *Here?*”

“He is concerned for Father’s safety,” Michael said. “He wishes to investigate.”

“Oh *fuck,*” said Carolyn. This was startled out of her—she hadn’t

expected Nobununga quite so soon. But she had the presence of mind to speak softly, and in English. No one noticed.

“When will he arrive?”

Michael’s brow furrowed. “He . . . he will arrive, um . . . when he gets here?”

David gritted his teeth. “Do we have any idea when that might be?”

“It will be later.”

“Like, when, exactly?” His hand curled into a fist.

“He doesn’t understand, David,” Jennifer said softly. “He doesn’t see time the way people do. Not anymore. Hitting him won’t change that.”

Michael, panicky now, flitted his eyes from Jennifer to David. “The mice have seen him! He approaches!”

David unclenched his fist. He rubbed his temples. “Never mind,” he said. “It doesn’t matter. He’s even right. Nobununga will arrive when he arrives. All we can do is make him welcome. Peter, Richard—collect the totems.” The twins bounced up, scrambling to obey.

“Carolyn—I need you to go back into America. We need an innocent heart. We will offer it to Nobununga when he arrives. Do you think you can handle that?”

“An innocent heart? In America?” She hesitated. “Possibly.”

Misunderstanding, he said, “It’s easy. Just cut through the ribs.” He scissored his fingers through the air. “Like so. If you can’t get it out yourself, send for me.”

“Yes, David.”

“That will be all for tonight. Carolyn, you can go whenever you’re ready. The rest of you stay close.” He glanced at the bull, uneasy. “Richard, Peter, be quick about it. I want to, um, get back to Mrs. McGillicutty’s,” he said, winking at Margaret. “Dinner will be ready soon.”

Rachel sat down on the ground. Her children crowded around her. In a moment she was entirely hidden behind them. Carolyn wanted to speak with Michael, but he and his cougars had faded into the woods. Jennifer unrolled her sleeping skins and lay back on them with a groan. Margaret drifted into orbit around David.

David rummaged around in his knapsack for a moment. “Here you

go, Margaret," he said. "I brought you a gift." He pulled out the severed head of an old man, hoisting him by his long, wispy beard. He swung the head back and forth a couple of times, then tossed it to her.

Margaret caught it with both hands, grunting a bit at the weight. She grinned, delighted. Her teeth were black. "Thank you."

David sat down beside her and brushed the hair out of her eyes. "How long will it be?" he called over his shoulder.

"An hour," Richard said, running his fingers through the bowl of totems—Michael's hair of the Forest God, the black candle, the scrap of Carolyn's dress, stiff with blood, a drop of wax from the black candle. These would be used as nodes of an  $n$ -dimensional tracking tool that they were quite sure—well . . . fairly sure, at least—would point them toward Father. Well . . . probably. Carolyn had her doubts.

"No more than that," Peter agreed.

Margaret took the head into her lap and began fussing over it—caressing its cheeks, cooing at it, smoothing its bushy eyebrows. After a moment of her attentions the dead man's eyelids fluttered, then opened.

"Blue eyes!" Margaret exclaimed. "Oh, David, thank you!"

David shrugged.

Carolyn snuck a peek. Perhaps the man's eyes had been blue once, but now mostly what they were was sunken and filmed over. But she recognized him. He had been a minor courtier in one of Father's cabinets and, once, the prime minister of Japan. Normally such a man would be protected. *David must be feeling bold.* The head blinked again and fastened his eyes upon Margaret. His tongue stirred and his lips began to move, though of course without lungs he could make no sound.

"What is he saying?" David asked. After six weeks of banishment, most of them had picked up at least a smattering of American, but Carolyn was the only one who spoke Japanese.

Carolyn leaned in close, her nose wrinkling at the smell. She tilted her head and touched the man's cheeks. "*Moo ichido itte kudasai, Yamada-san.*" The dead man tried again, pleading to her with sightless eyes.

Carolyn sat back and arranged her hands in her lap demurely, left over right, in such a way that the palm of each hand concealed the fingers of the other from view. Her expression was peaceful, even pleasant. She

knew that Emily could read her thoughts easily. David, too, could sense thoughts, at least the basic flavor. He knew when someone bore him ill will. In battle he could peer into the minds of his enemies and see their strategies, see the weapons that might be raised against him. Carolyn suspected that he might be able to look deeper if there were a need. But it didn't matter. If Emily or David chose to look into Carolyn's thoughts, they would find only the desire to help.

Of course, *genuine* emotion is the very essence of self. It cannot ever be unfelt, cannot be ignored, cannot even be rechanneled for very long.

But with practice and care, it may be hidden.

"He is asking about Chieko and Kiko-chan," Carolyn said. "I think they are his daughters. He wants to know if they are safe."

"Ah," David said. "Tell him I gutted them for the practice. Their mother as well."

"Is it true?"

David shrugged.

"*Sorera wa anzen desu, Yamada-san. Ima yasumu desu nee,*" Carolyn said, telling him that they were safe, telling him that he could rest now. The dead man allowed his eyes to droop. A single tear trembled on the edge of his left eyelid. Margaret studied it with bright, greedy eyes. When it broke free and ran down Yamada's cheek she dipped her head, birdlike, and licked it up with a single deft flick of her tongue.

The dead man puffed his cheeks and blew them out, the softest, saddest sound Carolyn had ever heard. David and Margaret laughed together.

Carolyn's smile was just the right amount of forced. Perhaps she was overcome with pity for the poor man? Or maybe it was the smell. Again, anyone who bothered to peek in on her thoughts would find only concern for Father and a sincere—if slightly nervous—desire to please David. But her fingertips trembled with the memory of faint, fading vibrations carried down the shaft of a brass spear, and in her heart the hate of them blazed like a black sun.

## Chapter 2

### Buddhism for Assholes

#### I

“So,” she said, “do you want to break into a house?”

Steve froze for a long moment, his mouth hanging open. Over by the bar he heard a series of clicks in the bowels of the Automated Musical Instruments juke. Somebody had dropped in a penny. He set his Coors back down on the table un-sipped. *What’s her name again? Christy? Cathy?*

“Beg pardon?” he said finally. Then it came to him: *Carolyn*. “You’re kidding, right?”

She took a drag off her cigarette. The coal flared, casting an orange glow over a half dozen greasy shot glasses and a small pile of chicken bones. “Nope. I’m completely serious.”

The AMI juke whirred. A moment later the opening thunder of Benny Goodman’s “Sing, Sing, Sing” boomed out across the bar like the war drums of some savage lost tribe. All of a sudden Steve’s heart was thudding in his chest.

“OK. Fine. You’re not kidding. So, what you’re talking about is a pretty serious felony.”

She said nothing. She only looked at him.

He scrambled for something clever to say. But what came out was “I’m a plumber.”

“You weren’t always.”

Steve stared at her. That *was* true, but there was no way in the world she could have known it. He’d had nightmares about this sort of

conversation. Trying to camouflage his horror, he grabbed the last wing off the plate and dipped it in bleu cheese, but stopped short of actually eating it. The wings there did not mess around. The smell of vinegar and pepper drifted up to him like a warning. "I can't," he said. "I've gotta get home and feed Petey."

"Who?"

"My dog. Petey. He's a cocker sp—"

She shook her head. "That can wait."

*Change the subject.* "How do you like this place?" he said, grinning and desperate.

"Quite a lot, actually," she said, fingering the magazine Steve had been reading. "What's it called again?"

"Warwick Hall. It used to be an actual speakeasy, back in the twenties. Cath—the lady who runs the place—inherited it from her grandfather, along with some old photos of how it used to look. She's a big jazz fan, so when she retired she restored it and opened it as a private club."

"Right." Carolyn sipped her beer, then looked around at the framed posters—Lonnie Johnson, Roy Eldridge holding his trumpet, an ad for a Theatrical Clam Bake on October 3 and 4, 1920-something. "It's different."

"It is that." Steve shook out a cigarette and offered her the pack. As she took it, he noticed that although the nails of her right hand were unpainted and gnawed away almost to the quick, the ones on her left were long and manicured, lacquered red. *Weird*. He lit their cigarettes off a single match. "I started coming here because it was the only bar around you can still smoke in, but it grew on me."

"Why don't I give you a minute to chew on the idea," Carolyn said. "I know I sprang it on you out of the blue. Where's the ladies' room?"

"No need to think it over. The answer is no. Ladies' is back that way." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "I've never been in there, but on the urinals in the men's room you have to pull a brass chain to flush. It took me a minute to figure that out." He paused. "Who are you, exactly?"

"I told you," Carolyn said. "I'm a librarian."

"OK." At first, the way she looked—Christmas sweater, complete with reindeer, over Spandex bicycle shorts, red rubber galoshes with

1980s leg warmers—made him think she was schizophrenic. Now he doubted that was it.

OK, he thought, *not schizophrenic. What, then?* Carolyn wasn't unduly burdened with good grooming, but neither was she unattractive. He got the impression that she was also very smart. About an hour and a half earlier she'd sauntered up with a couple of beers, introduced herself, and asked if she could sit down. Steve, a bachelor with no attachments other than his dog, had said sure. They talked for a while. She peppered him with questions and answered his own questions vaguely. All the while she studied him with dark-brown eyes.

Steve had kinda-sorta gathered the impression that she worked at the university, maybe as some sort of linguist? She spoke French to Cath, and surprised another regular, Eddie Hu, by being fluent in Chinese. *Librarian kind of fits too, though.* He imagined her, frizzy-haired, surrounded by teetering stacks of books, muttering into a stained mug of staff lounge coffee as she schemed her burglary. He grinned and shook his head. *No way.* He ordered another pitcher.

The beer beat Carolyn back to the table by a good couple of minutes. Steve poured himself another glass. As he drank, he decided to change his diagnosis from schizophrenic to “doesn't give a fuck about clothes.” A lot of people *claimed* not to give a fuck about clothes, but those who actually didn't were rare. *Not entirely unheard-of, though.*

A guy Steve had gone to high school with, Bob-something, spent two years on a South Pacific island as part of some weirdly successful drug-running scheme. When he got back he was rich as hell—*two* Ferraris, for chrissakes—but he would wear any old thing. Bob, he remembered, had once—

“I'm back,” she said. “Sorry.” She had a pretty smile.

“Hope you're up for another round,” he said, nodding at the pitcher.

“Sure.”

He poured for her. “If you don't mind me saying so, this is weird.”

“How do you mean?”

“The librarians I know are into, like, I dunno, tea and cozy mysteries, not breaking and entering.”

“Yeah, well. This is a different kind of library.”

“I’m afraid I’m going to need a bit more in the way of explanation.” As soon as the question was out of his mouth he regretted it. *You’re not actually considering this, are you?* He took a quick spiritual inventory. *No. I’m not.* He *was* curious though.

“I’ve got a problem,” Carolyn said. “My sister said you might have the sort of experience required to solve it.”

“Like, what sort of experience are we talking about?”

“Residential locks—nothing special—and a Lorex alarm.”

“That’s it?” His mind went out to the toolbox in the back of his truck. He had his plumbing tools, sure—torch, solder, pipe cutter, wrench—but there were other things as well. Wire cutters, crowbar, a multimeter, a small metal ruler that he could use to—*No.* He clamped down on the thought, but it was too late. Something inside him had come awake and was beginning to stir.

“That’s it,” she said. “Easy-peasy.”

“Who’s your sister?”

“Her name’s Rachel. You wouldn’t know her.”

He thought about it. “You’re right. I don’t recall meeting anyone by that name.” She certainly wasn’t part of the small—*very* small—circle of people who knew about his former career. “So, how does this Rachel person know so much about me?”

“I’m honestly not clear on it myself. But she’s very good at finding things out.”

“And what, exactly, did she find out about me?”

Carolyn lit another cigarette and blew twin columns of smoke out of her nostrils. “She said you’ve got a knack for mechanical things and an outlaw streak. And that you’ve committed over a hundred burglaries. A hundred and twelve, I think she said.”

That was true, if almost ten years out of date. Suddenly his stomach was in knots. The things he had done and, worse, the things he *hadn’t* done back then were always circling, never far from his thoughts. At her words they landed, tore into him. “I’d like you to go now,” he said quietly. “Please.”

He wanted to read *Sports Illustrated*. He wanted to think about the Colts' offensive line, not about how he could bump through a residential Kwikset in thirty seconds even *without* proper tools. He wanted to—

“Relax. This could be very good for you.” She slid something across the floor to him. He peeked under the table and saw a blue duffel bag. “Look inside.”

He picked the bag up by the handle. Already half suspecting what he might find, he unzipped it and peeked inside. Cash. Lots of it. Mostly fifties and hundreds.

Steve set the bag down and pushed it back across the floor. “How much is in there?”

“Three hundred and twenty-seven thousand dollars.” She stubbed out her cigarette. “-ish.”

“That’s an odd amount.”

“I’m an odd person.”

Steve sighed. “You have my attention.”

“Then you’ll do it?”

“No. Absolutely not.” *The Buddhist undertakes to refrain from taking that which is not given.* He paused, grimaced. The previous year he had declared \$58,000 on his taxes. His credit card debt was just slightly less than that. “Maybe.” He lit another cigarette. “That’s a lot of money.”

“Is it? I suppose.”

“It is to me, anyway. You rich?”

She shrugged. “My Father.”

“Ah.” *Rich daddy.* That explained some of it, anyway. “How’d you come up with—how much did you say it was?”

“Three hundred and twenty-seven thousand dollars. I went to the bank. Money really isn’t a problem for me. Will that be enough? I can get more.”

“It should cover it,” he said. “I used to know people—qualified people—who would do a job like this for three *hundred* dollars.” He waited, not unhelpfully, for her to rescind the offer, or maybe ask for an introduction to the qualified people. Instead they stared at each other for a while.

“You’re the one I want,” she said. “If it’s not the money, then what’s holding you back?”

He thought of explaining to her how he was trying to do better. He could say, *Sometimes I feel like a new plant, like I just sprouted from the dirt, like I’m trying to stretch up to the sun.* Instead what he said was “I’m trying to figure out what you get out of this. Is it some kind of rich-kid extreme sport? You bored?”

She snorted laughter. “No. I’m the exact opposite of bored.”

“What, then?”

“Something was taken from me a number of years ago. Something precious.” She gave him a flinty smile. “I mean to have it back.”

“I’ll need a little more detail. What are we talking about? Diamonds? Jewels?” He hesitated. “Drugs?”

“Nothing like that. More like sentimental value. That’s all I can tell you.”

“And why me?”

“You come highly recommended.”

Steve considered. Over Carolyn’s shoulder, on the dance floor, Eddie Hu and Cath were practicing the Charleston. *They’re getting pretty good, too.* Steve remembered what it felt like to be good at something. For a time, in some circles, he had been a little bit well-known. *Maybe somebody remembered.* “All right,” he said finally. “I can accept that, I guess. Couple more questions, though.”

“Shoot.”

“You’re sure that whatever it is, we’ll just be dealing with basic, residential alarms? No safes, no exotic locks, nothing like that?”

“I’m sure.”

“How do you know?”

“My sister again.”

Steve opened his mouth to wonder about the quality of her information. Then it occurred to him that he couldn’t have told you exactly how many jobs he’d done if you put a gun to his head. *One hundred and twelve sounds about right, though.* So, instead, he said, “Last question. What if whatever it is you’re after isn’t there?”

“You get the cash anyway.” She smiled slightly and leaned in a little closer. “Maybe even a bonus.” She cocked an eyebrow, smiled just a little flirtatiously.

Steve considered this. Before she dropped the burglary bombshell he’d been hoping that the conversation might head toward flirty land. But now . . . “Let’s keep it simple,” he said. “The money should do me just fine. When do you want to go?”

“You’ll do it then?” Her legs were strong and tan. When she moved you could see the muscles working under her skin.

“Yeah,” he said, already knowing in his heart what a terrible idea it was. “I guess.”

“No time like the present.”

## II

One of the things Steve liked about Warwick Hall was how clean it was. Everything was polished wood, glowing brass, well-sprung leather seats shaped like a friendly invitation for your ass, black-and-white tile laid out on the floor in a way that would have tickled Euclid.

That atmosphere broke as soon as you went out the front door, though. To get back to the modern world you had to climb a couple of flights of greasy concrete steps up to the street. The stairwell was black with ancient dirt, the sort of place stray cats go to die. Drifts of McCrap accumulated in the corners—cigarette butts, fast food bags, a Dasani bottle half full of tobacco spit. Tonight it was chilly, which kept the smell down, but in the summer he held his breath while he climbed.

Carolyn didn’t like it either. She had removed her rubber boots in the bar, but put them back on at the threshold, then took them off again at the top of the stairs. Her leg warmers were candy-striped in the many colors of the unfashionable rainbow. *Oh hell, I’ve got to ask.* “Where did you even get those things, anyway?”

“Hmm?”

He pointed at the galoshes.

"I'm staying with a lady. She had them in her closet." Without the rain boots her feet were bare. The parking lot was crushed gravel. Walking on it didn't seem to bother her.

"That's my truck over there." It was a white work truck, a couple of years old, HODGSON PLUMBING stenciled in red letters on the door. The locks on his equipment cases were Medeco, the best. "Chicks dig it, I know. Try to contain yourself." It had turned cold after the sun went down. His breath puffed white as he spoke.

She tilted her head at him, a quizzical expression on her face.

"Not funny. Never mind." He got in the driver's side. She fumbled at the door handle.

"Is it jammed?"

She gave a small, nervous smile and fumbled harder. He reached across the seat and opened the door from the inside.

"Thanks." She tossed her galoshes and the bag with the \$327,000 onto the floorboard, there to languish among the Mountain Dew bottles and empty bags of beef jerky. She curled up on the bench seat, legs folded beneath her, flexible as an eight-year-old.

"I got a spare jacket in the back. You want to borrow it? It's chilly out."

She shook her head. "No, thanks. I'm fine."

Steve cranked the truck. It rumbled to life. Cold air began to pour out of the vents. *Last chance*, he thought. *Last chance to back out of this*. He glanced at the floorboard. In the phlegmy yellow glow of the streetlamp he could see a bundle of money outlined against the canvas of the bag. He grimaced the way you do when you swallow medicine. "You got an address for this place?"

"No."

"Then how am I—"

"Take a left out of the parking lot. Go two miles and—"

He held up a hand. "Not yet."

"I thought we were doing it tonight?"

"We are. But first we've got to talk."

"Ah. OK."

"You ever done this before?"

“Not exactly. No.”

“You the high-strung type? Nervous?”

She flashed a small, wry smile. “You know, I’m honestly not sure. If I am, I’ve got it under control.”

“Well, that’s good. I don’t know what you’re expecting, but this isn’t going to be like bungee jumping. As a first-timer, you might be a little tense. That’s normal. But after the first couple of times, it’s actually pretty boring, more like helping a buddy move to a new apartment than anything you’d see in the movies.”

She was nodding. “I get that. I—”

He held up a hand. “However. There are a couple of things to keep in mind. You got a cell phone?”

She looked confused for a moment, then shook her head.

“Really?”

“Really. I don’t have any kind of phone. Is that a problem?”

“Nope. I was going to have you get rid of it. They can be tracked. It’s just that everyone seems to have them these days. You got gloves?”

“No.”

“I got a pair you can use. You’ll need to put your galoshes back on too—footprints. They’re probably not going to give the full *CSI* hair-and-fiber treatment, not for a simple burglary, but they might dust for prints. Other than that, just follow my lead and try not to touch anything you don’t have to. You don’t have any guns, right?”

“Nope.”

“OK, good. Guns are bad news.” Aside from not wanting to hurt anyone, Steve was a convicted felon. If he were caught in possession of a gun he’d be looking at five years, minimum.

“Let me get some things.” Steve took his own cell phone out of his pocket and removed the SIM card. He knew that cops could put together a pretty accurate map of where a person had been by the cell towers their phone connected to as they moved around. *If I remove the card, that should make it impossible, right?* He wasn’t sure. Back when he used to do this, cell phones didn’t exist. It crossed his mind to put the phone in one of the equipment lockers in the back of the truck. He figured that

would work about like an elevator in terms of insulating the signal. *But you never know. Ah, fuck it*, he thought. *I'll just smash the thing*. Probably that was overkill, but if he was going to do this he was going to do it right.

He was parked in the back corner of the lot—under a light, but away from everybody else, and mostly out of sight. *Old habits die hard*. He smiled a little. The metal locker over the wheel well swung open on well-oiled hinges.

He started pulling out tools. A cordless Makita drill, a couple of screwdrivers, a small crowbar, a five-pound hammer, and a slim jim he had made himself out of sheet steel from Ace Hardware. Just, y'know, for practice. He wrapped his cell phone in a towel and ruined it with two whacks from the hammer. The rest of the stuff he put into his tool belt along with a couple of pairs of leather work gloves, then stuck the tool belt in a knapsack. *Long time since I put a kit together*. He felt a burst of something like nostalgia and squashed it down hard. He *hated* how he missed this so much. He wanted to do better and, mostly, he did. Even after ten years the slap that ended his burglary career, and the accompanying verdict—*You little asshole*—were never far from his thoughts.

*But . . . three hundred grand*. He sighed. “How far is it?”

“About twenty minutes.”

“What kind of place is it? House? Apartment?”

“It’s a house.”

“Stand-alone? Not a duplex or anything?”

“Yeah, stand-alone. It’s in a subdivision, but the neighborhood is mostly empty. The owner works night shift, so we should have all the time we need.”

“All right. First thing is, I’ve got to get us another car.”

“Why?”

“Well, among other things, this one has my name on the door.”

“Oh. OK.”

They drove to the airport. He parked in short-term parking, then slung the knapsack over his shoulder. They walked into the terminal and out the other side, then took a shuttle to long-term parking. He walked

down the rows until he found a car with the ticket stub in plain sight. It was a dark-blue Toyota Camry, just about the blandest car on the road. The owner had dropped it off the day before. *Perfect.*

“Stand there, would you?” he said.

Carolyn took her place in front of the wheel well. He hung the crowbar from a belt loop and put the wire cutters in his back pocket. Then he took the long strip of sheet steel out of the knapsack, slid it in between the rubber and the window, and slipped open the lock. He was ready for the car alarm to go off, but it never did. He popped the trunk from inside the car and tossed his knapsack in there. “You coming?”

She walked around and got in on the passenger side. “That was quick,” she said. “My sister was right about you.”

“That’s why they pay me the big bucks.” He popped the cover off the steering column with the crowbar and used the screwdriver to pop out the ignition locking bolt. The Toyota started on the first try. Some of the exits from the lot were automated, but the electronic trail that his credit card would leave if he swiped it would be more or less conclusive proof of grand-theft Camry. So instead he replaced the metal cover on the steering column and had cash ready when he got to the window. He needn’t have bothered. The lot attendant, a bored-looking black guy in his fifties, was watching TV. He never looked up.

They slipped out into the night.

### III

**I**n his secret heart, Steve fancied that he was a Buddhist.

A couple of years ago, following a whim, he’d picked up a copy of *Buddhism for Dummies* at the bookstore. He kept it under the bed. Now it was dog-eared, the pages stained with the pizza grease and spilled Coke of repeated readings. Sometimes when he couldn’t sleep he fantasized about giving up all his worldly belongings and moving to Tibet. He would join a monastery, ideally one about halfway up a mountain. He would shave his head. There would be bamboo, pandas, and tea. He would wear an orange robe. Probably in the afternoon there would be chanting.

*Buddhism*, he thought, *is a clean religion*. You never heard about how eight people—two of them children—just got blown the fuck up as part of the long-standing conflict between Buddhists and whoever. Buddhists never knocked on your door just when the game was getting good to hand you a tract about what a great guy Prince Siddhartha was. Maybe it was just the fact that he didn't know any Buddhists in real life, but he clung to the hope that they might really be different.

Probably that was bullshit. Probably if you actually went to a Buddhist service you'd find out that they were just as petty and fucked-up as everyone else. Maybe between chants they talked about how so-and-so was wearing last season's robe, or how the incense little Zhang Wei burned the other day was the shitty, cheap stuff because his family was so poor, ha-ha-ha. But this was Virginia and he was a plumber. Why not pretend?

He never went so far as to even fantasize about buying a plane ticket, of course. He wasn't stupid. Pretend for the sake of argument that his vision of the Buddhist ideal had a basis in reality. The fact that he himself was still just a piece of shit with a shaved head and an orange robe was bound to come out sooner or later.

*Probably sooner*, he thought. The Buddha was pretty clear on the subject of stealing. "If you kill, lie, or steal . . . you dig up your own roots. And if you cannot master yourself, the harm you do turns against you Grievously." The *g* in "Grievously" was capitalized.

*And yet*, he thought, with the mental equivalent of a sigh, *here I am*.

"—left up there," Carolyn said.

"Say again, please?"

"I said turn left up there, by the red car."

They had been driving about twenty minutes, Carolyn giving directions. "Left here. Right on the big road. Whoops, sorry, turn around." Her voice was low and throaty. It was hypnotic. Also, Steve's sense of direction was crap. Five minutes out from the airport he'd already been utterly lost. They might as well have been in Fiji. Nagoya. The moon. "Are you sure you know where you're going?"

"Oh yes."

"Are we getting close?"

“Another few minutes. Not long.”

She was sitting curled up in the passenger seat with her back to the door. Her posture, together with her tight bicycle shorts, showed a lot of leg. He was having trouble not staring at that leg. Every time they drove past a billboard or road sign on her side he'd sneak a peek. She didn't seem to mind or, indeed, notice.

“Turn there,” she said.

“Here?”

“No, next one down. Where that—yes.” She smiled at him, her eyes feral in the moonlight. “We're close now.”

The road ahead was dark. They were well outside the city, edging into farm country. They drove into a mostly empty subdivision. It was big, or designed to be big—it had enough acreage for maybe a hundred houses with postage-stamp-sized yards. There were a few finished ones here and there, a few more poured foundations with weeds sprouting from the cracks. But mostly the lots stood empty.

“Perfect,” Steve muttered.

“There.” She pointed. “That one.”

Steve followed her finger out to a smallish ranch house painted a pale shade of green, hideous even in the dark. The driveway was empty. The only source of light was a lonely-looking streetlamp on the corner.

He rolled past the yard slowly, which reminded him in some non-specific way of a rap video, which made him feel ridiculous. A hundred yards farther down the road curved just enough that the house vanished from sight behind a stand of trees. He parked there and turned to look at Carolyn.

“Last chance,” he said. “You're sure you want to do this? If you'll tell me what it is you're after I can—”

Her eyes flared in the moonlight. “No. I have to go with you.”

“All righty, then.” He snuck another peek at her legs, then got out. The soft thunk of the door shutting sounded satisfactorily covert. He walked around to the back of the car and retrieved the knapsack. “Are you—”

She brushed the back of his neck with her fingertips. He shivered, the

little hairs standing up. He turned around to find her very close, close enough that he could smell her. She smelled a bit like she hadn't bathed in . . . well, a while—but it was a *good* kind of hadn't bathed in a while—musky, feminine. His nostrils flared.

“Come on,” she said. She had put the galoshes back on over the leg warmers.

When they reached the house, Steve checked inside the mailbox. It was stuffed full, easily a week's worth of junk. *Owner hasn't been home in a while*, he thought. *Perfect*. He pulled out a magazine and angled it in the moonlight until he could read the cover. It read *Police Chief Magazine* in big blue letters, and was addressed to . . . “Detective Marvin Miner.” He looked at Carolyn. “This guy's a cop?”

“Looks that way.”

“What'd he do to you?”

“Ruined my silk dress.”

“How'd he do that?”

“He got blood on it.”

“Hmm. Did you try rinsing it with club so—”

“Yeah, it was too far gone. Are you in or not?”

“Well . . . I guess it doesn't make much difference, if we do it right. Anyway, it doesn't look like Detective Miner is home.”

“Mmm.”

Steve hesitated, then stepped onto the driveway. He walked up to the front door and rang the bell. No response from inside the house.

“Why'd you do that?”

“I wasn't expecting anybody, but if there's a Rottweiler or something it would be good to know about it now.”

“Ah. Good thought.” Her voice dripped with distaste.

“You don't like dogs?”

She shook her head. “They're dangerous.”

Steve gave her a quizzical look. Most nights when he got home his cocker spaniel, Petey, wagged his tail so hard his whole butt wiggled. *Maybe when this is done me and Petey will go to Tibet*. He imagined hiking up the hill to the monastery on a bright spring day, Petey

bouncing along beside him, Inner Peace waiting for them at the top of the hill.

*Business first.* Steve picked up the doormat, looking for a key. Nothing. He slid his finger across the top of the frame. Carolyn looked at him quizzically. “A lot of times people keep spare keys sitting out.” The tips of his gloves came away dusty. There was no key. “Oh well,” he said. “Have to do this the hard way.”

They walked around to the back. Steve took out the crowbar and muscled it in between the door and jamb at the level of the bolt.

He slipped a Phillips and a flathead into his pocket, along with a pair of wire cutters. “If the alarm is set you usually get a full minute to disarm it,” he said. “That should be plenty of time. You wait out here, though. I don’t want to be tripping over you.”

She nodded.

Steve pulled at the crowbar, grunted. The doorjamb bent open an inch or so, enough that the bolt slipped free of its housing. The door popped open into darkness. Warm air rolled out from inside. He waited, but nothing beeped.

“I think we caught a break. The alarm isn’t set.”

Inside, it was very dark. All the windows were curtained—thick heavy things that the moonlight and that lonely streetlamp couldn’t penetrate. The only light in the living room came from an enormous stereo rack, fully as tall as Steve himself. The pale blue LEDs of the receiver shone down over a La-Z-Boy recliner rising up out of a sea of crumpled Busch cans.

“What are you waiting for?” Carolyn asked. The sound of her voice came from in front of him. Steve didn’t quite jump, but he was startled. He hadn’t heard her move.

“Just giving my eyes a chance to adjust,” Steve said. He glanced around. The microwave in the kitchen blinked endless green midnight over a greasy pizza box and a small mountain of crumpled paper towels. “Hmm.” He padded into the kitchen and pulled open the fridge, squeezing one eye shut so as not to re-blind himself. The white light of the fridge was startling in the dark. It was mostly empty of food—just a

half-empty jar of relish and a plastic squeeze bottle of French's mustard in the door—but there was a box of beer in the back. Steve, thirsty, considered the question this posed for a moment, then shut the door and drank a plastic cup of water from the sink.

“Carolyn? You thirsty?”

She didn't answer.

He poked his head out of the kitchen. “Carolyn?”

“Yes?” She had moved again. Now her voice came from behind him. This time he did jump. He turned to look at her. She was very close.

“Do you want . . .” His voice trailed off.

She moved in closer, ran her fingers down his chest. “Want what?”

“Hmm?”

“You asked me what I *wanted*.” Faint emphasis on the last word.

“Oh. Right. Sorry. Lost my train of thought.” He paused. “You want me to help you look for . . . whatever it is?”

She said something he didn't understand.

“What was that?”

“Chinese. Sorry. So many languages. Sometimes when I get excited the words blend.”

Her touch was electric on his chest. He backed away from it. His eyes had adjusted to the darkness. Where before there had only been vague shapes, he now saw couch and television, chair and table. He walked over to a cabinet next to the television and opened it. “Not bad,” he said. The receiver was a German brand, much nicer than the house warranted. “You want a stereo?”

“No.”

Steve's own stereo, never particularly high-end, had developed some sort of short. He reached out for this one—*Hey, it's a burglary, right?* His hand hovered over the power cord for a moment . . . and then he pulled back, mentally kicking himself in the ass. *If you kill, lie, or steal . . . you dig up your own roots.* When he looked up, Carolyn was gone. “Hey,” he said. “Where'd you go?”

“It's in here,” she said. “I found it.”

Her voice came from a different, adjoining room. Steve flinched again.

*Found what?* He followed the sound. She was in the dining room. She sat on a long, formal table, feet dangling, silhouetted against the pale light of the streetlamp. The china cabinet loomed behind her like a black throne.

“Carolyn?”

“Come here,” she said. Her legs were slightly parted. He went and stood before her.

“Where is it?”

“Here,” she said. She reached out to him, slid her hand around the back of his neck, pulled him in close.

“Wait,” Steve said, not resisting much. “What?”

She tilted her head a little, leaned forward, kissed him. Her lips were full, soft. She tasted of salt and copper. For a moment, he let himself go, sank down into the kiss. But it was in his nature that he did not close his eyes.

Behind her, reflected in the glass plate of the china cabinet, something moved.

Steve jerked away, spun around. In the shadows at the corner of the room stood a man. He was holding a long gun.

“Whoa,” Steve said, raising his hands. “Wait a minute . . .”

“I’m sorry, Steve,” Carolyn said. Somehow she had managed to slip off the table and move to the other side of the room.

“You’re under arrest,” the man said. He leveled the gun at Steve.

“Yeah,” Steve said. He raised his hands slowly. “OK. No problem.”

The man stepped forward into the pale light of the streetlamp. His hair stood on end. His eyes rolled wildly in their sockets. *What the hell is wrong with him? Thorazine? Brain damage?*

“You’re under arrest,” the man said again, raising the gun to his shoulder.

“Right,” Steve said. “OK. Should I turn around now, or . . . ?”

“Stop or I’ll shoot,” the man said. A trickle of drool ran down the side of his mouth.

“*Wait! Wait, I’ll—*”

“Do it,” Carolyn said.

The man fired. The muzzle flash was huge and bright in the small room, but Steve seemed not to hear the shot at all. When his vision

cleared he was on his back, looking up. Behind him he heard a small, tinkling sound. He rolled his eyes toward it, saw a chunk of glass fall out of the china cabinet. It made a pretty sound. *What's that on the plates?* he wondered. *It's all dark and drippy.*

Carolyn leaned into his field of vision. "I'm sorry," she said again.

"I . . . help . . . I gotta get home . . . gotta feed Petey . . . got . . . go . . ."

She reached down, touched his cheek.

Darkness.

#### IV

When Steve was dead, Carolyn took a moment to get hold of herself. She squeezed her eyes shut and blew out a long breath.

"You're under arrest," Detective Miner said again. He had resumed tottering around. Now he was in the corner, his back to her. He took a step forward and bumped into the wall. She walked over to him, turned him around gently, took the shotgun from him. He surrendered it without protest.

She gave it an expert pump, jacking another round into the chamber, then set it on the dining-room table. She was careful not to look at Steve's body. Then she took Detective Miner by the shoulders and steered him into the archway between the dining room and the kitchen.

"Stand here," she said.

He focused on her for a moment, then rolled his eyes again. "You're under arrest," he said. He didn't move, though.

Carolyn walked around to Steve's right side. She picked up the shotgun and wrapped the dead fingers of his left hand around the pump, holding it in place with her own. She put his right index finger on the trigger. She aimed the gun at Detective Miner.

Miner watched this without much interest. "Stop or I'll shoot."

She pulled the trigger. The blast caught Miner in the chest, obliterating his heart and lungs and sending a good bit of tissue out a fist-sized hole in his back. He dropped to the floor.

She set the gun down and walked over to the light switch. There she took off her right glove and rolled her thumb across the brass plate around the switch, careful not to smear. When she was done she put the glove back on.

Finished now, she took her hands away, leaving the gun in Steve's grip. She turned around and faced him. Even now she did not allow herself to weep. Instead, with infinite gentleness, she reached down and shut his eyes. "*Dui bu chi,*" she said, touching the skin of his cheek. "*U kama-kutu nu,*" she said. "*Je suis désolée*" and "*Ek het jou lief*" and "*Lo siento,*" "*Mainū māfa kara dēvō*" and "*Het spijt me*" and "*Je mi líto,*" "*Ik hald fan di*" and "*Ben bunu çözecektir*" and "*A tahn nagara*" and on and on.

She sat beside Steve's body, rocking back and forth a little, hugging herself. She took his head in her lap. Silver moonlight lit the room full of broken things. Alone, she dispensed with lies. All that night she held him, brushing his hair with her fingertips, speaking softly, saying, "I'm sorry," saying, "forgive me," saying, "I'll make it better" and "I promise it will be OK," over and over and over again in every language that there ever was.

# THE STAR SIDE OF BIRD HILL



NAOMI JACKSON

## Summer 1989

\*

### Bird Hill St. John, Barbados

The people on the hill liked to say that God's smile was the sun shining down on them. In the late afternoon, before scarlet ibis bloodied the sunset, light flooded the stained glass windows of Bird Hill Church of God in Christ, illuminating the renderings of black saints from Jesus to Absalom Jones. When there wasn't prayer meeting, choir rehearsal, Bible study, or Girl Guides, the church was empty except for its caretaker, Mr. Jeremiah. It was his job to chase the children away from the cemetery that sloped down behind the church, his responsibility to shoo them from their perches on graves that dotted the backside of the hill the area was named for. Despite his best intentions, Mr. Jeremiah's noontime and midnight devotionals at the rum shop brought on long slumbers when children found freedom to do as they liked among the dead.

Dionne Braithwaite was two weeks fresh from Brooklyn and Barbados's fierce sun had already transformed her skin from its New York shade of caramel to brick red. She was wearing foundation that was too light for her skin now. It came off in smears on the white handkerchiefs she stole from her grandmother's chest of drawers, but she wore it anyway, because makeup was her tether to the life she'd left back home. Hyacinth, while she didn't like to see her granddaughter made up, couldn't argue with the fact that Dionne's years of practice meant that she could work tasteful wonders on her face, looking sun-kissed and dewy-lipped rather than the tart her grandmother thought face paint transformed women into.

Dionne was sixteen going on a bitter, if beautiful, forty-five. Trevor, her friend and eager supplicant for her affections, was her age mate. Although Dionne thought herself above the things the children on Bird Hill did, she liked the hiding place the graveyard behind the church provided. So it was that she and Trevor came to the cool limestone of Dionne's great-grandmother's grave, talking about their morning at Vacation Bible School, and imitating their teacher's nasal Texas twang.

"Accepting Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior is the only sure way to avoid eternal damnation," Dionne pronounced, her arms akimbo.

Trevor grinned, his eyes caught on the amber lace of Dionne's panties as she walked the length of the grave.

"What do you think happens when you die?" Dionne asked Trevor.

"I don't know. Seems to me it's just like going to sleep. Except you never wake up. Why do you think so much about death anyways?"

"We are in a graveyard," Dionne said. She traced the name of her ancestor while Trevor's hand worked its way beneath her dress and along the smooth terrain of her upper thigh. She liked the way it felt when Trevor touched her, though she hadn't decided yet what she'd let him do to her. She'd let Darren put his hands all the way up her skirt on the last day of school. But here, where girls her age still wore their hair in press and curls, she knew that sex was not to be given freely, but a commodity to ration, something to barter with.

Dionne squeezed Trevor's wrist, halting his hand's ascent, and then crossed her arms at her chest, which was testing the seams of her dress. After a few weeks of eating cou-cou and flying fish, her yellow frock fit snugly and rode up on her behind. Dionne was a copy of her mother at sixteen her mouth fixed in a permanent scowl, her slim frame atop the same long legs, a freckle that disappeared when she wrinkled her chin. She hoped that one day she and her mother would again be

mistaken for sisters like some of the flirtatious shopkeepers in Flatbush used to do back when her mother still made small talk.

Dionne's and Trevor's younger siblings, Phaedra and Chris, played tag among the miniature graves of children, all casualties of the 1955 cholera outbreak. Nineteen girls and one boy had died before the hill folks abandoned their suspicion of the world in general and doctors in particular to seek help from "outside people." This was just one of the stories that Dionne and Phaedra's mother summoned as evidence for why she left the hill the first chance she got. "They're clannish. They wouldn't know a free thought if it smacked them on the behind," their mother would hiss, her mouth specked with venom.

Chris and Phaedra darted between the tombstones, browning the soles of their feet, losing track of the shoes they shook off on the steps at the top of the hill. They had become fast friends since Phaedra and her sister arrived from Brooklyn at the beginning of the summer. Phaedra was small for her ten years; even though they were the same age, her head reached only the crook of Chris's elbow. Her skin had darkened to a deep cocoa from running in the sun all day in spite of her grandmother's protests. She wore her hair in a French braid, its length tucked away from the girls who threatened her after reading about Samson and Delilah in Sunday school. Glimpses of Phaedra's future beauty peeked out from behind her pink, heart-shaped glasses, which were held together with Scotch tape.

Hyacinth tried to get Phaedra to at least cover her head and her feet, saying that she didn't need any black-black pickney in her house, and that, besides, good girls knew how to sit down and be still, play dolls and house and other ladylike games. Phaedra had never been one for girls in Brooklyn, and she didn't see herself starting now. At the beginning of the summer, a whole gang of girls her age filed through her grandmother's house to get a good look at her. They drank the Capri Sun juices Phaedra begrudgingly offered them from the barrel her mother sent. They chewed politely on the cheese sandwiches Hyacinth made and cut into quarters. Once they'd asked her all the basic questions (Where did she live in New York? What year was she in school? How old was her sister?), there was little left to talk about. They papered over the awkward silences by staring dumbly at each other and then promising to stop by soon. But by the time VBS started, none of them had come over again.

Phaedra knew that these friendships were doomed the moment she met Simone Saveur, the ringleader of the ten-and eleven-year-old girls because she towered over them and spoke with a bass the boys their age didn't yet have in their voices. On her first and last visit of Hyacinth's house, Simone Saveur, sat down and started looking around, taking mental notes, collecting grist for the gossip mill. Because while Hyacinth could safely say that she had been into almost every house on Bird Hill, whether to deliver a baby or visit an old person who was feeling poorly, or just to sit for a while talking about who had died and left and been born, only a handful of hill women could say that they had seen Hyacinth's house beyond the gallery where she sat with guests. All of them had at one point or another been invited to admire Hyacinth's rose garden, which in her vanity she sometimes showed off, going on about how they bloomed, the insects that troubled them, her pruning techniques. It could be said that Hyacinth's rose garden, which she tended to like another set of grandchildren, was an elaborate fortress whose beauty so thoroughly enchanted its visitors that they never questioned why they'd never been invited inside.

When Phaedra saw Simone looking around, she suddenly felt protective of Hyacinth and her house and everything in it: a pitcher and glasses with orange slices etched into them that had been around since before Phaedra was born, the open jalousies and the white curtains that lapped against the girls' faces, the lovingly carved archway that separated the front room from the dining room, just barely fitting a dining table and a hutch, the pictures of Phaedra and Dionne and their mother, Avril, lining the walls. Where their apartment building in Brooklyn was marked with just a number, 261, Phaedra loved her grandmother's house because of the question "Why worry?" written in blue script

above the front steps. Everything in Hyacinth's house had been touched by those she loved, and so it was Phaedra's and Dionne's in a way that their apartment in Brooklyn never would be.

Once, when there was a lull in conversation, Simone Saveur's roving eyes settled on Phaedra. Simone tried to explain the concept of cooking a dirt pot, but Phaedra was not at all interested in cooking, not even for play, much less near her grandmother's outhouse, which she was still too chicken to use, even when Dionne was taking forever in the inside bathroom, and she was dying to go. She knew she wouldn't be playing any such game, or spending time with girls who thought this was a good time. Phaedra's mouth corners turned down and soon everyone was saying their good-byes. Phaedra's mother said that her daughter's gloomy face could rain out a good time. In this case, Phaedra thought the force of her foul mood came in handy; it encouraged a quick end to what had been an uncomfortable, bordering on unpleasant, afternoon.

That summer, Chris and Phaedra were inseparable. Phaedra could barely trouble herself to remember the other girls' names, having put them in the category of "just girls," which was the same as dumping them into the rubbish bin of her mind. With Chris, there was ease to their play, a rough-and-tumbleness that she welcomed. Chris made Phaedra most happy by not asking her too many questions. Because while most of the Bird Hill girls were too polite to ask, she knew they most wanted to know about the thing she least wanted to talk about—her mother.

Phaedra liked to look at Christopher, who had the same sloe-eyed gaze as his mother's, an ever-ready smile, and pink lips that made him seem more tender than other boys his age. Now she watched as he stuffed the stocky fingers of his eternally ashy hands into his pockets and surveyed the land below the hill, mimicking the firm stance he'd seen his father take in the pulpit.

From where they stood, Phaedra and Chris could see the fishermen's boats at Martin's Bay, the buoys bobbing up and down in the blue-green water. Further east, a riot of rock formations, vestiges of an island long since gone, jutted out at Bathsheba. It was Phaedra's first summer in Barbados, and she wanted more than anything to feel the sand between her toes and to look at her feet through the clear-clear water. With its natural beauty, Barbados was far superior to Brooklyn; you were more likely to find a syringe than a seashell on the beach at Coney Island. She stood next to Chris, looking out at three rocks at Bathsheba that she and Chris had nicknamed the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. It was hard to explain, but she had a feeling, standing there, that she'd never felt before in Brooklyn, not that she owned these things, but that she was somehow part of them. When Phaedra went on a class trip to the Empire State Building and looked down at the city from 102 stories above the sidewalk, she didn't have that feeling. The city was beautiful in its own way, but it wasn't hers. She didn't try to explain how she felt to Chris. What she most liked about their friendship was how much space there was for silence, the kind of quiet she'd never found with girls her age.

Chris turned his back to the sea, toward Phaedra.

"Touch it," Chris said. He dared Phaedra to touch the grave of her namesake, her great-aunt Marguerite Phaedra Hill, who had died from cholera like the others.

"What if I don't want to touch it?" Phaedra said.

"Then I'll make you."

Chris picked up an enormous rock and threw it at Phaedra. It opened her right temple in the same place where she had a dime-sized birthmark she had seen the Bird Hill girls looking at and straining not to ask about. The force of the blow knocked Phaedra off her feet.

The dull thud of stone against skull roused Dionne and Trevor from their mischievousness. Dionne ran to see what happened and gasped when she saw her sister lying prone on the grave, blood running down the side of her head.

"But what happen here?" Dionne said, breaking into the patois that usually lay hidden beneath her tongue.

"Why did you do that?" Trevor asked Chris.

“Mummy say wail woman head can’t break,” Chris said incredulously, over and over again, as blood seeped out of Phaedra’s head and commingled with the hill’s red dirt. Phaedra didn’t know what wail women were yet, but Chris leaned on those two words in a way that made it clear to anyone within earshot that being called one wasn’t a compliment.

Dionne took off up the hill with Trevor trailing behind her. She pressed her hands to her breasts to still them as she ran. (She’d already outgrown the bras that she brought with her; the homemade ones her grandmother had sewn lay unused at the bottom of her mother’s old chest of drawers.) She swept past the church and stopped at the rectory, a white clapboard house with a view of all the other houses on the hill.

Chris’s mother was where she always was, sitting on her veranda, listening to Jamaican rockers on her radio. The way that Mrs. Loving stared out for hours over the hillside, unmoving, reminded Dionne of her own mother.

“Phaedra got hit in the head by a rock in the cemetery,” Dionne blurted out before she made it to the veranda steps.

“Oh dear,” Mrs. Loving said. She went running behind Dionne, moving unexpectedly fast.

Hill women were busy putting laundry out on the line, picking okra for cou-cou, humming along to the grand old gospel of salvation on family radio. They formed a circle at the hill’s bottom, looking on.

“Christopher Alexander Loving, what have you done?” Chris’s mother bellowed as she walked toward him. Upon hearing his full name, Chris would usually have run to hide. Instead, he stood at Phaedra’s feet, shading her from the noon- high sun. He looked down at Phaedra, transfixed, mumbling to himself.

Mrs. Loving took Phaedra’s head into her lap and let the blood soak her dress. She slapped gently at her face. “Come now, child, don’t let sleep take you.”

Finally, Phaedra opened up her eyes. “Mommy, what happened? Everything’s starry.”

“Hush, child, hush. Mummy’s not here, but she soon come,” Mrs. Loving whispered.

Phaedra looked up at Chris’s long shadow and then at Mrs. Loving above her. She was struck then, for the first time, by the heaviness of her head, the aching there, and the oddness of someone other than her mother trying to comfort her.



BRADSTREET

GATE

*A Novel*

ROBIN KIRMAN



## PROLOGUE

A young man stood on her stoop: tall, with lanky hair falling in his face, and thin, busy lips that he chewed while she studied him across the threshold. No one she'd met before. The sun was sharp; the maple outside her house was spiked with buds. Spring had arrived without her noticing.

"Georgia Calvin?"

She turned to check on Violet, in the dining room behind her, jabbering in her high chair.

"Miss Calvin? I'm Nat Krauss." He shifted his knapsack to offer her his hand. "I left a message I'd be coming."

Several messages, in fact, from a young man at the *Crimson*: she'd erased them all without playing them through. There was only one matter that reporters ever wished to speak to her about, though years had passed since anyone had tried.

This May, it would be ten years, exactly, since Julie Patel's murder. Georgia always marked the day, May 5, and made sure flowers were delivered to the family: *Mr. and Mrs. Barid Patel, 32 North Beatty Street, Pittsburgh, PA*. Nine bouquets and no replies. Nonetheless, she kept sending them, hoping that, if she hadn't been forgiven, she might at least be accepted as a valid participant in the family's tragedy, someone who'd been involved in those events the way they had: directly and against her will—unlike the many others who'd taken an interest in the murder out of some personal objective, the Nat Krausses of the world. "You're the *Crimson* reporter."

"Right. Editor in chief, actually." His hand remained outstretched; she took it at last. The boy's palm felt sticky; his fingertips were stained with newsprint, black under the nails.

The nurses had warned her again this morning: Mark could only be safely released to a clean, contained environment. No welcome home bouquets, no gifts of food, no guests.

“I’m sorry, this really isn’t a good time.”

A crashing noise came from behind; she rushed back inside, relieved to find Violet strapped into her high chair, her bowl of mashed bananas spinning on its side across the floor. Georgia knelt to clean the mess; when she stood again, the young man was in her living room, laying his unwashed jacket over one armrest of her sofa.

“Ms. Calvin.”

“Reese. I’m Reese now.” She hadn’t taken Mark’s name when they’d married, but with the onset of his illness, she’d filed the papers. She would be Reese and remain Reese, whatever happened, from here on.

The clock in the living room read 10:15; by noon Mark would be prepared for discharge; Violet still needed her nap. Food lay scattered around the high chair; the reporter had tracked mud across the floor. “Look, if you’ll just leave me your number—”

“One question. Please. Give me five minutes and I *swear* I’ll get out of your way.”

Despite the unkempt hair and rumpled bowling shirt, nods to hipsterism, the young man was clearly fanatically determined. The kind of guy that she, ten years before, would have found easy to comprehend and master. These Harvard boys had not changed.

*She* was the one who’d changed. Her shirt was stained; her leggings had a hole in one knee; her eyes were ringed from lack of sleep and white hairs had multiplied among the gold. The past year had done the transformative work of a decade; just over thirty, she must seem far removed from anything to do with sex or scandal.

Violet let out a whimper of exhaustion.

“I need to get her to sleep first.”

“No problem. I can wait.” The young man dropped onto the sofa.

Georgia resigned—“*one* question”—and leaned down to unstrap the baby from her high chair. When she glanced up, Krauss was star-

ing; her shirt gaped and, since she was nursing, she hadn't bothered with a bra.

Krauss's cheeks flushed; he turned away, to pull a notebook from his bag. A moment later, from the stairwell, Georgia caught him watching her again: a more prurient curiosity shone in his expression.

It was a look that she remembered, encountered often after the murder, in the faces of strangers who'd linked her to the figure in the news. Rufus Storrow's student girlfriend. The seductress or the naïf, the betrayed or the betrayer, the partner of a killer: she'd been all these things to different people, might be any one or more of them to this Nat Krauss.

She shut herself inside the baby's room. Almost half an hour went by while she nursed and rocked and hummed; the presence of a visitor made Violet agitated. By the time Georgia laid the baby, sleeping, in her crib and tiptoed down, she'd allowed herself to hope that Krauss had given up and left. Instead she found him typing into his phone; his feet were up on the coffee table's edge, beside a stack of unpaid bills: mortgage payments, insurance claims.

"Good to go now?" He pocketed his phone and picked up his spiral notebook.

She took a seat across from him, inside this living room she'd scarcely used, furnished with items she and Mark had bought over the summer at local auctions: one way to introduce an element of chance, some playful chaos, into the seemingly staid business of setting up house—as if chance and chaos weren't already with them, as if she'd forgotten the lesson of ten years before.

"You can guess what's brought me," Krauss began.

"The memorial this May." Every member of her graduating class had received notice, and she'd been made aware of it much sooner, since Charlie and Alice were both involved in the arrangements. Over lunch, that winter, Alice had warned her that the ten-year anniversary of Julie Patel's death would have consequences: the media was taking renewed interest in the story and the investigation had been reopened;

there was a chance that Georgia might be contacted by police or press. “You’re covering the ceremony?”

“Also.” Krauss shifted forward; the smell of cigarettes wafted from his clothes. “But my question has more, specifically, to do with Joe Lombardi—the officer who headed up the Patel investigation.”

“I know who he is.”

“Right, though maybe you’re not aware he’s Chief of Police Lombardi now. I don’t know how much you keep up with Cambridge politics—there have been complaints of corruption, incompetence. Which must come as no surprise to you: given what went on with the Patel case.”

That case had been mishandled in a dozen ways, but she’d never thought to blame officer Lombardi more than anybody else involved: the politicians who’d pushed the department to name a suspect quickly; the press that never clamored for a broader investigation. Everyone involved, it seemed, had played his eager part in persecuting Storrow.

Storrow had been too perfect a target, after all: too well dressed and too well spoken, with a high Virginia drawl and the sort of fair, delicate good looks that called to mind outdated notions like breeding. A charmed, young Harvard professor, whose reputation she’d assisted in sullyng forever.

Across from her Krauss brushed the hair off his pimpled forehead; he was sweating, talking on excitedly: “And not just any statements, potentially *exonerating* statements. I’ve already spoken with one witness who claims Lombardi completely disregarded what he told him: a classmate of yours. Miguel Santina. You might know him.”

“Know who?” She rubbed her eyes; the night before she’d scarcely slept, woken by Violet twice and kept awake by her own fears that the day would bring bad news, that Dr. Poole would tell her Mark’s immune system was still too compromised, that his release from the hospital would be postponed once more. *We can’t be overly cautious; he’s undergone a very serious surgery*, gravely serious, the name notwithstanding: Whipple—a word better suited to Violet’s toys and gizmos than to a procedure to remove half of Mark’s insides.

“Excuse me, Nat is it? What exactly are you after? Because when I agreed to talk, I thought we’d be discussing the memorial, not the investigation.”

“Obviously, they’re connected.”

“Maybe they shouldn’t be.” A ceremony to mourn a murdered girl, to provide some comfort to her family: that was not an excuse for pursuing a separate agenda.

“Look, assuming Lombardi botched the investigation and Julie Patel was denied justice, it needs to come out—even if it’s painful. I’m sure the Patels would feel the same way.”

“Yeah? I kind of doubt it.” On this almost hopeful morning, she didn’t need to recall death; and as unpleasant as returning to this subject was to *her*, it would have to be pure torture for Julie’s family.

She studied the reporter, perched at the sofa’s edge, knee bouncing; his pen ran, buzzing, up and down the notebook’s spiral—a creature positively twitching with ill-contained ambition—as if he’d given a damn about Julie Patel or her family, until he’d seen his chance to earn some notice from Reuters or the *Times*.

“If you’re here to discuss details of the case, I really doubt that I can help you; I said all I had to say to the police ten years ago.”

“To Lombardi, you mean.” Krauss looked down at his lap; he’d stuck his pen inside the notebook’s spiral. He lifted the book, trying to shake the pen free without her seeing: a flush bloomed again beneath the rash of tiny pimples; he was a child suddenly.

She smiled, despite herself. She supposed she was being rather hard on Krauss—too hard, probably, conflating him with the reporters who’d once assailed her, or with Alice, who’d been the one to expose her affair with Storrow, first to Charlie and then in the pages of the *Crimson*. Long ago, when they—she, Alice, and Charlie—were all really just children too, self-preoccupied and reckless.

“All right,” she resumed, more indulgent with Krauss now. “Your question then: there was a classmate.”

“Miguel Santana.” Krauss abandoned the stuck pen and pulled a second one out of his knapsack. “The name came up in an old *Globe*

article. Turns out the guy had phoned Lombardi, reported spotting Storrow's BMW on the night of the murder. Fifteen to thirty minutes before—parked on Cowperthwaite."

The street adjoining Mather House, where she'd been living senior year. Back then she'd never have imagined Storrow would risk seeking her out in her dorm, that he could be so rash or obsessive, but subsequent years had made her less certain. "This is the first I'm learning of it."

"The first *anyone* is learning of it. Seems no one pursued the claim." Krauss repressed a grin: so pleased to have surpassed the achievements of the many adults who'd dedicated months to these same mysteries before.

"We weren't together, Storrow and me, if that's what you're wondering."

"No, I know. You were at a party. Kirkland House."

A detail she hadn't had cause to recollect, not since she'd been held inside a detective's office for three grueling hours of questioning. "So if you read the police report, you already know everything I know. I'd have mentioned seeing Storrow or his car."

"You're sure of that? Because Lombardi might have left it out."

"Of course I'm sure."

"Maybe there were other occasions; he'd come by another time?"

"Not that I ever knew of, no." No meetings on campus: foremost among Storrow's many rules. It had seemed the height of irony, really, that after all the disagreements they'd had about his precautions, bordering on paranoia—*Who gives a damn who you're sleeping with?*—in the end, every move Storrow had made in those months, including with her, had been scrutinized publicly, and judged.

Krauss chewed his bottom lip: it seemed this wasn't the answer that he'd hoped for. "I'm not here just on the word of Santina, so you know. There was a girl, on your floor in Mather, who also thought she heard a man's voice in your room."

"Well, she was mistaken." Not that it was necessary to defend her statements to this kid: Nat Krauss was not police and she was no lon-

ger a guilt-ridden girl of twenty. “Look, I’ve told you what I can and now, really, I’ve got other things to do.”

She rose and stood in front of Krauss; he remained seated, determined.

“If you don’t want to help me, I get that, but I’d assume you’d want to help your friend.”

“Storrow, you mean?” Even during their affair, she wouldn’t have described Storrow as her *friend*. Charlie was her friend. Alice, too, or so she’d thought. But not a man she’d spent the last decade avoiding, not a man she couldn’t swear had been incapable of a brutal crime. “We haven’t spoken in five years.”

“Regardless, I’m sure you’re aware of how he’s been ruined: professionally, personally.”

“Is *he* your concern now? I thought it was justice for the Patels?”

“I’m concerned for everyone Lombardi’s lies affected—and if Storrow had his reasons for keeping quiet then, it looks as if he has a different story to tell now.”

“What story’s that?”

“I hope to find out when we meet.”

“You’re meeting Storrow?” The last she’d heard from the man, he’d been living in India—where she’d hoped he’d had the good sense to remain. Doing penance, so he’d said, with deliberate provocation: the memory of that improbable encounter, inside a tiny Mumbai kitchen, made her jittery still.

“Next week,” Krauss explained. “I’m driving down to see him.”

The news gave her a jolt: Storrow back on American soil, in contact with this kid who was now inside her home. “Driving where? Where is he now?”

“Great Falls. Visiting his mother, so he claimed. Though I got the distinct sense there was more he didn’t want to tell me: government business, maybe.” When he spoke of Storrow, Krauss lowered his voice, and his tone became more knowing. That was Storrow’s absurd effect, she recalled, on a certain kind of young man, even one as smart as Charlie. There had always been a bunch of them trailing Storrow

across the Yard, enamored of his West Point lingo, entranced by his stories of the JAG Corps, suggestions of covert operations he was part of, the precise definitions of which always remained elusive. Whatever elite connections Storrow had once possessed had been severed long ago. A decade ago, come May.

“He’s not back for the memorial, is he? For God’s sake, he doesn’t plan to use the occasion for grandstanding?”

“I can’t guess what’s on his mind.”

But she *could* guess. A man like Storrow, so devoted to the perfection of his image; he wouldn’t allow himself to be remembered as a villain, or to be forgotten either.

“He cannot be there. It would be a disaster for that family.” Her voice was shrill. A small cry sounded from upstairs. She paused, waiting to be reassured that Violet hadn’t fully woken. “The Patels must be allowed to have their day.”

“I understand your feelings here.”

“No, I don’t think you do.” Nat Krauss couldn’t begin to understand what it would do to Julie’s parents if Storrow showed his face, what a horror it would be for them to see the man they believed had taken their child from them. Until Violet was born, Georgia couldn’t have grasped it either: what it meant to care for a creature of such sweet defenselessness, from the soft crown of her head, to those feeble, immaculate feet—to tend to another body, its needs and pains, more thoroughly than to one’s own. Even the ghost of a child was a mother’s possession. Mrs. Patel ought to be left in peace at least with that.

“Storrow keeps out, or I’ll take steps to make sure. You can tell him I said so.”

“He does have a right to have his story heard, though, don’t you think? He’s suffered too.”

Suffering: what did this kid know about it? She wasn’t about to discuss suffering with him, not after a year like the last one, spent watching Mark lose his hair and nails and so much strength he couldn’t lift his nine-pound daughter.

She crossed to the sofa's edge to retrieve Krauss's jacket. He took it, blinking up at her. "I'm sorry if I've upset you, Ms. Calvin."

"*Reese*. And my husband is waiting."

From her stoop she watched Krauss unlock his car and drive away, the sun reflecting upon his rear windshield. The brightness hurt her eyes; she went back inside.

Soon Violet would wake and the house still had to be readied: meticulously disinfected. She had no time to spare on thoughts of Julie Patel now, to indulge in guilty musings of the sort that had kept her occupied for years after her classmate's death: imagining that she'd been sacrificed instead and Julie was living in her place. So it would be Julie with a child, a fitter mother, fitter wife, a better defender of the families of murder victims, more accomplished in everything and more deserving of existence in that parallel universe where she'd been the one struck down and Julie Patel lived.

Wallowing notions: such games just served to flatter, to convince us we had more profound consciences than we did. What good did it do anyone—Julie's family, or her own—to blame herself?

Still, once Mark was home and she was calmer, she supposed she should call Charlie and discuss this matter with him. Something should be done to prevent the scene she now envisioned: ten years since he'd been hounded from the campus, Storrow choosing this solemn event to surface once again.

He might just be capable of such a thing, a man who'd been mad enough, after all, to make an appearance at the vigil following Julie's death. Suspected of her murder, he'd dared to mix among the mourners, to stand before her family; he'd even dared to speak.

That was one more miscalculation that had ruined him: no falsely accused man could be ever so measured and so poised. He would shout and protest. He wouldn't give thoughtful speeches in remembrance of the victim. Such efforts to be proper, such measured dignity, especially for those who didn't know him, had only lent credence to the notion that Rufus Storrow was a monster.

Even she, who'd once lain beside him, couldn't quite muster certainty.

But why place the blame on Storrow? Who could hope for *any* kind of certainty in this life? Dr. Poole put Mark's chance of surviving the year at fifty percent. This was up from twenty; this was progress; it was the closest she could come to certainty. Human nature might not be designed to manage such odds—but life didn't care what we could manage, and death, even when it didn't hunt beloved husbands of forty, or strike down eager girls of twenty, was no kinder.



FREEDOM'S

CHILD

*NOVEL*

MAX MILLER

# PROLOGUE

My name is Freedom Oliver and I killed my daughter. It's surreal, honestly, and I'm not sure what feels more like a dream, her death or her existence. I'm guilty of both.

It wasn't long ago that this field would ripple and rustle with a warm breeze, gold dancing under the blazes of a high noon sun. The Thoroughbreds, a staple of Goshen, would canter along the edges of Whistler's Field. If you listen close enough, you can almost hear the laughter of farmers' children still lace through the grain, a harvest full of innocent secrets of the youthful who needed an escape but didn't have anywhere else to go. Like my Rebekah, my daughter. My God, she must have been beautiful.

But a couple weeks is a long time when you're on a journey like mine. It could almost constitute something magnificent. Almost.

I catch my breath when I remember. Somewhere in this field, my daughter is scattered in pieces.

Goshen, named after the Land of Goshen from the Book of Genesis, somewhere between Kentucky's famous bourbon trails in America's Bible Belt. The gallops of Thoroughbreds that haunt this dead pasture are replaced with the hammering in my rib cage. The mud cracks below me as I cross the frostbitten field, steps rip-

ping the earth with each fleeting memory. The skies are that certain shade of silver you see right before a snowstorm; now, the color of my filthy fucking soul.

I'm reminded of the sheriff behind me with an itchy finger and a Remington aimed between my shoulder blades. I'm reminded of my own white-knuckled grip on my pistol.

Call me what you will: a murderer, a cop killer, a fugitive, a drunk. You think that means anything to me now? In this moment? The frost pangs my lungs in such a way that I think I might vomit. I don't. Still out of breath, I use the dirty robe to wipe blood from my face. I don't even know if it's mine. There's enough adrenaline surging through my veins that I can't feel pain if it is.

"This is it, Freedom," the sheriff calls out in his familiar southern drawl. The tears make warm streaks over my cold skin. The cries numb my face, my lips made of pins and needles. There's a lump in my throat I can't breathe past. *What have I done? How the hell did I end up here? What did I do so wrong in life that God deemed me so fucking unworthy of anything good?* I'm not sure. I've always been the one with the questions, never the answers.

# PART I

1

# FREEDOM AND THE WHIPPERSNAPPERS

## *TWO WEEKS AGO*

My name is Freedom, and it's a typical night at the bar. There's a new girl, a blonde, maybe sixteen. Her eyes are still full of color; she hasn't been in the business long enough. Give it time. Looks like she can use something to eat, use some meat on her bones. I know she's new because her teeth are white, a nice smile. In a month or two, her gums will shelve black rubble, and she'll be nothing but bone shrink-wrapped in skin. That's what happens in that line of work. The perks of being young are destroyed by the lurid desires of men and the enslavement of drug addiction. Such is life.

A biker has her by her golden locks, heading for the parking lot. The place is too busy, nobody notices. He blends in with the other leather vests and greasy ponytails, the crowd crammed from entrance to exit. But I notice. I see her. And she sees me, eyes glassed over with pleading, a glint of innocence that may very well survive if I do something. But I have to do something now.

"Watch the bar," I yell to no one in particular. I'm surprised by my own agility as I jump over the bar and into the horde, pushing, elbowing, kicking, yelling. I find them, a trail of perfume behind the

young girl. I take the red cap of the Tabasco sauce off with my teeth and spit it out. The biker can't see me coming up behind him as he tries to leave the bar; he towers over me by a good foot and a half. I cup my palm and make a pool of hot sauce.



*I still own the clothes* I was raped in. What can I say? I'm a glutton for punishment. My name is Freedom, though seldom do I feel free. Those were the terms I made with the whippersnappers; if I did what they wanted, I could change my name to Freedom. Freedom McFly, though I never got to keep the McFly part. They said it sounded too Burger King-ish. Too '80s. Fucking whippersnappers.

Freedom Oliver it is.

I live in Painter, Oregon, a small town showered in grit, rain, and crystal meth, where I tend a rock pub called the Whammy Bar. My regulars are fatties from the West Coast biker gangs like the Hells Angels, the Free Souls, and the Gypsy Jokers, who pinch my husky, tattooed flesh and cop their feels.

*"Let me get a piece of that ass."*

*"Let me give you a ride on my bike."*

*"How 'bout I give you freedom from those pants?"*

I hide my disgust behind a smile that convinces the crowd and stick my chest out a little more; it brings in the tips, even if it makes me shudder. They ask where my accent's from and I tell them Secaucus, New Jersey. Truth be told, it's from a shady area on Long Island, New York, called Mastic Beach. It's not like the peckerwoods can tell the difference.

I tear out my umbrella in the early morning after my shift is over and the bar is closed. I squint through the October rains and the smoke of a Pall Mall. I swear to God, it's rained every day since I was born. To my left, adjacent to the Whammy Bar, is Hotel Painter. The neon letters drone through the rain, where some key letters are knocked out so the sign spells HOT PIE. Appropriate, given that it's

one of those lease-by-the-hour roach motels that offer ramshackle shelter to anyone wanting to rent cheap pussy. The ladies huddle under the marquee of the reception desk to hide from the rain and yell their good-byes my way. I wave back. Goldilocks isn't there. *Good*. Looks like the night's slowed down.

Fuck this umbrella if it doesn't want to close. I chuck it to the dirt lot and climb into the rusty hooptie of a station wagon. I remove my nose ring and put the smoke out in an overflowing ashtray.

"Jesus Harry Christ," I scream, alarmed by a knock on the window. I can't see through the condensation and open it a crack to find a couple suits. "Whippersnapping jack holes." They look at me like I'm nuts, but I'm pretty sure they expect it. People have a hard time trying to understand what I say most of the time. "Isn't it late for you guys?"

"Well, you keep making us come out here like this," says one of them.

"It was an accident." I shrug as I get out of the car.

"Trying to blind a man with Tabasco sauce was an accident?"

"Semantics, Gumm," I say as I fiddle with the keys. "Guy got rough with one of the girls, so I slapped him on the cheek. Only I missed his cheek and got his eyes. I only just so happened to have Tabasco sauce spill in my hand not a moment before. Besides, he's not pressing charges, so I'm sorry you guys had to make the trip from Portland."

"You're walking on thin ice," says Howe.

"Tabasco won't blind you." I shake the rain from my hair. "Just hurts like fuck and keeps you awake."

"Well, he was mad enough to call the cops. If it weren't for us, you'd be sitting in jail right now," says Gumm.

"Besides, an eye patch suits him." I lead them into the closed pub, turn on the power, and grab three Budweisers. They eyeball the beverages. "Relax. I won't tell," I offer.

The lights are dim, borderline interrogational, above the island

bar in the middle of a large, old wooden floor furnished with the occasional pool table. The scent of stale smoke hangs heavy, etched in the wood's grooves like a song impressed on a vinyl record. The music turns on to Lynyrd Skynyrd. U.S. Marshals Gumm and Howe each flip a stool down from the bar and sit.

"You know how it goes," says Agent Gumm, with his salt-and-pepper hair, handlebar mustache, and sagged jowls. He doesn't want to be here, I can tell. I don't want him here either. Court-mandated. Fuck the system. Let's get this over with. We'll fill out the forms, I'll get a lecture. *Consider this a warning.* Yeah, yeah, it's always considered. To Gumm's side is Agent Howe, who does a quick read over the files in their manila envelopes. "How's this job treating you, Freedom?"

"I'd come up with a clever remark, but I'm too tired for the bullshit." I wipe my leather jacket with a bar towel. "Just slap me on my wrist and we can all be on our way, why don't you?"

"Was just asking about the job, is all," says Howe, a handsome man in his early forties with jet-black hair and green eyes. I'd bang him. Well, maybe if he wasn't such an asshole. Though I doubt that'd stop me anyway.

"Let's cut the shit. You two didn't come all the way here from Portland to get on my ass about a tiny bar scuffle."

They twirl their bottles between their palms. Gumm uses his sleeve to wipe the sweat from his beer off the wood. They look at each other with those raised eyebrows, the kind of look that says, *Are you going to tell her or should I?*

"Will ya just spit it out?" I roll my eyes and hop onto the bar in front of them. I pull their envelopes from under me and sit Indian-style, their eyes level with my knees.

"Freedom, Matthew was released from prison two days ago. He was granted an appeal and won." Gumm pretends to cough with the words. Well, isn't that just dandy? I rest my elbows on my knees, chin on my fists. Which facial expression shall I feign? I go for ignorance, as if I have no idea who this Matthew is that they're talking

about. But I do. It's why I am a protected witness. In the Witness Protection Program. WPP. Whips. Whippersnappers. But lucky me, I was dismissed with prejudice, meaning I cannot be charged for the same crime twice. Thank God for small favors.

"And?" I don't want them to know that my heart is pounding and I'm starting to sweat.

Gumm leans in closer. "For a time to be determined, we are heightening your protection. We'll have one of ours come see you on a weekly basis. Keep a low profile."

"You mean lower than a biker bar in the middle of nowhere?"

"A small cross to bear for killing a cop, Freedom." And there are those nasty looks and curled lips from these guys that I know all too well. "C'mon, you've got nothing to lose if you admit it already. I mean, you can't be tried again for it. We know you did it."

"Good luck proving it. And nice of you assholes to give me a heads-up." I chug my beer and aim my chin at the door. "Be careful driving back to the big city in that rain. Don't want you two dying in some terrible accident." I finish the beer. "That'd just be terrible."

At least they take the hint. Sometimes they don't. Sometimes they overstay their welcome. Sometimes they do it on purpose just to piss me off. "By the way." Howe rises from his stool and closes his coat. "I have to ask. Procedure, you know . . ." He speaks through his teeth like he has thorns in his ass.

I'll save him the trouble, if only to get them the hell out of here faster. Their files stick to my wet boots as I bounce from the bar. I grab the soggy pages from under me and hand them over. "Don't worry, I'm still on my meds," but this is a blatant lie. And I think they know it's a lie but don't care. "No need to ask."



*I think about Matthew, released from prison after eighteen years; eighteen years of his imprisonment that secured my eighteen years of freedom.*

Alone in the shitty apartment, I crawl out of wet clothes and dry

Jax Miller

my naked body against the cushions of a musty tweed couch. Alone I cry. Alone I look at an old picture of my dead husband, Mark, the one photo that survived an incident with a sink and a book of matches a couple decades ago. Alone I open a bottle of whiskey. Alone I whisper two names in the dark.

“Ethan.”

“Layla.”

Alone. Fucking whippersnappers.

# MASON AND VIOLET

*I am a boy. This woman's arms protect me from the vastness of the ocean, blue as far as the eye can see until it forms a gray line dotted with ships. I bury my face in her neck; her laughter moves my small body. But I don't know who she is. I look up at the sky through her red hair; pockets of sunshine flash spellbindingly through wet locks. Her body, warmer than anything I've ever known, a blanket in the coolness of the waves. Her skin smells of coconut and lime. The sounds of seagulls roll in my ears, and I know I love this woman, I just don't know who the hell she is. "Who are you?" I ask. She never answers in these dreams, just a straight row of blinding white from her mouth. I can't wake up and I'm not so sure that I want to. She turns so the waves crash into her back, screams of delight in my neck. I wrap my legs tighter around her waist. And during the stillness between the wallops, I trace the tattoos on her shoulders, pick grains of sand from the ends of her hair, and tell her I love her.*

*"Where is your sister?" she asks.*



Mason Paul wakes, shivering in his own sweat, the air still thick even hours after making love, her taste still on his lips. What makes this recurring dream a nightmare, he doesn't know. He uses his thumb

and index finger to gently grab the bones of Violet's wrist, moving her arm from his stomach. Mason grabs a pack of cigarettes hidden in his sock drawer and sneaks outside, his movement delicate so as not to wake her.

Still too warm for an October night in Louisville, Kentucky, Mason stands naked at the double doors of his balcony, unsure whether his shoulders are an inch higher because of the satisfaction she left with him or with trepidation from the dream. Behind him, Violet snores, sprawled on top of silk sheets the color of her name. He pulls on the Marlboro and watches the stars that glow orange to correlate with the nearing of All Saints' Day. He pours a bourbon Manhattan with a splash of butterscotch schnapps. It smells like candy corn. It smells like Halloween. *These dreams, you'd think I'm some damn mental case.* He clears the phlegm of a mild hangover from his throat.

Spanish moss swings with the breeze in the large backyard of the New Orleans Colonial home, ivory with black fringes, one that probably housed masters and slaves more than a century ago. He brings his silver necklace to his lips, warming the cross with his breath, but it's just habit. In recent years, Mason decided it might be less disappointing to consider God as a loosely thrown noun instead of something profound. But it reminds him of his younger sister, Rebekah, the only member of his family who hasn't shunned him. He misses her greatly. The bourbon doesn't help.

The home was born of old southern money from Cavendish tobacco fields that line the property's edges, well-to-do bankers who made lucrative investments when the American economy was at its golden peaks. And now Mason, a promising twenty-four-year-old with a possible future in one day becoming the state's most successful defense attorney after sticking his foot in the door of one of the most profitable law firms in Kentucky only weeks after acing the bar exam. Impressive at his age, but not entirely unheard of. Currently an associate at the firm, rumors of him being the next senior associ-

ate attorney swirled around the offices, which would make him the fastest to reach such a position. The result of a lot of interning, many many hours, and being smart as a whip. He flicks the cigarette down to the grass when he hears Violet turn in her sleep and pretends not to notice her.

A moment later, she wraps her lanky arms around his bare chest from behind. "You've been smoking, haven't you?" Mason hears her smile bleed into the question. *I always knew I'd end up with one of my coworkers. Of course, she'd be a corporate lawyer embroiled in the campaign against big tobacco companies.*

Cicadas shrill in the distance and bullfrogs croak in the nearby swamps and weeping willows. Mason smirks. "Who, me?" The Manhattan glistens in the moonlight as he places his hand on hers, his gaze still in the backyard.

She squeezes him and breathes onto his back. "I can feel your heart racing with my lips." She kisses between his shoulder blades.

"Another dream . . ." He takes a long draw from the martini glass.

"It'll be OK," but she worries her attempts at comfort fall on deaf ears.

Mason walks out of her arms and into the bedroom, sitting down on the ottoman with his bottle of Maker's Mark, his laptop, and papers on the floor around his feet. He goes to his fake Facebook account, Louisa Horn. Thoughts of his sister Rebekah swim through the furrows of his brain. No word in days is odd for her. *Hope she finally got the sense to get out of that place.* Mason tries to distract himself with the pile of papers that form a cyclone around him. He shuffles through the work, breathing the vapors of bourbon between each page. He feels bad that he can't make love to his girlfriend because of the distractions of his sister not writing and the rape case finally about to end tomorrow. It's always that kind of stuff that gets to him. Who could get a hard-on with siblings and court trials on the brain?

"You're *still* working on the Becker case?"

“Just double-checking that all my ducks are in a row for tomorrow, is all.” He looks up at her and smiles. “Otherwise, you can forget about Turks and Caicos.”

“Not a chance in hell.” Violet stretches and yawns.

He studies the photos from Saint Mary’s Hospital, the victim’s rape exam. Tender patches colored eggplant branded under her eyes and between her thighs stir something that merits another sip. Behind him, Violet looks down at the same thing.

“How many times do you have to look at those?” she asks.

“Believe me, I don’t like it any more than you do.” He traces the edges of the paper with his fingertips. He sometimes wishes he could become desensitized, lose all sympathy toward the victim like some of his colleagues. “It’s just until I can become senior at the firm, love. Maybe partner, in a few years.”

“Sell your soul to the devil?”

“More like renting it out.” From an envelope, he pulls out a photo and hands it to Violet. He speaks low onto the rim of his glass. It was the only opening in a good firm back then. It was where he was needed. But he wants to get into a different area of practice soon enough, maybe white-collar or real estate, something like that.

She examines the picture. “Where the hell did you get this?”

“An anonymous tip.” He takes the photo from her and examines it. “This is what’s going to win the case. This is what’s going to make me partner at the firm.”

“Paint the victim as a whore . . .” She trails off.

“I know.” Mason takes a deep breath and rubs his brow.

“It’s perfect.” Violet kisses the top of Mason’s head and walks off. “You’re going to be a fucking star.”

He watches her walk out into the hall, enjoying the way the naked skin of her backside rocks before him, something akin to the artwork painted on the inside of a virtuoso’s dream. As she disappears down the staircase, he washes the image down with another sip. His eyes wander back to the photos, the one Violet approved

of: the victim, topless and laughing on his client's lap the night of the rape in question. The Maker's Mark gives him confidence, a little more hope than he might have if he were sober: if he can just win this case, he can move into any area of law he wants and never again have to defend another scumbag criminal.

"Where is your sister?" The question of the redheaded stranger from his dream reverberates between his ears.

"That's a damn good question, lady," he answers to himself as he goes back to the laptop. "Hopefully as far away from Goshen as someone like her can get."

It doesn't sit with him well, Rebekah not contacting him. He knows she's naive, a bit gullible, traits that can be confused for being slow, but can be chalked up to southern hospitality. Mason clicks to her Facebook page. The inactivity is out of character—she usually posts devotional scripture daily. The last post reads: *Galatians 5:19–21*.

After years of having it shoved down his throat, Mason still knows the quote without having to look it up. "*Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.*"

Below the scripture is a photo of Rebekah and their little sister, Magdalene. But Mason never met Magdalene—his mother was just pregnant with her at the time he was shunned from their church, disowned by the family.

Mason created a fake Facebook account, Louisa Horn, to stay in touch with his sister. He wonders if his parents finally worked out that Rebekah was in contact with him behind their backs. From what he understands, Rebekah was able to keep their father's suspicions at bay by telling him that Louisa Horn was merely somebody interested in their church. Mason knew of the church's newly added techniques of preaching in front of department stores and such,

trying to lead the lost into salvation, notches in the Bible belts . . . and the fictional Louisa Horn was just another prospect.

Had Mason known that wanting to become a lawyer, even the mere thought of leaving home, would warrant a sudden severing of contact, he would have been more cautious. But over the years, the wiring in his dad's brain seemed to shift and loosen from that of a normal-enough evangelistic preacher into something else, something more fanatical. None of the rumors credible, Mason could just laugh them off. But with his father's transition only developing when Mason was a teenager, and the four-year age gap between him and Rebekah, the fervent dogmas of his father were mostly in hindsight, changes progressing after Mason left home and his family chose to have nothing to do with him.

Mason sits back, rubs his chin, and squinches his brow. He white-knuckles the neck of Maker's Mark. The red wax coating that covers the glass makes it look like his hands are bleeding. *Stigmata*, he thinks, remembering an elderly lady in the community who went to his father once for guidance, convinced that she bore the wounds of Christ. But that was a long time ago, back in Goshen. Never a shortage of religious zealots there. Mason rereads the Galatians scripture from his laptop once more. He gets a shiver and thinks to himself, *Run, Rebekah, run.*



GIRL

*at*

WAR

*a novel*

*Sara Nović*

# 1

The war in Zagreb began over a pack of cigarettes. There had been tensions beforehand, rumors of disturbances in other towns whispered above my head, but no explosions, nothing outright. Caught between the mountains, Zagreb sweltered in the summer, and most people abandoned the city for the coast during the hottest months. For as long as I could remember my family had vacationed with my godparents in a fishing village down south. But the Serbs had blocked the roads to the sea, at least that's what everyone was saying, so for the first time in my life we spent the summer inland.

Everything in the city was clammy, doorknobs and train handrails slick with other people's sweat, the air heavy with the smell of yesterday's lunch. We took cold showers and

walked around the flat in our underwear. Under the run of cool water I imagined my skin sizzling, steam rising from it. At night we lay atop our sheets, awaiting fitful sleep and fever dreams.

I turned ten in the last week of August, a celebration marked by a soggy cake and eclipsed by heat and disquiet. My parents invited their best friends—my godparents, Petar and Marina—over for dinner that weekend. The house where we usually stayed the summers belonged to Petar’s grandfather. My mother’s break from teaching allowed us three months of vacation—my father taking a train, meeting us later—and the five of us would live there together on the cliffs along the Adriatic. Now that we were landlocked, the weekend dinners had become an anxious charade of normalcy.

Before Petar and Marina arrived I argued with my mother about putting on clothes.

“You’re not an animal, Ana. You’ll wear shorts to dinner or you’ll get nothing.”

“In Tiska I only wear my swimsuit bottoms anyway,” I said, but my mother gave me a look and I got dressed.

That night the adults were engaging in their regular debate about exactly how long they’d known each other. They had been friends since before they were my age, they liked to say, no matter how old I was, and after the better part of an hour and a bottle of FeraVino they’d usually leave it at

that. Petar and Marina had no children for me to play with, so I sat at the table holding my baby sister and listening to them vie for the farthest-reaching memory. Rahela was only eight months old and had never seen the coast, so I talked to her about the sea and our little boat, and she smiled when I made fish faces at her.

After we ate, Petar called me over and handed me a fistful of dinar. "Let's see if you can beat your record," he said. It was a game between us—I would run to the store to buy his cigarettes and he would time me. If I beat my record he'd let me keep a few dinar from the change. I stuffed the money in the pocket of my cutoffs and took off down the nine flights of stairs.

I was sure I was about to set a new record. I'd perfected my route, knew when to hug the curves around buildings and avoid the bumps in the side streets. I passed the house with the big orange BEWARE OF DOG sign (though no dog ever lived there that I could remember), jumped over a set of cement steps, and veered away from the dumpsters. Under a concrete archway that always smelled like piss, I held my breath and sped into the open city. I skirted the biggest pothole in front of the bar frequented by the daytime drinkers, slowing only slightly as I came upon the old man at his folding table hawking stolen chocolates. The newsstand kiosk's red awning shifted in a rare breeze, signaling me like a finish line flag.

I put my elbows on the counter to get the clerk's attention. Mr. Petrović knew me and knew what I wanted, but today his smile looked more like a smirk.

"Do you want Serbian cigarettes or Croatian ones?" The way he stressed the two nationalities sounded unnatural. I had heard people on the news talking about Serbs and Croats this way because of the fighting in the villages, but no one had ever said anything to me directly. And I didn't want to buy the wrong kind of cigarettes.

"Can I have the ones I always get, please?"

"Serbian or Croatian?"

"You know. The gold wrapper?" I tried to see around his bulk, pointing to the shelf behind him. But he just laughed and waved to another customer, who sneered at me.

"Hey!" I tried to get the clerk's attention back. He ignored me and made change for the next man in line. I'd already lost the game, but I ran home as fast as I could anyway.

"Mr. Petrović wanted me to pick Serbian or Croatian cigarettes," I told Petar. "I didn't know the answer and he wouldn't give me any. I'm sorry."

My parents exchanged looks and Petar motioned for me to sit on his lap. He was tall—taller than my father—and flushed from the heat and wine. I climbed up on his wide thigh.

"It's okay," he said, patting his stomach. "I'm too full for cigarettes anyway." I pulled the money from my shorts and relinquished it. He pressed a few dinar coins into my palm.

“But I didn’t win.”

“Yes,” he said. “But today that’s not your fault.”

That night my father came into the living room, where I slept, and sat down on the bench of the old upright piano. We’d inherited the piano from an aunt of Petar’s—he and Marina didn’t have space for it—but we couldn’t afford to have it tuned, and the first octave was so flat all the keys gave out the same tired tone. I heard my father pressing the foot pedals down in rhythm with the habitual nervous jiggle of his leg, but he didn’t touch the keys. After a while he got up and came to sit on the armrest of the couch, where I lay. Soon we were going to buy a mattress.

“Ana? You awake?”

I tried to open my eyes, felt them flitting beneath the lids.

“Awake,” I managed.

“Filter 160s. They’re Croatian. So you know for next time.”

“Filter 160s,” I said, committing it to memory.

My father kissed my forehead and said good night, but I felt him in the doorway moments later, his body blocking out the kitchen lamplight.

“If I’d been there,” he whispered, but I wasn’t sure he was talking to me so I stayed quiet and he didn’t say anything else.

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In the morning Milošević was on TV giving a speech, and when I saw him, I laughed. He had big ears and a fat red face, jowls sagging like a dejected bulldog. His accent was nasal, nothing like the gentle, throaty voice of my father. Looking angry, he hammered his fist in rhythm with his speech. He was saying something about cleansing the land, repeating it over and over. I had no idea what he was talking about, but as he spoke and pounded he got redder and redder. So I laughed, and my mother poked her head around the corner to see what was so funny.

“Turn that off.” I felt my cheeks go hot, thinking she was mad at me for laughing at what must have been an important speech. But her face softened quickly. “Go play,” she said. “Bet Luka’s already beat you to the Trg.”

My best friend, Luka, and I spent the summer biking around the town square and meeting our classmates for pickup football games. We were freckled and tan and perpetually grass-stained, and now that we were down to just a few weeks of freedom before the start of school we met even earlier and stayed out later, determined not to let any vacation go to waste. I found him along our regular bike route. We cycled side by side, Luka occasionally swinging his front tire into mine so that we’d nearly crash. It was a favorite joke of his and he laughed the whole way, but I was still thinking

about Petrović. In school we'd been taught to ignore distinguishing ethnic factors, though it was easy enough to discern someone's ancestry by their last name. Instead we were trained to regurgitate pan-Slavic slogans: "*Bratstvo i Jedinstvo!*" Brotherhood and Unity. But now it seemed the differences between us might be important after all. Luka's family was originally from Bosnia, a mixed state, a confusing third category. Serbs wrote in Cyrillic and Croats in the Latin alphabet, but in Bosnia they used both, the spoken differences even more minute. I wondered if there was a special brand of Bosnian cigarettes, too, and whether Luka's father smoked those.

When we arrived in the Trg it was crowded and I could tell something was wrong. In light of this new Serb-Croat divide, everything—including the statue of Ban Jelačić, sword drawn—now seemed a clue to the tensions I hadn't seen coming. During World War II the ban's sword was aimed toward the Hungarians in a defensive gesture, but afterward the Communists had removed the statue in a neutralization of nationalistic symbols. Luka and I had watched when, after the last elections, men with ropes and heavy machinery returned Jelačić to his post. Now he was facing south, toward Belgrade.

The Trg had always been a popular meeting place, but today people were swarming around the base of the statue looking frantic, milling through a snarl of trucks and trac-

tors parked right in the cobblestoned Trg, where, on normal days, cars weren't even allowed to drive. Baggage, shipping crates, and an assortment of free-floating housewares brimmed over the backs of flatbeds and were splayed across the square.

I thought of the gypsy camp my parents and I once passed while driving to visit my grandparents' graves in Čakovec, caravans of wagons and trailers housing mysterious instruments and stolen children.

"They'll pour acid in your eyes," my mother warned when I wiggled in the pew while my father lit candles and prayed for his parents. "Little blind beggars earn three times as much as ones who can see." I held her hand and was quiet for the rest of the day.

Luka and I dismounted our bikes and moved cautiously toward the mass of people and their belongings. But there were no bonfires or circus sideshows; there was no music—these were not the migrant people I'd seen on the outskirts of the northern villages.

The settlement was made almost entirely out of string. Ropes, twine, shoelaces, and strips of fabric of various thicknesses were strung from cars to tractors to piles of luggage in an elaborate tangle. The strings supported the sheets and blankets and bigger articles of clothing that served as makeshift tents. Luka and I stared alternately at each other and at the strangers, not knowing the words for what we were seeing, but understanding that it wasn't good.

Candles circled the perimeter of the encampment, melting next to boxes on which someone had written “Contributions for the Refugees.” Most people who passed added something to a box, some emptying their pockets.

“Who are they?” I whispered.

“I don’t know,” Luka said. “Should we give them something?”

I took Petar’s dinar from my pocket and gave them to Luka, afraid to get too close myself. Luka had a few coins, too, and I held his bike while he put them in the box. As he leaned in I panicked, worrying that the city of string would swallow him up like the vines that come alive in horror movies. When he turned around I shoved his handlebars at him and he stumbled backward. As we rode away I felt my stomach twist into a knot I would only years later learn to call survivor’s guilt.

My classmates and I often met for football matches on the east side of the park, where the grass had fewer lumps. I was the only girl who played football, but sometimes other girls would come down to the field to jump rope and gossip.

“Why do you dress like a boy?” a pigtailed girl asked me once.

“It’s easier to play football in pants,” I told her. The real reason was that they were my neighbor’s clothes and we couldn’t afford anything else.

We began collecting stories. They started out with strings of complex relationships—my best friend’s second cousin, my uncle’s boss—and whoever kicked the ball between improvised (and ever-negotiable) goal markers got to tell their story first. An unspoken contest of gore developed, honoring whoever could more creatively describe the blown-out brains of their distant acquaintances. Stjepan’s cousins had seen a mine explode a kid’s leg, little bits of skin clinging to grooves in the sidewalk for a week afterward. Tomislav had heard of a boy who was shot in the eye by a sniper in Zagora; his eyeball had turned to liquid like a runny egg right there in front of everyone.

At home my mother paced the kitchen talking on the phone to friends in other towns, then hung out the window, passing the news to the next apartment building over. I stood close while she discussed the mounting tensions on the banks of the Danube with the women on the other side of the clothesline, absorbing as much as I could before running off to find my friends. A citywide spy network, we passed on any information we overheard, relaying stories of victims whose links to us were becoming less and less remote.

On the first day of school, our teacher took attendance and found one of our classmates missing.

“Anyone hear from Zlatko?” she said.

“Maybe he went back to Serbia, where he belongs,” said

Mate, a boy I'd always found obnoxious. A few people snickered and our teacher shushed them. Beside me, Stjepan raised his hand.

"He moved," Stjepan said.

"Moved?" Our teacher flipped through some papers on her clipboard. "Are you sure?"

"He lived in my building. Two nights ago I saw his family carrying big suitcases out to a truck. He said they had to leave before the air raids started. He said to tell everyone goodbye." The class erupted into high-strung chatter at this news:

"What's an air raid?"

"Who will be our goalie now?"

"Good riddance to him!"

"Shut up, Mate," I said.

"Enough!" said our teacher. We quieted.

An air raid, she explained, was when planes flew over cities and tried to knock buildings down with bombs. She drew chalky maps denoting shelters, listed the necessities our families should bring underground with us: AM radio, water jug, flashlight, batteries for the flashlight. I didn't understand whose planes wanted what buildings to explode, or how to tell a regular plane from a bad one, though I was happy for the reprieve from regular lessons. But soon she began to swipe at the board, inciting an angry cloud of eraser dust. She let out a sigh as if she were impatient with air

raids, brushing the settling chalk away from the pleats in her skirt. We moved on to long division, and were not offered a time for asking questions.

It happened when I was running errands for my mother. I was supposed to get milk, which came in slippery plastic bags that wiggled during any attempt at pouring or gripping, and I'd rigged a cardboard box to my bike's handlebars to carry the uncooperative cargo. But all the stores nearest our flat had run out—stores were running out of everything now—and I commissioned Luka to join the quest. Expanding the search, we ventured deeper into the city.

The first plane flew so low Luka and I swore later to anyone who would listen that we'd seen the pilot's face. I ducked, my handlebars twisting beneath me, and fell from my bike. Luka, who'd been looking skyward but had forgotten to stop pedaling, crashed into my wreckage and landed facedown, cutting his chin on the cobblestone.

We scrambled to our feet, adrenaline overriding pain as we tried to right our bikes.

Then the alarm. The grained crackle of shoddy audio equipment. The howl of the siren, like a woman crying out through a megaphone. We ran. Across the street and through the side alleys.

“Which one’s closest?” Luka called over the noise. I visualized the map on the blackboard at school, stars and arrows marking different paths.

“There’s one underneath the kindergarten.” Beneath the slide of our first playground, a set of cement steps led to a steel door, triple-thick, as fat as a dictionary. Two men held the door open and people funneled from all directions down into the shadows. Reluctant to leave our bicycles to fend for themselves in the impending doom, Luka and I dropped them as close to the entrance as possible.

The shelter smelled of mold and unwashed bodies. When my eyes adjusted I surveyed the room. There were bunk beds, a wooden bench near the door, and a generator bicycle in the far corner. My classmates and I would come to fight over the bike in subsequent raids, elbowing one another for a turn converting pedals into the electricity that powered the lights in the shelter. But the first time we barely noticed it. We were occupied with surveying the odd collection of people seized from their daily activities and smashed together in a Cold War lair. I studied the group closest to me: men in business suits, or coveralls and mechanics’ jackets like my father’s, women in pantyhose and pencil skirts. Others in aprons with babies at their hips. I wondered where my mother and Rahela were; there was no public shelter near our building. Then I heard Luka calling for me and realized we’d been separated by an influx of newcomers. I felt my

way in his direction, identifying him by the outline of his unruly hair.

“You’re bleeding,” I said.

Luka wiped his chin with his arm, tried to make out the line of blood on his sleeve.

“I thought it would happen. I heard my dad talking about it last night.” Luka’s father worked for the police academy and was in charge of training new recruits. I was annoyed Luka hadn’t mentioned the possibility of a raid earlier. He looked comfortable there in the dark, his arm draped on the rung of a bunk bed ladder.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t want to scare you.”

“I’m not scared,” I said. I wasn’t. Not yet.

The siren again, signaling an all-clear. The men pressed back the door and we ascended the stairs, unsure of what to expect. Aboveground it was still daylight and the sun obscured my vision as much as darkness had below. I saw spots. When they dissipated, the playground came into focus just as I’d remembered it. Nothing had happened.

At home I barged through the front door, announcing to my mother that there was no milk left in the entire city of Zagreb. She pushed her chair back from the kitchen table, where she’d been grading a pile of student assignments, and shifted Rahela closer up against her chest as she stood. Rahela cried.

“Are you okay?” my mother asked. She gathered me up in a forceful embrace.

“I’m fine. We went to the kindergarten. Where’d you and Rahela go?”

“In the basement. By the *šupe*.”

The basement of our building had only two notable characteristics: filth and *šupe*. Every family had a *šupa*, a padlocked wooden storage unit. I loved to press my face against the gap between the door and the hinges to see inside, a private viewing of a family’s lowliest possessions. We kept potatoes in ours, and they fared well in the darkness. The basement didn’t seem very safe; there wasn’t a big metal door or bunk beds or a generator. But my mother seemed sad when I asked about it later. “It’s just as good a place as any,” she said.

That night my father came home with a shoe box full of brown packing tape he’d pilfered from the tram office, where he worked some days. He pulled big sticky Xs diagonally across the windows and I followed behind him pressing the tape down, smoothing out the air bubbles. We put a double layer on the French doors that led to the little balcony off the living room. The balcony was my favorite part of our flat. If I ever felt a twinge of disappointment after coming home from Luka’s house, where his mother did not have to work and he slept in a real bed, I would step outside and lie on my back, letting my feet swing over the ledge, and reason that

no one who lived in a house could have a high-up balcony like mine.

Now, though, I worried that my father would tape the doors shut. “We’ll still be able to go outside, right?”

“Of course, Ana. We’re just shoring up the glass.” The tape was supposed to hold the windows together if there was an explosion. “And anyway,” my father said, sounding tired, “a little packing tape’s not good for much.”

“Which color are we again?” I stood behind my father, resting my chin on his shoulder as he read the newspaper, and pointed to a map of Croatia splashed with red and blue dots indicating the opposing armies. He’d already told me once but I couldn’t keep it straight.

“Blue,” my father said. “The Croatian National Guard. The police.”

“And the red ones?”

“*Jugoslavenska Narodna Armija*. The JNA.”

I didn’t understand why the Yugoslav National Army would want to attack Croatia, which was full of Yugoslavian people, but when I asked my father he just sighed and closed the paper. In the process I glimpsed the front page, a photo of men waving chain saws and skull-emblazoned flags. They

had felled a tree across a road, blocking passage in both directions; the headline TREE TRUNK REVOLUTION! ran across the bottom of the page in fat black type.

“Who are *they*?” I asked my father. The men were bearded and wearing mismatched uniforms. In all the military parades, I had never seen JNA soldiers carrying pirate flags.

“Četniks,” he said, folding the paper and tucking it on a shelf above the television, out of my reach.

“What are they doing with the trees? And why do they have beards if they’re in the army?”

I knew the beards were important because I’d noticed all the shaving. Across the city, men with more than two days’ stubble were eyed suspiciously by their clean-shaven counterparts. The week before, Luka’s father had shaved off the beard he’d worn since before Luka and I were born. Unable to part with it completely, he’d left his mustache, but the effect was mostly comical; the bushy whiskers atop his upper lip were a specter of the face we’d known, and left him looking perpetually forlorn.

“They’re Orthodox. In their church men grow beards when they’re in mourning.”

“What are they sad about?”

“They’re waiting for the Serb king to be returned to his throne.”

“We don’t even have a king.”

“That’s enough, Ana,” my father said.

I wanted to know more—what a beard had to do with being sad, why the Serbs had both the JNA and the Četniks on their side and we only had the old police force, but my mother set a knife and a bowl of unpeeled potatoes in front of me before I could bring it up.

Amid the disorder, Luka analyzed. It had always been his habit to ask me questions I couldn't answer, hypotheticals that supplied our bike rides with endless conversation. We used to speak mostly of outer space, how it was possible that a star was already dead by the time we saw it shooting, why airplanes and birds stayed up and we stayed down, and whether or not, on the moon, you'd have to drink everything from a straw. But now his investigative attentions had turned exclusively to the war—what did Milošević mean when he said the country needed to be cleansed, and how was a war supposed to help when the explosions were making such a big mess? Why did the water keep running out if the pipes were underground, and if the bombings were breaking the pipes, were we any safer in the shelters than in our houses?

I'd always loved Luka's inquiries, and that he trusted my opinion. With other friends, the boys at school, he usually just kept quiet. And given the grown-ups' penchant for evading my questions, it was a relief to have someone who'd

talk about it all. But the moon was far away, and now that he was dissecting issues so close to home I found my head aching with the idea that all the familiar faces and parts of the city were pieces of a puzzle I couldn't fit together.

"What if we die in an air raid?" he said one afternoon.

"Well they haven't actually blown any buildings up yet," I reasoned.

"But what if they do, and one of us dies?"

Somehow, the prospect of just *him* dying was a scarier place than I'd allowed my imagination to go thus far. I felt sweaty and nervous, unzipped my jacket. I was so rarely angry with him I almost didn't recognize the feeling.

"You're not going to die," I said. "So you can just forget about it." I took a sharp turn and left him there alone in the Trg, where the refugees were untangling their belongings and getting ready to make their next move.

We entered an era of false alarms. Air raid warnings and pre-air raid warnings. Whenever police reconnaissance spotted Serb planes approaching the city, a strip of alert text ribboned its way across the top of the television screen. No siren sounded, no one ran to the shelters, but those who'd seen the warning would poke their heads out into the hallway and begin the Call: "*Zamračenje, zamračenje!*" It drifted down the stairwells, across clotheslines to neighboring

buildings, through the streets, the air humming with the foreboding murmur—"darken it."

We pulled the blinds over our taped-up panes, secured strips of black cloth atop the shades. Sitting on the floor in the dark I wasn't afraid; the feeling was more like expectation during a particularly intense round of hide-and-seek.

"Something's wrong with her," my mother said, one night when we were squatting beneath the windowsill. Rahela cried, was still crying, it seemed, from a spell she'd begun a few days earlier.

"Maybe she's afraid of the dark," I said, though I knew that wasn't it.

"I'm taking her to the doctor."

"She's fine," my father said in a way that ended the discussion.

A Serbian man who lived in our building refused to pull down his shades. He turned on all the lights in his flat and, through the most impressive of boom boxes, blasted cassettes of garish orchestral music that had been popular during the height of communism. At night, families took turns begging him to turn out his lights. They asked him to have a heart and help them protect their children. When that didn't work they appealed to logic, reasoning that if the apartment building was bombed, he would surely die in the explosion as well. He seemed willing to make the sacrifice.

On weekends when he was in the car park working on his broken Jugo, we lurked around the lot and stole his tools when he wasn't looking. Some mornings before school we'd gather in the hallway outside his flat. We'd buzz his doorbell again and again, and run when we heard him pad toward the door.

The refugee kids showed up at school a few weeks after their arrival in the city. With no record of their academic skills, the teachers tried to divide them among the classes as evenly as possible. Our class got two boys who looked close enough to our age to blend in. They were from Vukovar and spoke with funny accents.

Vukovar was a small city a few hours away and had never meant much to me during peacetime, but now it was always in the news. In Vukovar people were disappearing. People were being forced at gunpoint to march east; people were becoming hemic vapor amid the nighttime explosions. The boys had walked all the way to Zagreb and they didn't like to talk about it. Even after they settled in they were always a little dirtier, the circles beneath their eyes a little darker than ours, and we treated them with a distant curiosity.

They were living in a warehouse we'd referred to before as Sahara because of its desertedness; it was where the older kids used to go to talk and smoke and kiss in the dark. Rumors swelled: people were sleeping on the floor and there

was only one bathroom, or maybe not even any bathroom, and definitely no toilet paper. Luka and I tried to sneak in a few times, but a soldier was checking refugees' documents at the door.

Soon they were checking IDs at the front of my apartment building, too. Families in the building alternated sending an adult down in five-hour shifts to guard the door, an attempt to prevent some Četnik from coming in and blowing himself up. One night there was an argument; the men outside were yelling so loudly we could hear it through the window. The guard didn't want to let the Serbian man back in.

"You're an animal! You're trying to get our children killed!" the doorman screamed.

"I'm doing nothing of the sort."

"Then turn your fucking lights out during the blackout!"

"I'll turn your lights out, you filthy Muslim!" said the Serb, followed by more shouting and grunting.

My father opened our window and stuck his head out. "You're both animals!" he said. "We're trying to get some sleep up here!" The noise woke Rahela, who resumed her crying. My mother glared at my father and went into the bedroom to retrieve my sister from her cradle. My father pulled on his work boots and ran downstairs to keep the brawl from getting out of hand. All the policemen were away being soldiers, and there was no one else left to do it.

“Will you have to go to the army someday?” I asked my father.

“I’m not a policeman,” he said.

“Stjepan’s dad isn’t either, and he had to go.”

My father sighed and rubbed his forehead. “Let’s get you back in bed.” He scooped me up with a deft swing of his arm and plopped me on the couch.

“The truth is, I’m embarrassed. But I’m not allowed to be in the army. Because of my eye.”

My father had a crooked eye and couldn’t tell near from far. Even when driving he’d sometimes close the bad eye and squint the other, guessing his distance from cars and hoping for the best. He’d learned to make do this way, and liked to brag that he’d never had an accident. But the police-turned-army were harder to convince that hoping for the best was an effective methodology, particularly when grenades were involved.

“At least for now. Maybe, if forces are down, I could be a radio operator or a mechanic. Not a real soldier, though.”

“That’s not embarrassing,” I said. “You can’t help it.”

“But it’d be better if I could protect the country, no?”

“I’m glad you can’t go.”

My father bent to kiss my forehead. “Well, I would miss you, I *suppose*.” The lights flickered, then went out. “All right, all right, she’s going to bed!” he said to the ceiling, and I giggled. He went into the kitchen and I heard him bumping around in search of matches.

“In the top drawer by the sink,” I called. I switched off the lamp in case the electricity came back in the middle of the night, and willed myself to sleep amid the sudden silence of our flat.

As a side effect of modern warfare, we had the peculiar privilege of watching the destruction of our country on television. There were only two channels, and with tank and trench battles happening across the eastern counties and JNA ground troops within a hundred kilometers of Zagreb, both were devoted to public service announcements, news reports, or political satire, a burgeoning genre now that the secret police were no longer a concern. The anxiety that arose from being away from the television, the radio, our friends’ latest updates, from not knowing, panged our stomachs like a physical hunger. The news became the backdrop to all our meals, so much so that televisions lingered in the kitchens of Croatian households long after the war was over.

My mother taught English at the technical high school, and she and I arrived home from our respective schools around the same time, I dirt-streaked and she fatigued-stricken and carrying Rahela, who spent the school days with the old woman across the hall. We’d turn on the news and my mother would hand Rahela off to me while she wielded her wooden spoon to create another meal from

water and carrots and chunks of chicken carcass. I'd sit at the kitchen table with Rahela on my lap and tell them both what I'd learned that day. My parents were strict about school—my mother because she had been to college and my father because he hadn't—and my mother would interject questions about my times tables or spelling words, little quizzes after which she sometimes rewarded me with a bit of sweet bread she hid in the cabinet under the sink.

One afternoon an extra-large block of special report text caught my attention and I let my account of the day's lessons trail off and turned up the television. The reporter, pressing on her earpiece, announced there was breaking news, uncut footage from the southern front in Šibenik. My mother darted away from the stove and stood behind me to watch:

An unsteady cameraman jumped a ledge to get a better view as a Serbian plane spiraled toward the sea, its engine on fire and blending with the late September sunset. Then to the right, a second plane ignited in midair. The cameraman spun around to reveal a Croatian antiaircraft soldier pointing incredulously at his handiwork saying, "*Oba dva! Oba su pala!*" Both of them! They both fell!

The *oba su pala* footage played on both television channels for the remainder of the day, and continuously throughout the war. "*Oba su pala*" became a rallying cry, and whenever it appeared on TV, or when someone yelled it on the street or through the walls at the Serb upstairs, we were reminded

that we were outnumbered, outweaponed, and we were winning.

That first time we saw it, my mother and I together, she patted my shoulder because these men were protecting Croatia and the fighting didn't look too dangerous. She smiled and the soup steamed, and even Rahela wasn't crying for once, and I allowed myself to slide into the fantasy I recognized as such even while my mind was still spinning it—that there in the flat, with my family, I was safe.

**RE**

**JANE**



A NOVEL

**PATRICIA PARK**

Chapter 1

## Flushing

Home was this northeastern knot of Queens, in the town (if you could call it a town) of Flushing. Northern Boulevard was our main commercial thoroughfare, and two-family attached houses crowded its side streets. They say the neighborhood once contained a hearty swath of the American population, but when I landed here as an infant, Flushing was starting to give way to the Koreans. By the time I graduated from college in 2000, Northern looked like this: Daedong River Fish Market, named after the East River of Pyongyang. Chosun Dynasty Auto Body, run by the father of a girl from my BC calc class. Kungang Mountain Dry Cleaning, owned by my uncle's accountant's cousin on his mother's side. This was my America: all Korean, all the time.

Flushing. The irony was that none of its residents could pronounce the name of their adopted hometown; the Korean language lacked certain English consonants and clusters. The letter *F* was assimilated to an *H* or a *P*. The adults at church would go *Hoo* before they could form the word, as if cooling it off their tongue. My uncle and aunt's rendition: Poo, Rushing. It could've been poetry.

Home was 718 Gates Street, Unit 1. It was my Uncle Sang's house, and I lived there with his family: his wife, Hannah, and my younger cousins, Mary and George. A few blocks away was his store. It was a modest-size grocery carrying a mix of American and Korean products, along with the usual emergency supplies—flashlights and bat-

teries, candles and condoms. From Northern you could spot our green awning, bearing four white letters in all caps: F-O-O-D. Below it were large wooden tables stacked with pyramids of fruit.

One day in late summer, I was crouched in one of the aisles, turning cans of beans face out and flush with the lip of the shelf. I heard someone say, in Korean, "*Jane-ah. I heard about Lowood. What a shame.*"

It was Mrs. Bae, the wife of the pastor of our church. I stood and ducked my head into a bow. At five foot seven, I towered over most of the women of Flushing. Her words were like salt sprinkled on the sting of being the only one in my graduating class still bagging groceries and restocking merchandise. The economy—with the exception of the tech industry—was, for the most part, still booming. I'd had a job with Lowood Capital Partners lined up since my senior year last fall, never anticipating that in the months that followed, here's what would happen: The company would be heavily leveraged in dot-com investments, the CEO would resign after accusations of insider trading, and the interim CEO would issue a hiring freeze. My job offer had been rescinded.

Mrs. Bae went on. About how her daughter Jessica worked such long hours at Bear Stearns yet still she would wash the rice and do the laundry and help her little sister with her homework after she got home. How Mrs. Bae felt undeserving of such a devoted daughter. What Mrs. Bae didn't know was that "Jessica the PK" (Pastor's Kid) had cut class every Thursday our senior year of high school to shoot pool at Amsterdam Billiards in the city.

"*I'll tell our Jessica to help you,*" Mrs. Bae said, staring back with the usual curious expression she seemed to reserve for me. You'd think that after all these years I would've gotten used to it. I didn't. I averted my eyes, focusing on the hairline cracks running through the floor tiles.

"*No, no, that's too much trouble for you.*" That was Sang, approaching us.

They had the usual exchange—"No, no trouble at all, you and Mary's

mother must be so worried.” “Eh, what can you do?”—before my uncle turned his head sharply, shooting me a look. I thanked Mrs. Bae. He shot me another look—that was my cue to go get her some fruit, on the house. And none of the cheap stuff.

That was the power of *nunchi*. There’s no word for it in English; perhaps its closest literal translation is “eye sense.” My friend Eunice Oh sometimes likened *nunchi* to the Eye of Sauron: an all-knowing stink eye that monitored your every social misstep. Other times she said it was like the Force, a way of bending the world to your will. But Eunice had an annoying tendency of bringing everything back to *Star Wars* or *Star Trek*, Tolkien or Philip K. Dick. For me *nunchi* was less about some sci-fi power and more about common sense. It was the ability to read a situation and anticipate how you were expected to behave. It was filling your elder’s water glass first, before reaching for your own. The adults at church always said that good *nunchi* was the result of a good “family education.”

On my way to the fruit stalls, I was intercepted by Mrs. O’Gall, a petite Irish granny who frequented Food every day. Cradling a head of iceberg lettuce, she demanded help with the Hellmann’s mayonnaise: “It’s too damn high.”

The jars on the shelf were at hip level—I handed one to her. Mrs. O’Gall shook her head. “No, gimme the smaller one.” When I told her that eight-ounce jars were the smallest we carried, she said, “Unbelievable. You people.” She told me to put in a special order from our distributor.

“Yes, Mrs. O’Gall. I’m sorry, Mrs. O’Gall.”

She walked away with her iceberg and mayo, leaving a trail of her particular scent in her wake. Mrs. O’Gall had that unwashed smell the elderly sometimes had, one that made you think of brown paper bags left out in the rain and chin whiskers and absentee adult children. It was the smell of abandonment.

I returned to Mrs. Bae with the fruit, but she was gone. I was making my way back to the shelf of beans when another customer stopped me. Then I rushed to man the second cash register—a line of new

customers had formed. The delivery guy from the beverage distributor cut to the front, waving a pink invoice at me. “Who checked your cases?” I demanded. “The little guy,” he said. I knew he was referring to our stock boy, Hwan. I jerked my head, motioning him to the back of the line—we were *his* customers, so he could very well wait—and when I reached him, I paid him with the dirty twenties we kept at the bottom of the cash drawer, the crisper bills reserved for the shoppers.

I was just about to leave the register when Mrs. O’Gall returned; I processed her mayonnaise refund, even though she’d opened the jar and removed one teaspoon. Then it was over to the wooden stalls, to pick out the bruised and dented fruits from their unblemished counterparts.

I was making my way back to the bean cans again when I saw Sang. His was a harried gait, and it always struck me as less a rush *to* his destination than a hasty departure *from*—like he couldn’t get out of a place fast enough.

He frowned when he arrived at where I stood. “You do this?” he said, handing me a pink invoice—the soda delivery I’d just signed off on. My uncle usually spoke to me in English, even though it was his weaker language.

I could hardly expect him to clarify. Sang had a very specific organizational system for running Food; he knew that store and its many intricacies like the back of his chapped hands. The problem was, that knowledge was all in his head and none of us had access to it. And he expected you to read his mind.

Sang had other rules, too, that I’d had to learn over the years:

No chew gum.

No back-talk to customer.

No act like you so special.

No ask stupid question.

“Go to office get last week invoice,” he ordered. I rushed past the aisles of produce and dairy cases to the back corner of the store. This was our “office”—cardboard boxes flattened into walls and duct-taped

to leftover PVC pipes. The desk was a slab of scrap wood suspended by L-brackets drilled into the concrete wall. The chair was an upended milk crate. As I rummaged through the banana box on the floor—our version of an accounts-payable/accounts-receivable department—I thought of my interview at Lowood on the 103rd floor of the World Trade Center. My cubicle would have had walls of sleek frosted glass, overlooking an office that overlooked the river.

I found the soda invoice. In my haste to get back to Sang, I tripped on the cinder block propped against the door of the walk-in refrigerator box. I would have pitched forward if Hwan hadn't dropped his hand truck and rushed to break my fall.

"You okay, Miss Jane?" he said, steadying me to my feet.

"That stupid door," was all I managed, my cheeks flushed with embarrassment. The problem with the walk-in was that unless you knew how to jiggle the handle a certain way, the door failed to latch. The refrigerator kept things cold as it was, but if it was sealed properly, its contents would stay preserved for up to three days, even if the power blew out. The door, as it stood, was a liability. But whenever I brought the subject up to Sang, he'd wave my words away. *If not broke, why you gotta fix?* For Sang the inverse was also true: Everything broken could be jerry-rigged to working order. It was his own special form of madness—he never stopped trying to salvage the unsalvageable.

"Why you take so long?" Sang said when I returned with the invoice. He jabbed a finger at the offending signature. *My signature.* Apparently we were supposed to receive credit for two more soda cases, but the new invoice didn't reflect that credit. I realized, with sinking stupidity, that I should have called for my uncle on the spot, instead of taking the deliveryman's word as a given. Things like this happened every now and again—the delivery guys would do a bait and switch, "pocketing" the extra pallet or two—but the store had been busy. I knew what Sang would have said if I'd paged him over the loudspeaker—*Why you ask stupid question? Where your nunchi?*—as though it were something I'd carelessly misplaced somewhere, like a set of keys or a receipt.

“Why didn’t you just tell me about the credit?” I asked. “Then I would’ve known—”

“Don’t talk back to your uncle,” my aunt interrupted, walking toward us. Then, to her husband, “It’s Mr. Hwang, from Daedong Fish.”

Sang rushed away, and it was just Hannah and me. Her eyes studied mine. “Are you trying to make his high blood pressure go up?” she continued in Korean.

I toed a loose floor tile. Yet one more thing that needed to be fixed. I made a note to grab the contact cement and putty knife in the office.

“Don’t you know how lucky you are?” she said. “You should be grateful.”

Hannah was echoing what everyone in this tangle of Queens thought about my situation. They knew all about my dead mother—I could see it in the way their eyes have fixed on me these past twenty years. Just as I knew who borrowed money from whom to start a business and which of those businesses were flourishing and floundering. I knew their children’s SAT scores, their college acceptances and subsequent job offers, but I also knew who was dating whom, who was cheating on whom, where they went to get drunk or high.

In Flushing your personal business was communal property. Such intimate knowledge was stifling. I tapped a hand to my chest, seeking relief. I felt *tap-tap-hae*—an overwhelming discomfort pressing down on you physically, psychologically. When the walls felt as if they were closing in around you, that was *tap-tap-hae*. When the strap of your bra was fastened too tightly across your chest, that was *tap-tap-hae*. When you were trying to explain to the likes of Hannah how to turn on the computer, let alone how to operate the mouse, that was unbearably, exasperatingly, *tap-tap-hae*.

I must have been frowning because suddenly I felt a harsh rap on my forehead: my aunt had flicked a finger at me. “Stop that,” she snapped. Hannah had a theory that scrunching your face led to early aging. “You of all people need to worry about wrinkles.”

Then don’t touch me, I thought, but if I spoke the words aloud, I’d only set off the cycle anew. *Don’t talk back. You should be grateful.* It

was easier to comply silently. So one by one I loosened the features of my face. I became expressionless, unreadable.

Then Hannah pointed down the aisle to the shelves of beans. “*Why’d you make such a big mess over there? Go finish.*”

As I reshelfed the beans, I thought once more about that job at Lowood. Flushing and Food would have been an indistinguishable speck from the office windows. I’d have had the chance to see how a real business was run. Not Sang and Hannah’s mom-and-pop operation: decidedly rustic, with none of the homespun charm.

I tapped my hand once more to my chest. *Tap-tap-hae*. All I wished was for this feeling to go away.

Chapter 2

## Uncanny Valley

Every Sunday we went to church. On the way you passed the American Roman Catholic church, the Korean Roman Catholic church, the Chinese Buddhist temple, the Pakistani mosque, and an ever-expanding assortment of Korean Presbyterian and Methodist churches. (The Korean Protestants, unlike their Catholic counterparts, seemed to multiply like Jesus's five loaves and two fishes.) Service was held in one half of a two-family house. After Pastor Bae gave the sermon, the mothers prepared *bibimbap* in the kitchen for the entire congregation.

Every Sunday, for as long as I can remember, Eunice Oh and I would find each other after the service. She'd always been the same Coke-bottle-glassed girl since childhood. In truth she and I were bound together less by common interests than by our differences from *them*, the more popular kids in our year: Jessica Bae—Pastor Bae's daughter, who just graduated from Columbia. James Kim, who went to Wharton and was about to start at Lehman—his parents owned a deli downtown. John Hong, who was at Sophie Davis—his father's herbal-medicine practice was down the block from Food. Jenny Lee, who went to Parsons and now did graphic design for *CosmoGirl!* magazine—her mother owned a nail salon on the Upper East Side, but her father graduated from Seoul National and, according to my Aunt Hannah, “was too proud to get a menial job.”

But this was our last Sunday together. Eunice was leaving again, this time for good. First it had been for MIT, where she'd majored in something called "Course VI." Now for San Francisco, where she'd gotten an offer from Google. Eunice had had her pick of offers—including one from Yahoo!—but she went with Google. Why she would take a job with a dot-com immediately after the dot-com crash, no one could understand, but I suspected it had to do with her American boyfriend, a guy called Threepio. He'd also accepted a job in Silicon Valley. They were heading out the next day.

"The job search, how goest?" Eunice asked, pushing up the nose-piece of her thick glasses with a chubby finger.

"It goest—" I started, then stopped. You never knew what you were going to get with Eunice. One day she spoke like an Orc, the next like Shakespeare. Sometimes I found myself imitating her without even realizing I was. "It's going. Actually, it's not. There's nothing on the market."

She waved one hand in the air and rummaged through her bag with the other. The other girls from church carried purses, but Eunice had had the same Manhattan Portage messenger bag since the seventh grade, which I knew was filled with its usual jumble of stubby mass-market paperbacks, a well-thumbed C++ pocket guide with some chipmunk drawing on the cover, magazines ranging from *Scientific American* to the *501st Daily*, assorted highlighters, and German mechanical pencils (.5-mm thickness) and their lead refills. Eunice Oh could not wait for the day when paper went digital.

She pulled out a copy of the *Village Voice*; its circulation in our part of Queens was nonexistent. The page was opened to the classifieds, her finger pointing to one of the listings.

I peered down. An ad for a fertility clinic. "You want me to sell my eggs?"

"No. This one." She jabbed again. And there, wedged between the clinic's posting and one from an escort service offering "discreet and seXXXy services" was the following:

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**BROOKLYN FAMILY DESIRING AU PAIR**

We wish to invite into our family an au pair (i.e., a live-in “baby-sitter,” although n.b., we take issue with such infantilizing labels; seeing as the term has yet to be eradicated from the vernacular, we have opted—albeit reluctantly—to use it in this text for the sole purpose of engaging in the lingua franca) who will foster a nurturing, intellectually stimulating, culturally sensitive, and ultimately “loving” (we will indulge the most essentialist, platonic construct of the term) environment for our bright (one might even say precocious) nine-year-old daughter, adopted from the Liaoning province of China. In these post-modern, postracial times, we desire said au pair to challenge the existing hegemonic . . .

The ad cut out, exceeding its allotted space.

Eunice knew I was supposed to be looking for a job in finance, not a nanny gig. It was insulting that she thought so little of me. I might not have gone to a name-brand college like MIT or Columbia (even though everyone at church thought that Columbia was one of the easiest Ivies to get into), but I’d still gotten an offer from *Lowood*. I wanted out of Flushing, but not so badly that I’d be willing to change diapers or the equivalent in order to do it. I had spent enough of my lifetime watching my cousins Mary and George walk all over me because they knew I had absolutely no power over them. I had a plan. Baby-sitting was not part of that plan.

“Don’t you want to get out?” Eunice asked, looking at me. “A very sheltered existence you lead.”

She was one to talk. “So you’re telling me to go live with a bunch of total strangers. Who can’t even write normal English.”

“What do you expect? They’re probably academics.”

“They live in *Brooklyn*.” The whole point was not to trade one outer borough for the other but to upgrade to *the city*. We had spent countless rides on the 7 train, watching as the Manhattan skyline bloomed into view. As kids we used to imagine living in deluxe condos that overlooked Central Park.

I sighed. “A bunch of places have my résumé on file. If something comes up in the next year—”

“Much can happen in a year,” she interrupted. “Just apply. Worst-

case scenario, you hate them, they hate you, you part ways. But I have a *good* feeling about this. Their daughter's Asian, you're also Asian"—she glanced up at my face, revised—"ish. And you can play up your whole epic sob story: uncle, grocery store, orphan. Everyone loves a good orphan story." (Technically I was only half an orphan.) "Jane. Your ticket out, this could be."

Eunice extended the paper anew. Reluctantly I took it from her.

We made our way to the line for food. Eunice's father was standing in front of us. I bowed; Dr. Oh and I were nearly the same height. "Eunice-ah," he said, after I greeted him. "Make sure you mail letter to Jane after you leave home." Dr. Oh spoke a fluid, gentle English, a far cry from the choppy waters of Sang's speech.

"Abba: letter writing is obsolete."

"Yes, well . . ." He fumbled for words; finding none, he patted a warm hand on his daughter's back. But instead of leaning into her father's embrace, she pointed ahead. "Abba, the line. It's moving." Eunice Oh had no *nunchi* whatsoever.

The mothers heaped rice onto our Styrofoam plates, and we loaded up on bean sprouts with red-pepper flakes, spinach and carrots drizzled in sesame-seed oil, ground beef marinated in a sweet soy sauce, brown squiggles of some *namul* root whose name I didn't know in English, fried eggs with still-runny yolks, shredded red-leaf lettuce, a spoonful of red-pepper paste, and of course squares of cabbage kimchi.

We headed to the kids' table. Jessica Bae dabbed at her mouth with a napkin and said, "So, Eunice, you're, like, leaving us. That's so sad!"

"Yo, Eunice, isn't that, like, mad stupid? Working for a dot-com right now?" James Kim said.

"A good company it is. A greater company it will be." When she spoke, she looked at no one in particular, which gave the impression that she was talking to herself. Sometimes I wondered how Eunice Oh had ever managed to get a boyfriend.

Jenny Lee tittered into her napkin. Jessica Bae turned to me. "So . . . Jane!" she said brightly. "That, like, totally sucks about Lowood. How's the job hunt going?"

I hated when it was my turn.

“My mom said she saw you at your uncle’s store yesterday.” Jessica paused. “It must be really tough to get a job when, like, you know . . .”

“You know” meant “*You only graduated from CUNY Baruch.*”

I could feel Eunice studying my face. “Jane *has* a job she’s considering. An *au pair* job.”

I shot her a look of *nunchi*, but Eunice pretended not to see me.

“A *what* pair?” said John Hong.

“Isn’t that, like, a housemaid?” said Jenny Lee.

“That doesn’t look good *at all*,” Jessica Bae continued. “Do you know about our rotational internship? At Bear Stearns?” She repeated the name of her firm, as if I could forget. “You should apply? It’s, like, for college seniors, but I can *totally* put in a good word for you?”

Did I mention Jessica Bae only got into Columbia off the wait list?

Then my cousin Mary came to our table with a plate full of just vegetables (in public she was perpetually on a diet) and took the seat next to John Hong. She smiled brightly at him. She smiled brightly at everyone, except Eunice, at whom she curled her lip and said, “*Eunice.*” When her eyes fell on me, they grew round. “*Omigod, Jane,*” she said, pointing at my face.

Everyone’s eyes followed the direction of her pointing.

“You’ve got . . . on your forehead . . .”

I swiped at my face, thinking red-pepper paste had splashed me. My fingers fell on a tiny bump. I saw James Kim feeling his own face for pimples. He’d had horrible acne since the eighth grade. When I looked at Eunice for confirmation, she just shrugged. “*Darker matters have come to pass,*” she said.

Jessica Bae began rooting through her tiny purse. She pushed a travel-size bottle of astringent and a Baggie of cotton pads into my hand. “*Here. Go to the bathroom.*”

Since everyone expected me to drown my pimple in purple-tinted salicylic acid, I got up, dreading how their eyes would once again latch

onto my face when I returned. On the short walk to the bathroom, I ran into Pastor Bae and his wife, Jenny Lee's parents, James Kim's, John Hong's, Eunice's, and of course Sang and Hannah. I forced myself to go bow, bow, bow to each and every adult I met.

I finally reached the bathroom, and leaned all my weight against the locked door. My neck was sore from the rapid succession of bowing. My cheeks hurt from all the strained smiling. I lifted my eyes to the mirror. What I saw was limp black hair. Baggy brown eyes. Sharp and angry cheekbones, pasty skin, pointy chin, and—like a maraschino cherry on top of the whole mess—a furious red pimple smack-dab at the center of my forehead, the same spot where Hannah's finger had jabbed me the day before. At first glance I looked Korean enough, but after a more probing exploration across my facial terrain, a dip down into the craters under my eyebrows, or up and over the hint of my nose bridge, you sensed that something was a little off. You realized that the face you were staring into was not Korean at all but Korean-*ish*. A face different from every single other face in that church basement.

\* \* \*

After lunch Eunice offered to give me a ride home. Staring down the expanse of Northern Boulevard through the windshield, she let out a long, low sigh. But soon she would leave Flushing and slip back into her world, the one where each *ping* she volleyed forth would be met with its appropriate *pong*. I was glad for her. Sad for me, but glad for her.

She gripped the steering wheel and drove off.

When we pulled up to 718 Gates, I said, "I guess this is it."

Eunice's eyes were still fixed on the road ahead. "That's right."

I reached for the door handle, paused, and blurted, "I'll miss you."

"I know." Her words sounded canned.

I jerked open the handle. "Well, don't get all mushy on me." One foot was already out the door. "See you, Eunice."

"It's 'So long, Princess . . .'" Eunice's tone changed to the one she used when enlightening the unenlightened, but there was a hitch in

her throat. She stopped, started again. "Good-bye, Jane Re. I wish you well. May the Force be with you."

"And also with you," I found myself saying.

We shook hands.

"Lose the *nunchi*, Jane," Eunice said. With these words she drove off and we each went our separate way.

The background of the cover is a textured, halftone-style illustration. It depicts a soldier in silhouette, wearing a helmet and carrying a child on his back. The soldier is walking across a desert landscape with sparse, dry vegetation. A large, bright yellow sun or moon is positioned behind the soldier, creating a strong backlighting effect. The overall color palette is dominated by dark browns, blacks, and the bright yellow of the sun.

# THE VALLEY

A NOVEL

JOHN RENEHAN

THE  
VALLEY



JOHN RENEHAN

DUTTON  
— est. 1852 —

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

For Susan, with all the rest of it

## GHOSTS

In the dream he climbed a narrow foot-trail alone in the sun, on a bare mountainside littered with metal corpses.

At the summit above him the stone building sat framed in light. She stood shadowed in the window, as she always did. He saw no face.

The path ran straight to the door. He pressed higher, pebbles and gravel skittering away beneath his bare feet.

He passed one hulk. The twisted remains of a car. Another was unrecognizable. Strips and shards of metal lay strewn across the trail. He felt one enter the underside of his foot.

A concrete bunker built into the hillside was full of soldiers. They reached their arms through the opening and called wordlessly to him as he pushed on higher.

The path grew steep, his feet slipping with every step now. The shards went into his soles, straight through to the bone, and opened the soft flesh between his toes.

He leaned forward and scabbled at the ground with his fingers, trying to pull himself higher. He saw metal come through the back of one hand and cleave the fingers of another.

The mountain heaved beneath him. The figure in the window turned away and receded into the little building as one of its walls slid away in a cascade of stone blocks. A voice from below called without words for him to come back down.

His footing gave way as the mountain buckled. He fell forward and met the trail with his face. A shard went through his cheek and into his tongue. The bombs fell in earnest, all around him. He clawed the

ground but it disintegrated beneath him as he slid backward into the crater—

He jolted awake, honking the horn with the palms of both hands. The meager little toot cried *4-cylinder economy rental*, but to him it was deafening in the dark and quiet of the sleeping neighborhood.

The center console of the car had some napkins wadded into it, which he pulled out and used to dry his face. He sat with his hands on his legs, eyeing the little house and waiting for his breathing to return to normal.

The second-story windows remained dark. He sat back against the seat and stole a look in the vehicle's mirror. The eyes that met his in the silvered rectangle looked coal-dark and hard, the gray half-circles smudged beneath them hollow and soft. He sighed.

A backpack sat on the passenger seat. From its overstuffed depths he produced a miniature leatherbound book, small enough to fit in the palm of his hand. A taut leather band inside it held a tiny pen.

He drew this out as he flipped through to the inside of the back cover. On the last page of the book he scratched a little hash mark, next to a collection of other hash marks.

Stuffing the book away he reached for the ignition, where the key sat in the OFF position. He turned it to ON and threw an arm over the passenger seat.

Casting a final glance at the house, he craned over his shoulder and rolled the car in neutral down a gravel drive. He waited until it was on the street and pointed downhill before starting the engine and putting it in gear.

Bungalow homes slept on either side. At the end of the block, pulling the wheel to the right, he switched on the lights.

The dim road cut across the broad foothills of a low coastal mountain range. Above and to his right, the forested ridges. Below and to his left, moonlit rooftops spilled down four miles to a black bay spanned by great bridges.

Receding behind him, beyond the houses and above the trees, a soaring gothic building rose like a cathedral against the night. In its

shadowed buttresses the hosts and legions, gargoyles and cherubim, crouched and dancing, wept and stood watch. He turned onto the main descending road and made his way down to the edge of the water.

Out over the bridges, across the glassine bay and into the hills. Another hour south to where the highway met the ocean. Then the long moonlit ride along the mountainous California coast.

There were more direct routes to Los Angeles. He took the long way, winding beneath the crags with the waves crashing far below. He rolled the windows down and played no music. The hours turned small.

South of Big Sur he passed beneath a castle built on a mountaintop by a long-dead man who'd made his fortune in newspapers. When the highway turned in from the coast he stopped in a one-street tourist village hidden in a tiny valley.

He remembered its late-night liquor store. Squinting under banks of fluorescents, he purchased a tall can of "energy drink," which tasted like bubble gum dissolved in cleaning fluid.

The road from there skirted the ocean again, past a great rock that loomed invisibly from the dark sea, then continued inland and began to hint at civilization. He rolled up the windows and put on the radio, wincing as he slurped at the can.

The sun was rising when he arrived at Los Angeles International Airport. He dropped his car at a frenzied off-site rental facility crowded with exhausted vacationers, slung his backpack over his shoulder, and went through the motions at the security checkpoint with as little human interaction as he could manage. On the airplane he turned down the flight attendant's offer of a free drink and promptly passed out.

The plane flew east, through the day and the night and into the next day. He woke after a couple of hours and couldn't sleep any longer. They made many stops.

In Ireland, he bought a pint in an airport pub that was inexplicably open in the middle of the night. In the Netherlands he changed his undershirt and socks in the bathroom, pulling fresh ones from his straining pack and tossing the old into a garbage can.

He switched to a private charter and flew on. In Kuwait City he and

his fellow passengers milled in a private terminal for an hour or so before climbing back on board and heading east again. He thought: *Wouldn't it have been faster going the other way?*

At its final destination, in the hollow of the night, the plane disgorged its passengers into quietly orchestrated chaos.

A cavernous “terminal” of wood and canvas hummed with the sounds of transit—parties seeking other parties, terse announcements issued on lo-fi speaker boxes, the zip of tightening backpack straps, and the soft thump of duffels released to the floor. There were civilians—reporters, private contractors, people whose occupations he could not identify—and many military.

He followed a group of these outside into the dark. They trudged over gravel paths between tents and temporary buildings, to a large and well-lit shack at the edge of a black airfield. There they checked a dry-erase board that passed for a departures list, and sat down to wait. He watched a slightly built young journalist with quiffed hair and rectangular glasses fiddle with his backpack and press badge.

Throughout the night, in twos and threes, they disappeared. The airfield serviced a steady stream of helicopters and cargo planes, coming and going in the dark. One would arrive, barely audible as it crested the hills, its sound building until the whole shack vibrated.

People would file out into the dark and rush of noise, the plywood door snapping shut behind them. Off they would go to their destinations. Then silence, until the next.

It was a small crew that was scheduled to ride on his flight. Him plus two reporters and ten military. He had some time. He stood outside the shack for a while, watching the flights come and go.

He enjoyed hearing the first comforting sounds of the helicopters beyond the hills, trying to spot them as they approached. With all their lights turned out this was a trick. They could be right above you, deafening pale ghosts in the night, before you spotted them.

And he enjoyed standing in the silence after they left. Watching the blue tarmac lights wink at the empty sky.

Deep in the night his turn grew close. A great cargo plane was to come

and take him and a few others to their final stop. A helicopter wouldn't cut it. Their destination was too distant—one of the farthest locales serviced by this particular airfield, and one of the least desired.

*Tore up*, the young soldier was thinking, *from the floor up*.

He was used to seeing disorganized civilians, sloppy contractors, even people who were in the Air Force. You got 'em all when you came to this place.

*Not everybody can be as squared away as us*, his sergeant would say if he were there. *It's a grab bag in this place*.

He understood. Still, the kid sort of felt obligated. How old was this guy? Twenty-five? Older? Old enough to know. Besides, he really wanted to wash his hands and get moving before he got yelled at.

He approached and reached out to tap the guy's shoulder.

"Excuse me, sir."

He turned, startled. A soldier, nineteen years old, tops. Standing there waiting for who knows how long.

He came back to himself, noticing for the first time the sound of a large propeller-driven airplane taxiing outside. His flight was here. The soldier was probably desperate to wash his hands and get his bag and get outside before he got chewed out for cutting things close with the plane.

When the time had neared, he'd gone to the modest restroom to wash his face. He'd lingered over the only sink staring into the only mirror, surveying the damage of the last thirty-six hours of travel.

He figured he had slept for about four of those hours. His dark eyes still bore their dark circles, which he'd been pondering when the soldier startled him.

"Sorry," he said.

He stepped aside and turned to go as the soldier started washing.

"No problem, sir."

The kid was clean-scrubbed, eager.

"Um, excuse me—sir?"

He turned back.

"I'm sorry, sir, but your . . ."

By way of explanation the soldier reached up to his right shoulder, pinched his fingers together, and tugged. He came away with a long, green clump of tangled thread, which he held up for inspection.

"I figured you hadn't seen it there, sir," the kid said, suddenly flustered.

He reddened and thanked the young soldier, who gave an embarrassed "No problem, sir," and disappeared.

He turned back to the mirror, regarding himself. A young man eyed him back warily from beneath a dark brow that angled toward a scowl, as though he were always squinting just a bit against a strong light. His hair, the color of deep forest soil, was cropped to an inch or less all round. His eyes, though yet unlined, managed at all times to seem burdened, leaving people with the disconcerting impression that they'd met a much older person who'd been manhandled into a much younger body and then left there to just lump it.

Those eyes traveled down his own person.

*C'mon, man.*

The laces of one tan boot loose and dangling. One pant leg partly untucked from the other boot. Coat appallingly rumpled, even for a camouflage coat. Turning to inspect his shoulder, he saw that the thread had been hanging loose from just behind where a Velcro American flag patch sat. The patch was crooked.

Which is to say, he was in the Army. He hated the Army.

He tore off the flag and replaced it, carefully. He bent and fixed his laces and pants, straightening to inspect the rest of him.

In black thread on the center of his chest, on a square of Velcro-backed material, was sewn the vertical bar of a first lieutenant. An officer. A low-ranking one.

To one side of the bar was a Velcro strip that read U.S. ARMY. To the other side was a name tape that read BLACK.

He had a first name, though Lieutenant Black knew to a near certainty that for the next six months not a soul he encountered would use it. Few of those people could really be counted as friends. Few, he was fairly sure, even knew what that name was.

He rooted around and found a pair of nail clippers, using them to snip off several other loose threads. When he was done, he extracted a small razor from his backpack.

He turned on the water in the sink, which ran only cold, and proceeded to scrape the wet razor across his face. When he finished he packed it away and gave a last look at the slightly less haggard young man in the mirror.

He shouldered his pack and left.

At the door of the shack he swiped his ID card through a reader mounted in the door frame, presided over by a sleepy soldier reading a book, and went out onto the windy tarmac with the others. Waited to be given the signal. Trudged up the ramp into the darkened cargo hold. Strapped himself in to a seat made of netting, watched the ramp close, listened to the roar of the engines filling the black compartment. Closed his eyes and slept at last as the aircraft went up into the night, up there with the ghosts.

# PART ONE



Dude, don't do it." Black startled and turned in his chair to see one of his least favorite people in the Army.

Bradley Derr, twenty-four going on college freshman, slouched behind him with his hands in his uniform pockets, lip fat with dip, peering over Black's shoulder at the memo sitting out in the open on his desk.

Black hadn't heard him approach. Hadn't even noticed as Derr placed the plastic soda bottle he used for his dip spit on the desk right next to Black's arm.

He considered the bottle now as its two inches of dark brown fluid content came to rest. He turned slowly back to Derr and regarded him with a look that he thought was full of significance. It bounced right off Derr's sunburned forehead.

"Damn, Black, you lost in space or something?"

He had been. Before Derr appeared he'd been staring for a long time at the same piece of paper that Derr now gestured to with a flip of his chin.

"Dude, I'm telling you. Don't do it."

Derr was a lieutenant. A junior officer like Black. Unlike Black, he did not work behind a desk in the battalion's paperwork office.

Derr spent most of his time outside the dreary midsize base where Black spent all of his time, stomping through the Afghan backhills with his platoon and shooting at people. It was precisely what Derr had imagined he would be doing when he set out to become an Army officer, and the universe had graciously given him no reason to question his assumptions.

Once every couple of weeks he would come back to the base with his guys and spend a day or so crunching around gravel pathways in his sunglasses and eating at the chow hall. When he had paper-type business he needed help with, he made his way back to Black, to be found reliably behind his desk doing precisely the opposite of what *he* had imagined when he became an Army officer.

Which was where Derr stood now, sunglasses inverted on the back of his head, looking down at Black with mild pity from beneath blond gel spikes.

“What do you need, Derr?”

“I need a hard copy of my pay stub so I can show the bitchwife I ain’t holding out on her.”

Derr considered himself a laugh riot, in addition to handsome and suave. Apparently some misguided young lady somewhere back in the United States thought so too. Derr was, inexplicably, married.

“Bitchwife” was only one of the fond names by which Black had come to know Derr’s beloved. She was also, depending on the day, “fuckslut,” “my opinion,” or “the ‘ho,”” along with other names Black cared to forget. It occurred to him that he did not actually know the unfortunate girl’s name.

“Such deep respect,” he said blandly as he turned to his computer.

Derr snorted.

“Pfft! You should hear what she makes me call her in bed.”

He laughed and sent a fresh muddy slug into his dip bottle. He was proud of his ability to spit shining wads of tobacco phlegm cleanly through a two-centimeter Coke bottle opening, straight to the tidy puddle at the bottom, without leaving the brown residue often seen trickling down the insides of such receptacles. Derr considered this, alone among all aspects of the Army’s second-favorite pastime after smoking, to be unsightly.

“You know,” he said, “that’s funny, Black, because ‘Deep Respect’ is actually our name for one of our things she makes me do.”

He adopted an athletic stance and prepared an expressive tableau.

“I sort of get her by the legs right here, and—”

“Why don’t I print your thing.”

Derr shrugged.

“Suit yourself, bud. Deep Respect’s good stuff, though. Works every time.”

Black did not ask and tried not to wonder what “works” meant. He called up Derr’s records and printed off his most recent Leave and Earnings Statement. He observed that, as fellow first lieutenants, he and Derr made precisely the same amount of money.

*Who should be more offended by that?*

“Here’s your L.E.S., man.”

He handed it over.

“Thanks, Black.”

Derr turned to go, then stopped and thumbed at the paper on the desk.

“And I’m telling you, dude. Don’t do it.”

Black sighed. He finally bit.

“Why not, Derr?”

“Because you think you got hosed. You think the Army fucked you over that thing.”

*That thing.*

Black said nothing.

“Okay, so you need to fuck it back,” Derr continued, shrugging as though this were the simplest thing. “Don’t sign that paper, and don’t take it to the commander. Fuck that shit.”

Derr rotated ninety degrees left.

“Am I right, Sergeant Cousins?”

Cousins worked with Black in the “S-1 shop,” which was Army-speak for the battalion’s administrative office, handling personnel business for the unit’s four hundred people and supervising several paperwork soldiers, none of whom were present for some reason. He reclined heavily behind his desk with his feet up and his nose down in a men’s magazine.

“Mmm, you got it, sir.”

He didn’t look up.

Black was searching for something else dry or snide to say to Derr when it occurred to him that, coming from a guy like Derr considered

himself to be, to a guy like he believed Black to be, this was pretty generous and friendly advice.

"Thanks, Derr."

"You got it, bud," Derr said graciously.

He wove his way through desks and makeshift workstations toward the makeshift door.

"Take it easy, Sergeant Cousins. Gotta go fight and stuff."

Cousins turned a page. Derr called over his shoulder.

"Don't take no Deep Respect from the Army, Black."

He chuckled at his own wit and fired another clean shot through his spit bottle opening, which while walking was actually a good trick.

"Nothin' but net," he told himself happily as the plywood door clattered shut behind him.

The office was quiet again. Black resumed staring at the paper on his desk. Cousins tossed his magazine aside and turned a balding head and gentle eyes on Black.

"You know, sir, far be it from me to agree with anything that Lieutenant Derr says, but he's kind of right."

Black just stared at the paper.

"I mean, you got your own opinion of things, so don't let the Army tell you what's what. You tell *them*."

"How does not signing this help me tell the Army?"

"Gotta show up to stand up, L.T."

*L.T.* The Army nickname for lieutenants, the most junior and least experienced of officers.

It came from the way the rank was abbreviated in writing: capital *L*, capital *T*. Some sergeant sometime in prehistory thought it was funny to spell it out loud and address his green platoon leader that way instead of "sir" or "ma'am."

Over the years it evolved. Sometimes it was a term of familiarity or affection, of something approaching respect. Sometimes it was just a way to avoid having to say "sir" to some college kid who had been in the Army for about a fifth of the amount of time you had but was in charge of you because he had been anointed as an officer.

Black was reasonably sure that where Cousins was concerned, it was more or less the former. Cousins considered him a worthy project.

“Thanks, Sergeant Cousins.”

“Got your back, sir. Now come on, let’s get some chow.”

Chow was a frequent topic of conversation in the office. Cousins pushed back and eased himself to his feet.

Black checked his watch and told Cousins he’d meet him there in a minute. Cousins gave a *Suit yourself* shrug and strolled out.

Alone in the office, Black sat with the pen in his hand, hovering over the memo, for a long time before he finally put point to paper and scratched out his name. He put the memo into a manila envelope and sealed it, setting it on the desktop. He looked at it a long moment and left.

Outside, the air was cool. An easy fall breeze cut across the front of the temporary office shack where he and Cousins and the paperwork soldiers spent their days sitting and doing paper and talking about food. He cut left, though he knew Cousins had cut right.

The gravel network weaved its way between shipping containers, little prefab housing units, Porta-Potties, generator trailers, and all the tidy detritus of the American army deployed overseas. Soon he was walking on bare ground, climbing the dirt slope of a man-made hill.

It was probably sixty feet high, standing solitary above the rest of the base. The top had been bulldozered flat and across its surface sprouted a crowded collection of antennas, transmitting dishes, and all manner of electronic communications gear. They called it Radio Hill.

He turned at the top and had a sweeping view of Forward Operating Base Omaha. His “fob.” His home.

It was as dreary and flat, aside from the hill he was standing on, as every large FOB in Afghanistan was dreary and flat. Like most others, it had grown in fits and starts as military needs changed over time. From above, its hodgepodge nature was clear to see, with different “neighborhoods” and working areas identifiable by the different types of temporary buildings and construction materials.

He walked around to the far side of the antenna cluster to see what he’d come to see. Radio Hill was close to the edge of the FOB.

One of Afghanistan's great eastern plains spread before him. Brown grass and scrub rolled gently to the horizon. Beyond that rose the great dark mountain massifs of the Nuristan branch of the Hindu Kush.

Black came to Radio Hill nearly every evening to watch the sun go down behind them, watch the shafts cut across their summits and the valley entrances fill with shadow.

The mountains were where most of the fighting that FOB Omaha supported took place. Oh, there were the usual mortar attacks on the base itself from time to time. But those were bands of jokers, paid small change to lob some shells from a safe distance and keep the Americans on their toes.

The real-deal guys, the guys who fondly remembered the brief heady days when the law of an angry god was the law of the land and who wanted to make it so again, the guys with the forces and planning ability and networks to do it—*those* guys were in the mountains. The hills at the edge of the plain were where people like Derr spent their weeks, trading steel barbs.

Other units went deeper, and the fighting got worse. A smaller number of thrill-seeking Americans more or less lived in those mountains, far up the deadly ridges and valleys in tiny outposts at the limits of Omaha's lifelines.

Those soldiers fought every day. Fought for their lives, for the tiny patches of ground they had staked out. They might spend a year in Afghanistan and only see the FOB once or twice.

That's who the antennas on Radio Hill were for talking to.

Not directly, but through a series of retransmission hubs perched strategically on ridges and peaks like signal fires, bringing the signals over the summits and across the valleys until they found the little huddled enclaves of American life. Black would stand and imagine the invisible network, its tenuous threads running from where he stood, out through the air over the plain and beyond the horizon, and wonder what was happening at those outposts at that moment.

One thing he could tell with certainty from atop Radio Hill was that there would be rain in those uplands tonight. Lots of it. A roiling block of

thunderheads gathered over the peaks across the whole range. Some soldiers would be having some sucky guard shifts in some sucky mountain locales.

The sun had gone down fully. Black headed back down and trudged a half mile to the “dining facility.” The chow hall. He wasn’t hungry but figured he needed to eat.

It was one of the largest and newest buildings on the base. Steel exterior beams and stylish aluminum temp-to-perm exterior walls and adornments. A first-time visitor seeing it from the outside could have been forgiven for mistaking it for a college campus athletics center.

Black marveled every time at the bacchanalian foodstravaganza inside. It was run by a major defense contractor, and it would have made the most well-appointed hospital cafeteria in America blush.

Wings and burgers and steaks. Fries nightly. Entrees upon entrees. Buttered vegetables in steam trays. Grill-to-order station. Banks of refrigerator cases stocked with sodas and sports drinks. Sandwich bar. Salad bar. Pasta bar. Ice cream bar with thirty-two flavors. Soft-serve machine. Cookie piles. Selection of cakes. Four times a day, including Midnight Chow, every day. If you lived on the FOB, as Black did, it was now entirely possible to get fat while deployed to war.

“Hey, shitbag.”

There it was. He’d been moving through the tray line when he heard it. The voice came from the exit line passing by in the opposite direction a few feet away.

He didn’t turn or look up. Didn’t have to. He knew the voice—knew most of the individual voices that periodically harassed him as he went about his business on the FOB. He knew which name he would have seen on the uniform next to the lieutenant’s or captain’s rank had he bothered to look up.

So he didn’t look up, and the owner of the voice didn’t expect him to. It was more of an obligatory ritual by now. He’d grown used to it in the months since he came to Omaha. Almost numb to it, he told himself.

“That’s right, shitbag,” said the voice, from behind him now, receding toward the exit. “See you next time.”

Black got his food and went to a table in one of the big building's distant corners. He didn't find Cousins and didn't try. He knew Cousins didn't really mind anyway. He sat alone and read a mystery novel about a maladjusted Los Angeles detective named after a Renaissance painter who specialized in scenes of earthly sin and eternal damnation.

He peered over the top of it from time to time, watching the spectacle.

Hordes of soldiers lined the cafeteria tables beneath stark fluorescents, scarfing chow. Sports highlight reels traded places with Department of Defense commercials on plasma screens bolted below the rafters. Wall posters spoke of LEADERSHIP and DETERMINATION, accomplished through rock climbing or catamaran driving, or told 1940s-era recruits that Uncle Sam needed them.

Soon, orange and brown vines of crepe paper would encircle the rafters and the walls would fill up with the paper cutouts of turkeys, pilgrims, and cornucopias that he remembered from Thanksgiving time at elementary school. The feast—four feasts, really—on that day would be unbelievable.

“FOBbits” was the Army term for soldiers who spend their whole deployments living on the FOB, working in air-conditioned little office spaces and eating chow and rarely venturing outside the base. It was a term Black had once used himself, before he became one.

It was dark when he emerged into the cooling night. Passing under an aluminum awning he heard another voice calling him. This one he didn't recognize.

“Excuse me there, sir.”

He turned and saw the rank. He stopped, glaring.

Sergeant major is the highest of the enlisted ranks. Sergeants' sergeants, in for life.

A favorite sergeant major project is squaring away young lieutenants, whom they generally view as bumbling embarrassments to the officer corps. Black didn't know this one, but he looked the part. Short, stocky, fiftyish, square chin, mouth a grim line.

“Well, sir, if you don't mind, you're just a little crooked here. . . .”

Black's own hand slapped hard over his own American flag patch at

just the instant he heard the tearing sound of the Velcro coming up. The sergeant major's iron finger and thumb were momentarily caught beneath his palm. The man's eyes went wide.

"I do mind, Sergeant Major."

Black turned and stalked off into the dark, leaving the flabbergasted old soldier with his mouth hanging open.

*That was dumb.*

The guy would find out what unit Black was in. A sergeant major can find out anything. He would tell the story like Black had struck him, which was basically as bad as punching out a general.

"Hey, sir!"

He ignored the voice from behind him. Some other sergeant who saw the thing, no doubt, coming to do a citizen's arrest on a lieutenant who'd violated the cardinal rule of always kissing a sergeant major's ass.

"Hey, sir!"

Heavy hand on his shoulder. He windmilled it off him and spun around in the dark, hands up and ready to shove.

"GET THE FU—"

Cousins. Standing there wide-eyed in the dark, his face confusion.

Black felt himself deflate. He said nothing. Just turned around and walked away.

"Sorry, Sergeant Cousins," he mumbled as he disappeared between a row of generators and shipping containers.

He didn't stop walking until he got back to the S-1 shop, didn't stop to talk to the couple of S-1 soldiers who greeted him along the way—didn't respond to their "evening, L.T." or return their salutes. He didn't stop as he weaved his way through the desks and swept up the manila envelope, already on his way back out the door.

Didn't even stop, really, as he knocked on his commander's door, two temporary buildings over. Didn't wait for the inevitable "Come!" but just strode through as he knocked, envelope clutched in his hand.

Lieutenant Colonel Gayley, the battalion commander, responsible for the lives and welfare of the unit's four hundred soldiers, barely looked up from the papers on his desk. He was busy signing something.

“Oh, Lieutenant Black. Good. Sergeant Cousins found you.”

Black blinked.

“Here, have a seat. I’ve got something for you.”

He gestured offhandedly at one of the two chairs permanently stationed before his desk. Every commander in the Army had two chairs before his desk. He rooted among his stacks.

“Okay, here we go.”

Gayley located a packet of papers, which he began skimming.

“This is the thing.”

“Sir?”

“You’re not going to like it.”



Katja Rudolph

LITTLE BASTARDS  
IN **SPRINGTIME**

A Novel

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# Little Bastards in Springtime

A Novel

KATJA RUDOLPH



Hanover, New Hampshire

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*for Ali Drummond  
nine hundred years and counting*

*When the leaders speak of peace,  
The common folk know  
That war is coming.  
When the leaders curse war  
The mobilization order is already written out.*  
—BERTOLT BRECHT, *War Primer*

*The duty of youth is to challenge corruption.*  
—KURT COBAIN

# Prologue

*Baka told me the story of how she walked up into the mountain forest to join the partisans so many times that I can write it down without hesitation in ten minutes flat. All the words are already there, I don't have to think up a single one. It's a good place to begin. Sava, this is for you.*

## Autumn 1941

THE GIRL SQUATS BY THE ROADSIDE, ARMS resting on knees. She can see far out into the valley, a haze of green and rust punctuated by dabs of oily black smoke. Beyond this rise mountain peaks capped by snow. She has all she needs with her: food for several days, a change of underclothing, a knife she took from the kitchen just before slipping away. Directly below, where the road enters the mountain forest, the Italians are burning her village and along with it, she prays, her father, her uncle, her brothers, and her loathsome husband-to-be.

The girl has been waiting without stirring since morning, savouring the stillness, the solitude, how the sun moves inexorably across the sky. The harsh white of noon is replaced by a golden afternoon, which, following an interval of fading light, blooms into a luminous pink sunset. With dusk, the girl calls her

prayer back from the changeable sky. She no longer wishes for her father and the others to burn to death within earshot of fascist curses. She is satisfied to be up in the mountains away from them. Let them live their lives, let me live mine, she thinks.

As the sun sets she hears footfalls. Indistinct on the loose edge of the road, their soft crunching and sliding might be the sound of an animal burrowing but for their purposeful regularity. The girl listens with anticipation. She was told to expect a man when night fell. She knows what he will say to her once he comes upon her. She knows how she will respond.

The man is at her side. She senses him as much as she can see him. He is a dense breathing presence undulating in the blue and purple night. She can feel warmth radiating from his body, smell his cigarette breath, his sharp salty sweat.

“Do you wish to continue with me?” he asks her.

He speaks in a dialect that the girl has not heard before. She feels a shiver rush from her lower back to the crown of her head and arches her spine with pleasure, knowing the gesture will remain invisible. This is the marriage ceremony I choose, she thinks, this is my special day. Up here, on a moonless night, bathed in forest scents, no witnesses to steal the moment from me. A man from a distant region whom she has yet to lay eyes on asks her a question she can with all her heart say yes to. There is a tremor in her voice when she replies.

“Yes, let us continue together to higher ground.”

The man and the girl walk side by side through the night. They say nothing more. Occasionally, he reaches out and touches her arm; occasionally, she reaches out and touches his. In this way, they stay within three feet of each other as they move quickly into the mountain. After some time, the girl takes notice of her body, the way her muscles propel her forward in a complex sequence

of contraction and relaxation, the way her ligaments secure her joints, the way her arms swing rhythmically at her sides and her breath steadies and deepens despite her exertion. It does all of this of its own accord, the girl notices, leaving her mind free to wander, for the first time in her life, in an immaterial world of its own making. In this state of entrancement, time and place no longer fetter her; she conjures up a hundred diverse futures for herself, none of which include the vile man her father intends her to marry, or the house in the village to which she would be tied for the rest of her life. She would like this night march and its visions of the wide world to go on forever.

Eventually, however, light seeps through branches and morning arrives. The girl looks outward again. She sees a narrow path through pine trees. She sees mountainside thrusting upward beyond the treetops. She sees the man, who is tall and wiry and leans forward to counterbalance the weight of his pack, walking next to her.

“Day is breaking,” he says. “We are almost there.”

“I like walking distances in the dark,” the girl responds. “It’s the first time I’ve done it.”

“Well, that’s good,” replies the man. “There’s going to be a lot of that. We conduct our raids and ambushes like bee stings, quick, sharp, painful, then we melt away into the forests, hills, and sometimes high, high up into the mountains where there is snow and the enemy and all his machinery cannot follow.”

The camp is a peasant farm. There’s a barnyard, several tall hay cones, a stone farmhouse to the left, a wooden barn and several smaller sheds to the right. The girl sees the farmer leaning in the doorway of one of them, his anxious eyes on the road; he could be one of her uncles, one of her neighbours. She knows his wife and children are in there, waiting for their uninvited guests to

leave. The girl and the man follow the sound of raised voices into the farmhouse and to the kitchen. Fifteen soldiers are squeezed tightly into its dim confines—thirteen men, two women, each talking loudly over the others. Their faces are swarthy and slick with an oily sheen, since the kitchen is stuffy and hot, and their hair minus caps is matted and stringy. Propped up next to each is a rifle, different from the guns the girl has seen hunters carrying in the village. All at once all present turn, look at her, raise their mugs, and shout, “Welcome, Partizanka!” Then the girl is jostled to the end of the long table.

“We’ll take you to training camp from here,” the man says. “For now, meet your comrades, eat and drink.”

A mug of tea, a boiled egg, a slice of sausage, a piece of bread are placed in front of her. There is no plate. She takes a sip of tea.

“What’s your name?” asks the partisan next to her. He has a scraggly beard, a cigarette tucked behind each ear, and round spectacles emphasizing soulful brown eyes. He’s wearing a uniform the girl does not recognize.

“I haven’t decided yet,” she says.

“Oh?” His eyebrows rise, his forehead wrinkles.

“I’m going to choose my own name.” The girl says this with a deep feeling of joy.

“Well, Yet-to-Be-Named, you are about to learn everything we know about resisting and terminating the occupation. Harassing the enemy, cutting communications, guerrilla operations like that. And active offensives. I am the political commissar here, by the way.”

He reaches out a hand. The girl shakes it.

“I know why I’m here,” the girl says.

“The occupiers are not our most important enemy,” continues the commissar. “Our most important enemy is all that

stands in the way of a united Yugoslavia and a just and equitable society.”

“Yes, I know,” says the girl.

“The Germans and their Axis are superior in weapons and equipment, but we have—”

“—knowledge of terrain, speed of mobility,” the girl finishes for him.

The commissar squints at her, then smiles. “That’s it,” he says. “You’ve heard our lecture in the village. You children learn fastest.”

“Yes, I did. In the village.”

“The children will all be ruined by war, that’s the truth of it,” the commissar announces, not to her but to the table in general. “Yet some will rise arduously from the ruins to change the world for the better.” No one is listening to him. “And when the next war breaks out, the same will happen,” he continues. “When this cycle has occurred enough times, the ruined children of war will have changed the world sufficiently to eradicate the benefit of war to any man, venture, nation, or empire and there will be no more wars. You see, progress!”

“Maybe it will only take one more generation,” the girl says.

“Maybe. That is our intention,” says the commissar. “Death to fascism, freedom to the people!”

He turns to talk to the man beside him.

The girl chews her bread. She peels her egg. The food is good. After this brief exchange, no one pays attention to her, so she sits and concentrates on tasting and lets the hubbub of voices envelop her. In this way, she finishes eating, then turns her attention to the two partizankas at the other end of the table, strange luminous creatures in the girl’s eyes, wearing men’s uniforms, gesticulating boldly with their hands and jumping out of their seats as

they talk. One of them has cut her hair short, the girl notices. A dark lock has fallen down over her forehead and stays there, stuck down by sweat. The girl is thinking about this, whether she will cut her own hair short, when the room falls abruptly silent. She looks around wide-eyed. For a heartbeat everyone is motionless, heads cocked, listening. And there it is, gunfire at the sentry's post a hundred yards down the road.

The soldier at the head of the table barks, "Go," and "Now," and a cacophony of chairs tipping over and guns being picked up and mugs smashing as they're swept off the table accompanies the scramble for the door. The girl is dragged out of her seat, the kitchen, the farmhouse by the two partisans sitting closest to her, the commissar, and an old-man soldier with a head of grey hair and a gaunt, pitted face. She is aware of a bruising grip on each upper arm, of her head dangling awkwardly on the stem of her neck, of her knees dragging along the floor, then banging on the ridge of each step down to the farmyard. And there she is set on her feet and pushed hard toward the back perimeter of the farm.

"Run," the commissar shouts. "It's a raid. Follow us."

The girl runs, following her comrades out of the farmyard and into a field beyond it. There she observes them fanning out, each one heading to the forest at the edge of the field. Gun- and mortar-fire echo against the mountainside, and raised voices too, the orders of the enemy officers, the pleading of the farmer, the cries of his family, the shrieks of animals. When she reaches the edge of the forest, the girl stops to look back. The farm buildings are on fire, the animals are being slaughtered. She turns, enters the forest, and chases after the officers' whistles. When they are all together, running in single file, the whistles stop and they move silently but for the rasp of their breathing, ever uphill, off the path, ducking between trees, jumping over roots.

# Bennington Girls Are Easy

A Novel



Charlotte Silver

Jobs, even back when Sylvie and Cassandra graduated, were getting hard to come by. But it was not yet impossible to find one, as it would be for the Bennington girls who followed after them in just a couple years' time. Cassandra managed to find employment before Sylvie did, in some vague administrative capacity, untaxing to her fragile mental health, at a cultural nonprofit in Harvard Square: the less said of the specifics of this job, like most jobs, the better. Because most jobs are boring. After graduation, Sylvie also landed back in Cambridge, but only temporarily, she sincerely hoped. Because for as long as she could remember, she had hated the city of Boston. Many years ago now, her grandmother had taken her to the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, long lauded as one of the crown jewels of Boston but, to the discriminating Sylvie, nothing all that special; she sniffed in its grand and gloomy rooms a certain fustiness, a residual, mothy scent, perhaps, of the city's Puritan legacy in spite of the gallant efforts of the more flamboyant Mrs. Gardner herself. "Make a wish," Sylvie's grandmother had commanded, handing her a penny and pointing to the fountain in the middle of the Venetian-style courtyard. Sylvie braced herself and closed her eyes and tossed the penny into the fountain. Then announced:

"I wish I wasn't here."

She was six years old at the time.

Still, sometime over the course of that first summer after college, she announced to Cassandra, "So, I found a job."

There was a note of gloomy caution, nothing resembling elation certainly, in her voice.

“Oh, Sylvie, that’s wonderful!” Cassandra said, refusing to listen to it and trying her best to be encouraging.

“No, it isn’t. It isn’t wonderful *at all*. It’s at Black Currant.”

“Oh.”

And now Cassandra was the one who sounded gloomy.

Black Currant was a bakery in Harvard Square, generally held to be the *crème de la crème* of such establishments among the dreary post-doc and professorial set of which Cambridge society consisted. Cassandra often went there for coffee and the very excellent raisin-pecan rolls they had—not that she would have been caught dead working there. But best to keep that to oneself right now; Sylvie needed her support, obviously. So she tried to change her tone, hoping that it wasn’t too obvious. It was, of course. Sylvie picked up on it immediately and felt faintly condescended to. Sylvie hated feeling condescended to! And she was forced to listen to the inanity of Cassandra prattling on:

“Oh my God! I’m so happy about this. That means that you’ll be working in Harvard Square, too, Sylvie. So we can have lunch, like, every day together!”

But already Sylvie was thinking: Like hell I’m happy about this. I’m getting out of town.

From her very first day on the job at Black Currant, she began to plot her escape. The wheels, the wheels in her head were turning. Which was worse, she wondered, the staff or the customers? The two groups coexisted in a state of low-level hostility in which there was seldom any actual yelling but plenty of complex anger clotting the atmosphere. Maybe the customers resented the staff for the indignity of a place where you had to pay a full seven bucks for a slice of vanilla-bean pound cake. There was no bathroom, and if you asked where the bathroom was, you were sure to get a really dirty look. Maybe the staff, making \$7.50 an hour, resented the customers for spending a full seven bucks for a slice of vanilla bean pound cake. (A whole pound cake cost twenty-three dollars.)

All Sylvie could take away from the situation was: these people are fucking miserable. An ex-convict, having taken a job as the night baker, confessed to Sylvie that being in the clink was nothing compared to the likes of *this*.

But *I* could do this, thought Sylvie. She meant that maybe one day she could run a bakery, though not here in Cambridge—no way. But maybe someday in New York . . . For, of the many things that Sylvie was naturally good at, one of them was being an excellent cook; Cassandra had often marveled at how she could turn something as mundane as a tuna fish sandwich into something absolutely delicious. The girl was born knowing how to dress a salad in the correct amount of French olive oil and how to toss off a perfectly silky chocolate soufflé.

And so, *I* could make these jams, Sylvie was thinking, looking at the stout glass bottles of chunky apricot preserves selling for seventeen dollars a pop. *I* could write out those labels. She imagined her pretty, sloping handwriting; she imagined tying a white grosgrain ribbon around the lid . . .

This place must be making a killing, thought Sylvie, trying to crunch the numbers in her head. She and Cassandra had first become friends back in high school while skipping out on geometry class together. She wasn't good at math, but she was shrewd with numbers on a practical level, and she could grasp how they broke down in a business. This one broke down entirely to the owner's advantage and not to the staff's—why, they didn't even get free coffee!

But in those days, Sylvie was young and idealistic and given to making people feel good; she hadn't yet learned to *want* to take things away from people. But she soon did learn that hospitality in any form was to be distrusted at Black Currant, as when she gave an elderly sculptress an extra scoop of cranberries on top of her eight-dollar oatmeal and afterward was reprimanded by Tish, her manager.

“Sylvie,” said Tish in the weak, trailing voice that never varied, no matter what the emotional pitch of the situation, for perhaps in Tish’s diminished universe there was only one. “Sylvie, we don’t give away freebies here. Of any kind.”

“Oh, I know,” began Sylvie, tossing her shiny black head with its glamorous, Italian pixie cut and figuring that she personally could get away with anything because she was young and because she was beautiful, “but I just thought, it was this nice old lady, and she’s a regular, and it was only a couple of cranberries, so—”

“A cranberry is a cranberry,” said Tish, and from then on this became a phrase of hilarity between Sylvie and Cassandra: *A cranberry is a cranberry*. How appropriate, remarked Cassandra, that Tish should hold dear this most bitter of fruits, for the two of them, with the glittering callousness of twenty-two, thought she was the last word in grimness: something of a withered fruit herself.

“Now most of the time she never smiles,” said Sylvie. “A frown is, like, her default expression. She already has these frown lines and you know what I found out—she’s only twenty-eight! You’d think she was forty-two already.” Sylvie pressed her hand to her own satiny brown cheek and continued, “But what I wanted to say is, when she does smile, and it isn’t often, it’s actually really creepy. It makes you more uncomfortable when she smiles than when she scowls, you know?”

Later on, the girls howled when they discovered a Yelp review in which Tish was described by a disgruntled customer as “the I See Dead People manager.” There really was something rather haunted about her pinched white face and the dusty black pigtails, which by now she was far too old to be wearing.

Before Sylvie met Tish—not to mention all of the regulars at Black Currant—she had always assumed that you grew up and had a sex life. Of course there were unfortunate cases who didn’t, but they were the exceptions. Now, however, it occurred to her that

there might be a whole seedy underclass of people to whom nothing sexual ever happened; life went on without even the possibility of magnetic eye contact or melting touch. She felt, in general, that living in Cambridge past a certain age threatened to enclose her and her still-beautiful flesh in a gray crust of sexlessness. She felt that to stay there too long might prove fatal.

The sad, mauve colored streets of Cambridge were thronged with women who had, to Sylvie's mind, just plain given up. She wanted to go and shake them. She wanted to ask them point blank: What happened to you? Did you wake up one morning and just decide that there was no damn point in pretending anymore?

And then there was her family. That didn't help. All of Sylvie's relatives had been born in and elected to stay in Cambridge for reasons that were to her frankly bewildering. One afternoon that summer, when the girls were taking their lunch breaks, she announced to Cassandra:

"Oh my God. Get *this*. My mother told me last night that Aunt Lydia and Uncle Billy and my grandparents have pooled their money together and bought a plot at Mount Auburn! Turns out they don't come cheap either. Nothing does in this town. That's another strike against it! Cambridge: incredibly boring and incredibly expensive, to boot. But seriously, Cassandra, can you imagine? Aunt Lydia and Uncle Billy and my grandparents laid away in a tomb for all eternity! *A plot in Mount Auburn!* Talk about never getting out of Cambridge! I ask you. Is that all those idiots have to look forward to?"

Cassandra's reaction to this bombshell was not quite as Sylvie had hoped.

"Do we want to get out of Cambridge?" she asked.

"Absolutely," said Sylvie flatly. There could be no question of that.

One weekend, Sylvie got an invitation to go and stay on Martha's Vineyard at the fabulous beachfront property of a Bennington classmate named Vicky Lalage.

Aside from the beachfront property, which had been in her family for generations, Vicky herself was nothing much to write home about, a dim, honey-blond creature with spectacles, the good egg type often found at Bennington sitting under an apple tree with a group of similarly undistinguished girls and a pile of knitting. Nevertheless, Cassandra was jealous not to have been invited to go with, and was most put out to discover that their good friend Gala Gubelman just happened to be on the Vineyard, too.

"She's not staying with Vicky, though," Sylvie reported over the phone once she got there. "She's been dating this anorexic slut from Bryn Mawr and *that's* who she's staying with, not Vicky. Turns out her parents have this big place out in Edgartown."

"Wait, Gala is dating a girl *after* graduation?"

"I know, right? That's what I said! I said: Gala, you are being *ridiculous*."

"What's the girl like?"

"Absolutely impossible—" Sylvie began, before launching into an exquisitely detailed tirade about the finer points of the anorexia from which she was "supposedly" in recovery, and what a drag it was to have to go out to eat with her; the girl's name was Tess Fox.

Exhibitionists all, this quartet of lithe young girls—Sylvie, Vicky, Gala, and Tess—spent the better part of that weekend on the nude beach. On Sunday afternoon, just before she had to go and catch the ferry, Sylvie was lying there and feeling stricken at

the thought of having to go back to Black Currant. It was August by now; September, that month of new beginnings, fresh starts, was coming. Worse, it appeared that almost everybody she knew was going to be in New York City that fall except for her. Tess said that Gala could move into the studio apartment her parents had bought for her in the East Village, no problem, the two of them would be so cozy there; and Vicky revealed that she had just signed the lease on a loft in TriBeCa.

“Wait,” said Sylvie to Vicky, remembering something, “you’re a native New Yorker, aren’t you?”

Vicky nodded.

“You grew up in Greenwich Village, right?”

“Well, when I was born we actually were living upt—”

Sylvie got right to the point.

“Your parents, though. Do your parents still live there? In Greenwich Village?”

“My *mother* does. My *father’s* dead, remember.”

Sylvie was so carried away with her ulterior motives, she didn’t even bother to say *I’m sorry*. Instead, she rolled over on her stomach and sulked. So obviously this meant that nobody would be living in Vicky’s childhood bedroom come September. The thought filled Sylvie with emptiness on this splendid summer’s day. Then—rage! Why should Vicky’s bedroom go unused, in the most fashionable neighborhood in New York City, with so many people desperate for housing? It wasn’t fair!

She sat up straight, looked down at her sleek brown breasts and belly, then scooped up a palmful of sand and let it cascade through her fingertips, enjoying the soft heat of it against her skin. She felt full to bursting with life.

“Oh my God, did you hear the one about Penelope Entenmann?” Gala was now saying.

Penelope Entenmann was the name of the leggy cello student who was famous for letting Professor Sobel nail her in the Secret Garden.

“Oh no, what is it?” Vicky asked, being the good egg type, genuinely concerned.

“*Pregnant.*”

It was presumed to be the professor’s child, and in fact was. Sylvie made a note to tell Cassandra, who had had a crush on him back at Bennington and would surely be interested in the latest about him and Penelope.

“Oh, no! What is she going to do?”

“Keep it,” said Gala authoritatively. “Rumor is she’s going to have it in Hawaii.”

“And what, like, give it up afterward?” Sylvie wanted to know. “Why doesn’t she just have an abortion already?”

“That’s, like, really judgmental of you,” Tess Fox cut in. Over the course of that weekend she and Sylvie had not exactly hit it off, so to speak, and this was too bad, since they were in for a long ferry ride together, during which, as things turned out, they would bicker almost incessantly.

“No, no, she wants to *keep* it, she says. She wants to *raise* it in Hawaii, she says.”

Idiot, thought Sylvie to herself. All of her classmates were idiots. But then she turned to Vicky and in her sweetest, most charismatic tone of voice said: “Hey, that’s so cool about the loft in TriBeCa. I forgot if I mentioned it already, but *I’m* going to New York, too. Any day now.” (*Bullshit!* Gala Gubelman was tempted to hiss, as she narrowed her eyes at Sylvie behind the lenses of her Italian sexpot sunglasses.) “But!” Sylvie carried on in all innocence. “I haven’t figured out where I’m going to be living yet. Do you think there’s any way that maybe I could crash at your mom’s till I found a place?”

Sometimes there can be much wisdom in asking for things directly because so few people do it, and in this case it worked. Vicky was pleasantly surprised by Sylvie’s candor, especially coming from this pretty, upbeat girl who made the most delicious tuna fish sandwiches anybody had ever tasted. Just the kind of girl who

could stay with one's mother, she thought. The room was available, and it would be no trouble at all. Also, she still felt a good deal of guilt over the trust fund left to her by her dead father, an aristocratic French art collector. Letting Sylvie stay in her bedroom at her mother's would ease her conscience about getting the place in TriBeCa.

Sylvie has guts, Cassandra thought to herself on hearing the news that come September she was going to be living rent free in a brownstone in the West Village. I would never have dared ask Vicky that. But she hugged her and said:

“Oh my God! New York! Sylvie, that's so wonderful! And who knows? Maybe I'll move there someday, too. After all—everyone from Bennington's already there anyway.”

Sylvie thought this was just like Cassandra, making someone else's news all about herself; and the thought came to her that maybe she didn't want her best friend ever since high school to come to New York. Maybe she wanted New York City all to herself.

Her first month in New York, Sylvie got a job at Petunia Bakery, in the West Village. Later on, of course, she would feel a mixture of emotions around that first job and what it said about her. On the one hand, she felt that its being a famous bakery—the one responsible for igniting the cupcake craze all over the city—conferred on her a certain cachet. But on the other hand, that was just the problem. Because some people—some of the die-hard New Yorkers whom Sylvie tried to emulate—blamed the cupcake craze, and places like Petunia, for gutting the soul of the city. Years after she had left Petunia, whenever the subject came up, she would always make sure to say that she had worked at the “original” location in the Village, and not one of the ones that sprang up later on in Rockefeller Center or around Columbus Circle.

But in the beginning anyway, Petunia was a confectionary paradise, its red velvet cupcakes and saucy, ruffled vintage aprons the perfect antidote to the Colonial austerity of Black Currant. Also, there were plenty of guys there, and all of them had crushes on the cute new girl, having long since tired of the other ones behind the counter. And Sylvie, herself, hadn’t yet learned to find the kinds of guys who worked at Petunia annoying. By those kinds of guys, she meant adult men who were not ashamed to be caught dead working in the vicinity of cupcakes. But then, let it be said that in their generation, masculinity was not what it once was; just recently Gala Gubelman had had all of her friends in hysterics at an account of a date she had gone on during which the boy had tried to impress her by offering to share his homemade peanut brittle recipe. *Peanut brittle recipe?* the girls had repeated to one another, incredulous.

Sylvie made \$8.25 an hour working at Petunia. But that was okay—everything was okay. Having gotten out from Tish and company alive was enough of a triumph to keep her in an excellent mood for a long time.

And she was living rent-free in a beautiful four-story brown stone in the Village! With a grand piano, and fluffy white couches, and all of the fabulous French paintings Vicky's father had spent a lifetime collecting. The windows of Sylvie's bedroom faced an iconically leafy Greenwich Village street, which was just as it should have been.

When Cassandra came to visit her at that apartment, the two of them passed hours in that bedroom with the view of the nice, leafy street, talking and talking, stopping only to eat the occasional cupcake from Petunia. That was another good thing: unlike Black Currant, Petunia let their employees get away with some freebies. Sylvie brought home boxfuls of cupcakes, and she and Cassandra could be found, toward the end of their evenings together, moaning at the deliciousness of it all and licking fat curlicues of chocolate buttercream frosting from their fingertips.

"Do you think you'll ever move to New York one of these days?" Sylvie asked Cassandra one night, because she wondered how she could bear to go on living in Cambridge.

"Maybe," replied Cassandra, who did sometimes envy Sylvie the comparative coolness of her lifestyle. And yet at the same time, because she was still in her early twenties, she believed that her options as to where she might live or what she might do with her life were limitless. Besides, her life in Boston was nothing if not comfortable, and Cassandra was big on having her creature comforts. She also liked having a steady boyfriend, and Sylvie had reported back to her that in New York these were not quite so easy to find because everybody knew that single women outnumbered the men. Then, too, Sylvie said, so many of the men you met there were short: "Manhattan," she had once fumed to Cassandra over the phone, "is an island of short men!" Cassandra's Harvard boy

friend was very tall and she liked that. It had been a point of pride when he came to visit her at Bennington. He's a big one, Alphonse the security guard had murmured, with evident approval, on checking him in. It had been a long time since Alphonse had seen a male specimen so strapping.

"If you moved here," went on Sylvie, "you'd have so many *connections*. You could get a job *like that*." Doing what, Sylvie didn't know and Cassandra didn't ask: another perk of being twenty-two is that you still believe that things will just work out. For you any way, they'll work out. "Like, for instance. The other night, there I was doing Zumba at Crunch—"

"Doing *what* at *where*?"

"*Zumba*. *Zumba dancing*. At Crunch. Crunch is the gym I go to. Gala and I go to the one on Lafayette," she added, with that peculiar desperation of people who are new to New York to show that they can get street names and addresses right. Cassandra failed to deduce, as quickly as Sylvie would have wanted her to, that Lafayette meant SoHo.

"Oh," Cassandra said, suddenly feeling left out. It wasn't that she wanted to go to the gym. Cassandra didn't exercise, and had avoided gyms ever since the day at Bennington when Pansy Chapin had convinced her to work out with her and she had fallen and bruised her knees when trying to get off the treadmill; Pansy never invited her to go again. No, it was just the thought of Sylvie and Gala going somewhere together without her that rankled.

"Yeah, and guess who I ran into? Gala wasn't there that night, she was off cheating on Tess with some guy."

"Oh, God. Oh, no. Please tell me it wasn't the guy with the peanut brittle recipe."

"No, no, he's ancient history. Peanut Brittle! That's what Gala and I decided to call him: Peanut Brittle. Sometimes when we meet a new guy, we say: He seems kind of Peanut Brittle. Peanut Brittle! It's the new crunchy granola."

"Hmm."

“But what I wanted to tell you is, I ran into Bitsy Citron! At Crunch.”

“Bitsy Citron? What was *she* doing there?”

“Teaching, actually. Apparently she teaches this class called Beach Body.”

“She would,” said Cassandra, thinking of how Bitsy had been known, at Bennington, for her tight muscle tone, sexy hair, and her family’s reportedly owning diamond mines somewhere in South America.

“Anyhow—afterward in the sauna together we started talking and I had forgotten, but! Bitsy’s older brother is this really successful artist named *Ludo* Citron. Like, finance guys are starting to collect his work and he just did this really cool limited edition collaboration with Puma.”

“Is that what being a successful artist means?”

“Hello, it’s the twenty-first century, Cassandra! What the hell else could it mean? Triumph of capitalism and all that.”

My, Sylvie sounds like a real New Yorker already, thought Cassandra, alternately impressed and horrified.

“But the point is, Cassandra, the point is that Bitsy said that maybe I could work for him! Like, maybe I could be an artist’s assistant. Wouldn’t that be cool if I were an artist’s assistant?”

“I guess so.”

Cassandra continued to feel left out. Peanut Brittle, she was thinking to herself. So Gala and Sylvie were making up their own adjectives and catchphrases now! Not so long ago, she and Sylvie had been the ones doing that.

“You guess so! Cassandra, Bitsy said it’s a really great gig if you can get it, like, all his assistants ever do is hang out at his studio on the Bowery and listen to the Rolling Stones and eat roast chicken from FreshDirect.”

“That does sound kind of great actually, Sylvie,” Cassandra admitted, visions of free roast chickens dancing like sugar plums in her head.

“And! If you moved here,” said Sylvie again, bolstered by the prevailing mood of optimism, “we could live together. Maybe.”

Cassandra was touched by this. The thought of living with Sylvie was as sweet to her in that moment as any love nest, and she forgave her for making up catchphrases and doing Zumba with Gala. “But you’re living at Vicky’s,” she said, remembering reality, which, as always, was utterly inconvenient.

Sylvie shrugged and reached for the last of the cupcakes, carefully splitting it in half with Cassandra.

“Yes, but not forever,” she said.

Meanwhile, Vicky’s mother and Sylvie’s landlord, Rosa Lalage, was a former opera singer. She had tawny blond hair and the brittle beauty of a well-manicured woman past a certain age. On several occasions, Sylvie had observed her through the French doors of the living room doing her vocal exercises while wearing nothing but a pink thong. She still had her figure, at least. One of Sylvie’s chores for living in the brownstone rent-free—and there were many of them, she was to discover—was to keep her refrigerator stocked with low-fat Greek yogurts, just about the only food she ever ate. And as the summer wore on, living with Rosa Lalage and her white silky terrier, Fabergé, was her first experience of just how bitter it was to be on the bottom end of the totem pole in New York City—at the receiving end of the whims and patronage of those more fortunate than you.

Death turned out to be the theme—the recurring note—of Sylvie’s first few months in New York. One night, Cassandra got a phone call. It was Sylvie, and she was crying.

“Oh my God. What happened?”

“Fabergé!”

“Fabergé?”

“The dog! Rosa’s dog!”

“Oh, *Fabergé*. The obnoxious little terrier. Right.”

“She’s dead.”

“Dead! Oh my God. What hap—”

“I was supposed to be watching her while Rosa was on the Vine yard, is the thing.”

Then Sylvie sobbed girlishly, beautifully; her sobs formed lovely moaning silver bells. She was twenty-two years old and in New York City and life was an adventure. Even this—especially this—was an adventure! When you got right down to it, what Sylvie and Cassandra had in common above all else was a lust for misfortune, the more ridiculous the better. A favorite phrase of theirs: *This would happen to us!*

“And I *was* watching her. Well, not all the time, but you know—”

Cassandra did know. *She* wouldn’t have left a dog with Sylvie, who was always up to something or other at the last minute.

“Well, what happened?”

“Well, I’d been out a lot, there’s this guy, Jasper, at the bakery, oh my God, well—wait, I’ll tell you about Jasper later. Anyway, I’d been out one night. One. And when I got in this morning, I saw her. *Fabergé*. On the living room floor. I saw her through the French doors.”

Sylvie shuddered, then continued: “Not that I was sorry exactly. I always hated that dog.”

“God, me, too. Rosa just *would* have to have a dog like that.”

The next motif of death happened when Rosa—fresh off the Vineyard and nonplussed that her dog had upped and kicked the bucket under Sylvie’s care—banished her to sleep not in the guest room but in a tiny room on the fourth floor that once upon a time had been Vicky’s nursery. Getting in the bed that first night, Sylvie was puzzled to find something hard underneath the pillow. It turned out to be a small wooden box, wrapped in a French flag. She unwrapped the flag and read the label on the box.

“*Cassandra!*” she screamed into the phone, having picked it up to call her immediately. “Cassandra! You are not going to believe

what I am holding in my hand. What I found, under my goddamn pillow—”

“Your pillow?”

“Yeah, the bitch stood there in her pink thong and waved her golden wand and exiled me to, get this, Vicky’s nursery! I haven’t figured out what the significance of that is, but it’s definitely kind of sick, right? So okay, there’s this, like, lump, not a normal lump, under my pillow. Like, you could hurt your head on it. It turns out it’s a box. A box in a French flag, okay? So I take the flag off and the label on the box says”—Sylvie paused appropriately—“ ‘Contents: Marc Lalage.’ ”

“‘*Contents: Marc Lalage*’! You mean—”

“I mean, this woman made me sleep in a bed with her husband’s ashes! Yes! That’s what I mean. Jesus Christ! I’ve got to get out of this place.”

It was after the episode of “Contents: Marc Lalage” that Sylvie first learned one of the important lessons of life in New York City, or anywhere else as a grownup for that matter: the lesson of hoping not to run into people you have had fallings out with. For years, long, long after leaving there, she dreaded the threat of running into Rosa Lalage and her daughter Vicky, too.

*The*  
*Ambassador's*  
*Wife*

JENNIFER STEIL

*Author of *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky**

## Miranda

An hour after leaving the crenellated towers of the Residence behind, Miranda is in the mountains. It's a 45-minute drive to a village just outside of the city where they turn off the road and rattle over a series of long dirt tracks before leaving their cars in a dusty patch of earth. The others carpoled, but Miranda had to come separately with her driver and guard. There are just three of them today—Dortje, Kaia the Norwegian wife of a French banker, and Miranda. And of course Mukhtar, who is Miranda's guard for the day. None of the other women have guards. Usually it's just the diplomats who have close protection. *Close protection*. She had never heard the phrase before she became an ambassador's wife. It sounded like a euphemism for birth control. No, Finn had joked. More like death control.

Few of the other ambassadors' wives are keen on hiking. The athletic American ambassador's wife had wanted to get to the mountains, but was evacuated after the most recent attack on the embassy. Not that she would have been allowed out anyway. Only the American Embassy has stricter security regulations and more bodyguards than the Brits. The few Americans Miranda meets complain that they hardly ever get to leave the compound. None of them have trekked across the western mountains, swum in the sea off the southern coast, or traveled over the desert heartland to mud-brick cities resembling children's crude sandcastles baked in the sun. Presuming that one becomes a diplomat in order to experience other cultures, this posting must be a disappointment to them.

Other diplomats—the Omanis, Egyptians, Qataris, Turks, and Saudis—have no need for such restrictions, having made fewer enemies in the Arab world. Yet the Arab wives, in Miranda's experience, do not hike. A few times Miranda has convinced Marguerite, the French ambassador's wife, to come along, but none of the others.

Miranda feels self-conscious about Mukhtar, as if his presence suggests her life is somehow more important, more valuable than the others. Still, she has no choice, and the other women know that. She had felt much safer living with VÍcenta in the Old City than she does living with Finn, surrounded by gates, guards, and security procedures. For nearly three years she walked the streets alone every day, shopped the markets, met friends at tea stalls, explored the mountains, and chatted with strangers, unmolested. She and VÍcenta even freely held hands on the street, as it was not uncommon for people of the same sex to do here. Then she fell in love with Finn and the cage descended around her.

The day has grown uncommonly hot, the sun blazing dryly down. Miranda pulls her Mariners baseball cap low on her forehead. As they set off across the parched ground, Mukhtar stays just ahead. Miranda hurries after him, her limbs rejoicing in the freedom. It is wonderful to be outside; the new security restrictions mean that too many days are spent cloistered at home. In the wake of the attack on the US Embassy, a series of attacks on oil companies, and the kidnappings up north, Embassy employees (and their spouses) are banned from anywhere westerners might gather: the souqs, coffee shops, hotels, certain restaurants. The British club, one of the only bars in town, has been closed. And recently even the weekly hiking trips have been canceled. Despite the tragedies, the restrictions feel slightly absurd to Miranda. She has been hiking in this country for three years without incident and no one she has encountered on her journeys has ever been less than hospitable. In fact, she is treated more royally in this country than she has been anywhere else in the world. The kidnappings up north were unusual; they happened in a rebel-controlled area beset by periodic violence and regularly bombed by the government. It was also an area ruled by Sheikh Zajnoon, perhaps the most formidable sheikh in the country. He terrorized his people, confiscated land and money, and claimed it was all in the

interest of the anti-government cause. More than one of his tribesmen has accused him of beatings and sodomy, after having reached the relative safety of the capital. But none of those cases ever came to trial. No prosecutor would dare take the case.

Foreigners rarely ventured into Zajnoon's lands. It would certainly never have occurred to Miranda to go there. She is perfectly happy to hike within recommended areas. These were the arguments she presented to Finn when she asked if she could resume her hikes after Cressie turned one and she could leave her for a bit longer. "If I don't get out of this house and stretch my legs, I'm going to have to be taken out in a straightjacket."

"There are worse places to be kept prisoner," he said wryly.

"I know, I know. But do you honestly, really, truly think I would be in danger?" If he had said yes, she would not have gone. But he did not say yes. Finn didn't seem worried last night, though he never does. Finn is constitutionally calm (a helpful quality in his line of work). "If I thought you were going to be attacked I'd lock you in the safe room and never let you out," he reassured her. Adjoining their bedroom and the bath was a tiny room with double-reinforced doors, a radio, and a week's supply of water. This was where they were to hide if the house came under attack. And this was where, in the tall, locked, mahogany cupboard, the secret paintings lived. Not even Finn had a key.

The women take turns in the lead, chatting with each other in French, their one common language. Kaia, in her sixties, is a strong walker. Her close-cropped hair is still blond and her face bears only faint lines. Her slender form is all the more remarkable given that she has four grown daughters. When she married Stéphane, she didn't speak a word of French, she says. But

when they moved to France just after the birth of her first daughter, a desperate loneliness made her quickly fluent.

“It was Siri who saved me. When she was born she gave me the excuse to talk to people. I needed other mothers. My best friend was a woman I met at my local crèche, and unsurprisingly she didn’t speak any Norwegian. So I learned fast.”

Many of the women Miranda meets have more than three children. She wonders if it’s because their line of work has allowed them to live in places where childcare is cheap. She hadn’t thought she would want more than one child, but she and Finn have already started talking about a second. Watching Cressida evolve has been more thrilling than Miranda had ever imagined. From a purely scientific point of view, observing the process by which Cressie discovered her hands, learned how to clap, and put simple words together was riveting. It was like living with the greatest science experiment ever. However, at 39, she isn’t sure she could get pregnant again. Conceiving Cressie had taken sustained and concentrated effort. Pleasurable effort, it’s true, but effort nonetheless. “Could we adopt a Chinese baby?” she asked Finn once. “A baby girl?” She’d become obsessed with news reports from China about baby girls murdered at birth, dismissed as less than human because of their sex. It made Miranda want to adopt every girl in the entire country. She cannot imagine anything more wonderful than a baby girl.

“No.”

“No?” Miranda was surprised. Finn was the pied piper of the local children. When they had a children’s party around Christmastime, Finn had led every game, tumbling on the ground with the children and swinging them onto his shoulders. If there was ever someone who could love a stranger’s child, it was Finn.

“I just don’t think I would feel the same as I do about a child that is part of me,” he said.

Miranda couldn't get her mind around this. "Seriously?"

"Seriously," he said. "Couldn't we just try again the fun way?"

Under their feet, the ground is dry and cracked, yet large patches of the flat valley are carefully cultivated. Miranda wonders at the source of water until she sees the irrigation pipes emptying into furrowed fields. After an hour or so, they pass a field of tomatoes just coming into ripeness. "Tomatoes are on me!" Dortje declares, waving a 500-dinar note. Two bearded, white-robed farmers lingering by their field happily scamper off between rows to pick them the reddest ones. Crouching beside the irrigation pipe, the women dip the tomatoes in the gush of water and dry them on their trousers before sinking their teeth into the sweet, slightly mealy flesh.

Dortje catches up with Miranda as they finish their last tomatoes, juice running down their forearms and into their shirtsleeves. "I'm thinking of starting a dance class," she says, tipping her blonde head to smile at Miranda (who wonders, not for the first time, if Dortje is flirting with her). She'd been studying salsa and ballroom dancing in Amsterdam before she moved here, she says, and she wants to keep it up. "But we're stuck in this stupid company compound, with a tiny living room."

"What about somewhere near us?" says Miranda. "Everyone has these enormous houses they hardly use. Want me to ask around? I'd offer our living room, but there are kind of constant meetings and lunches and pre-dinner drinks and after-dinner coffees going on there. So it's a bit hard to schedule." *And bug men*, she adds silently to herself. She isn't sure whether to mention the bug men. When she isn't sure whether something is confidential, she stays silent. In fact, since meeting Finn she has probably grown quieter than she has ever been. Her head is so full of things she isn't supposed to know that she constantly fears letting something slip.

It's another hour and a half before they stop for tea and snacks on a rocky outcrop. Miranda's feet ache as she stretches them out in front of her, nibbling at her almonds and raisins. She isn't terribly hungry. Near the top of the hill behind them, where he can maintain a good view of their surroundings, Mukhtar has stopped to eat his lunch. Miranda gazes before her at the sea of gentle hills and cultivated valleys. A cool breeze brushes the sweat from her brow. Kaia unscrews a thermos of espresso and pours tiny cups, passing them around the circle. She can always be counted on for the extravagant gesture—the flask of gin and tonics, the box of Swedish black liquorice, the tiny, handmade chocolate truffles. Dortje passes around a plastic container of pomegranate seeds.

“That's a lot of time in Hades,” Miranda says, watching Dortje pour a few hundred into her hand.

“If they've got good pomegranates there, then I don't mind,” said Dortje, her eyes crinkling with her smile.

As she lifts the second forkful of pomegranate seeds to her lips, Miranda notices the shouting. Part of her mind had registered it moments earlier, but dismissed it as insignificant. Men here were always yelling. They yelled their greetings, they yelled comments on the weather, they yelled in arguments. Miranda sometimes wondered if the entire country was hard of hearing. She had noticed several men approaching Mukhtar, who had wandered up the hill to inspect their surroundings, but again, this was not unusual. Mukhtar and the other guards often befriended the locals wherever they walked, talking and sharing their food.

But suddenly something sounds wrong. They all notice it at once, a sharpness of tone. As they turn their faces toward the top of the hill, Miranda hears another familiar sound: the slide and click of a rifle being cocked. A small, elderly man dressed in the standard white robe and

twisted turban stands training an AK-47 on them. He waves it back and forth, screaming Arabic words that are lost to the wind, and then holds it steady. Behind him, several disciples fan out, raising their own weapons.

Instantaneously they scramble to their feet, stuffing everything haphazardly back into their packs without speaking. They have all made the same assumption; they are trespassing and the man and his posse want them off of his land. Miranda looks up for Mukhtar. He will know what to do. The others are starting off down an incline to the dusty trail, moving as fast as they can. But Mukhtar is frantically waving her back.

“We can’t go,” Miranda calls, interpreting Mukhtar’s gestures. “They want us to go up there.” More men have appeared now, spreading across the ridge.

The other women stare at her, but quickly realize they have no choice. While it is counterintuitive to walk towards a group of men pointing guns to their heads, they cannot outrun bullets. Slowly, her heart shuddering through her ribcage with each beat, Miranda climbs toward the men. Perhaps Mukhtar has sorted something out. Some kind of agreement. They could just apologize and promise never to walk here again.

But when they reach the group of men, it doesn’t look that way. Mukhtar is arguing with the turbaned man, who is the obvious leader of the group, and the others join in, everyone talking at once. The old man has seated himself on a rock, clutching his rifle with two hands like a walking stick. He is small, with a faceful of concentric wrinkles.

“They think you are all spies,” Mukhtar told Miranda. “And that you are here to look for treasure on their land. To look for gold.”

“Gold?” echoes Miranda. “There is gold here?” Surely a country this poor didn’t have secret reserves of gold.

“I told them you were all doctors,” Mukhtar continues. “French doctors. But they want to know why you have a guard. Doctors don’t usually have guards.”

“What did you say?” Mukhtar would not have told them he was a guard. But it was fairly obvious. His fatigues, the heavy pack, the suspicious bulges under his shirt. The fact that he was the only Mazrooqi man with a group of foreign women.

“That your company requires you to have a guard.”

Miranda hardly has time to assess the situation before Mukhtar takes her arm and leads her directly toward the old man on the rock. “Mira, let me introduce you,” he says. Mukhtar is the only one of the guards who calls her Mira, mimicking Finn. He knows she speaks some Arabic. This is his attempt to humanize me, she thinks. She has no time to become nervous.

“*Salaam aleikum*,” she says, looking the old man in the eyes. He won’t look back at her. His greenish eyes are hard and remote, trained on the air above her right shoulder. He does not return her greeting. The silence closes cold fingers around her heart. Never, since she arrived in this country, has anyone ever failed to respond to this greeting with “*aleikum salaam*.” Every Arab knows that a person who refuses to return this greeting intends harm.

“She said ‘*salaam aleikum*’ to you,” Mukhtar prompts the silent old man in Arabic. “Respond to her. Show some respect.”

Avoiding the sheikh’s eyes, Miranda stares at the gold paisleys on his turban. *Paisleys*. Which she associates with hippies, with peace. The old man mumbles something under his breath, clinging tightly to his gun. The countryside around her falls away. The rocky hills, the puffs of dust rising from the trails, the spiky shoots of aloe plants fade from her periphery. There is only this man before her.

“*Kayf halak?*” Miranda continues. *How are you?* No response. *I am a friend*, she tells him in Arabic. *I want no problems.*

“She’s a *woman*,” says Mukhtar, just in case the man has missed this fact. She is, after all, dressed in men’s clothing.

Their entreaties are ignored. When Miranda looks again in the man’s eyes, her fear grows. His eyes absorb nothing; he cannot *see* her. They are the deaf, decided eyes of a lunatic set on an irrevocable path. Miranda is not a woman to him. She is not even human.

The man begins shouting at Mukhtar again, and Miranda cannot understand what he is saying. As Mukhtar murmurs placatingly, she looks around for the other women. They are huddled a bit further down the hill, inching away from the confrontation. A willowy young man, not more than eighteen, stands next to the sheikh, his AK-47 pointed at their heads. Slowly, Miranda steps away from Mukhtar and the men, toward the women.

“We’re all French,” Dortje whispers to her. The two women had tried to pick a benign nationality, a country less hated than America. A language they all spoke.

“That’s what Mukhtar told them,” said Miranda. “Thank god.”

She keeps her eyes on the men and their guns. There are a dozen of them now, all in white thobes, like angels in a school Christmas pageant. Bloodthirsty angels. She counts them again. There is one on the ridge above, one standing protectively at the sheikh’s shoulder, five in a knot at the top of the hill engaged in fierce debate, and five arranged around the periphery like the points of a star.

She cannot make sense of the situation. What do the men want? Surely they don’t want to kill them for trespassing? Do they really think they are spies? Will they search them? And when they find nothing, will they let them go? Or are they among the fanatics who loathe all

westerners and want them dead? Is this what happened to the group kidnapped up north? The whole thing is surreal. Is it possible that all these men want are government concessions of some kind? A few tribesmen sprung from jail? Or are these men – at least their leader – simply crazy? Crazy men with guns. The thought is not comforting.

We still have phones, she realizes. She can call Finn, if they can get a signal out here. She has no idea what he can do to help, but she has to let him know what is happening. She puts her hand into her front pocket, searching for her phone. But it is gone. “My phone,” she says aloud. “My phone is gone.” She must have dropped it near the old man, but she is not eager to return to him to search for it.

She stands there thinking what a ridiculous way this would be to die. To be shot – on purpose or even accidentally, given the very casual way the men were handling their weapons – by crazy men who think they are spies. The thought that her selfish desire for exercise and fresh air could deprive Cressida of a mother and Finn of a wife nauseates her. How could she have been so careless with her life? It was all well and good to be bold and free when she was single, but now there are people who need her, people for whom she is responsible.

These thoughts take less than a millisecond to fly through her mind while she searches all her pockets again for her phone. The other two women stand close, cracking nervous jokes. Neither is panicking, no one is in tears.

Mukhtar is suddenly at her side. “They want you to walk toward that house,” he says, pointing to a stone structure across the valley.

“No,” Miranda says reflexively. “Not into a house.” For some reason she feels that would be the end of them, to enter an enclosed structure. As long as they stay outside, there are escape

routes. Still, inspired by the approach of several rifle barrels, the three women begin to slowly shuffle in the direction indicated.

Miranda's hands continue to fruitlessly search her pockets.

"Here," whispers Dortje. "Use mine." She slips Miranda her phone. Turning away from their captors, Miranda flips it open. Thank god she has memorized Finn's number. With shaking fingers, she dials. Please pick up, she silently pleads. Please pick up. It isn't easy to reach him during the workday. He is often in meetings, and his mobile doesn't work in the Embassy.

But Finn answers immediately. "Sweetheart?" she says, weak with relief. "We're in trouble."

"What's happened?" His voice is steady and alert.

"There are men with guns who have us, they are trying to corral us somewhere—." She struggles to string words together in a way that makes sense.

"Where are you?"

She turns to Kaia. "Do you know where we are?"

Kaia takes the phone and gives Finn directions to the beginning of their hike. But they have been walking into the mountains for more than two hours, and they don't know exactly where they are. Finn asks to speak with Mukhtar. Miranda looks up. Mukhtar is still arguing with the men. She isn't sure she should interrupt. "We'll ring you back," she tells Finn.

"I'm calling the Minister of the Interior," he says. "We'll find you. Tucker knows your route." How could Miranda allow herself to become hysterical when he is so calm? It's as if she has rung to give him the weather report or ask what he would like for dinner. Just hearing his voice steadies her.

The tallest man in white moves slowly down the ridge toward them, never lowering his weapon. Mukhtar leaves the group of men and joins them.

“Do not worry Miranda,” he says cheerfully. “You will be okay. You will be okay even if I have to give my life.”

“Thank you, Mukhtar, but I hope that is not necessary.” Miranda smiles at him. “Would you talk with Finn?” She hits redial and hands him the phone.

A shot suddenly explodes the air by her head. Miranda doesn’t see who fires it or from what direction it came. But she is facing Mukhtar, and she sees the expression of surprise on his face as a red bloom spreads across his cheek. His ear is gone, the phone gone. Slowly, with a helpless look at Miranda, he crumples to the ground. She stares at him in horror.

“*Yalla!*” a man yells at them. The man in white is behind them now, indicating with his rifle the direction they are to walk. “*Yalla, ilal bait,*” he says. Miranda cannot move her legs. Her knees fold beneath her and she reaches for Mukhtar, touching his face. His cheek is damp and warm.

“*Sadeeqee,*” she says. *My friend.*



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