Literary Fiction Sampler

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PERSONS UNKNOWN

A NOVEL

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SUSIE STEINER

RANDOM HOUSE / NEW YORK

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JON-OLIVER

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Down. Dizzy. Pitching left. He is draining away like dirty water, round and round. Stumbling not walking, the ground threatening to come up and meet him. And yet he presses on. Something's not right.

He is swampy, heavy-footed. His shin is throbbing. A scuffle—like being spun in blindman's buff—so quick that when it was over he thought he'd been mugged, but he patted himself down and his wallet and phone were there all right.

His muscles are soupy, unresponsive. His legs wade, the landscape too broad for him to make headway. The air is close like a wet web. He can barely draw breath.

He stumbles to the right, into a muddy wooded area in a direction he hadn't intended to take, and it's as if the ground is reaching for him. Is it quicksand, not mud?

He's really scared now; nervously places a hand to his chest. His shirt is wet through but it's not raining. He looks at his hand. It is

glistening dark; the color unclear because of the dark and the orangy street lighting.

He starts to panic, cannot fill his lungs. What is happening to him?

He falls into the mud, feels some arms take him up and cradle him, looks up to see blond hair. The alien scent of perfume.

Saskia?

"Sass?" he whispers, confused. Is she the cause of this, after all her stupidity? She went too far and he couldn't stop her.

"Sass?"

His sight dims, he is too tired.

The world dips.

MANON

• • •

Crisp in one hand, sandwich in the other; the tickle and press of light internal kneading around her pelvis, like butterflies in a sack. Seems typical that pregnancy has brought zero in the way of nausea but has instead turbocharged Manon's appetite.

She becomes aware of Harriet and Davy talking, urgent and low, on the other side of the open-plan office. Something's up. They're quickening. Manon elongates her neck, craning to hear, but her colleagues are too far away.

As they pass her desk she says, "What's happening?"

"Job's come in," Harriet says, but it's clear she can't be bothered to fill Manon in.

"Ooh, who is it?" Manon says, through a mouth of sandwich.

They ignore her.

She looks at Davy, full of himself these days; Detective Sergeant

Davy Walker, promoted by the Super, Gary Stanton. He might as well call Stanton "Daddy." Well, he's welcome to it. Manon is in hot pursuit of the work-life balance: desk job, regular hours, house full of children. She wants to focus on whether to sign up for an organic veg box or whether this would be taking her personal reinvention too far. You can lead a horse to uncooked beetroot . . .

And yet she is straining out of her seat to overhear the conversation between Harriet and Davy.

Manon butts in, saying, "I could be special adviser at the scene, brackets, teas . . ." Hopeful face.

When she'd first begged Harriet for a job back in the major crime unit, determined to leave behind the misery of the Met (awful boss, crushing workload) and the cost of London living, she said she'd do anything, didn't care how boring. Cold cases.

"You don't want to do cold cases," Harriet said. "There is no greater career cul-de-sac than cold cases."

"I do, seriously. Boring dead-end redundancy's where I'm at."

And cold cases is where she's ended up, while her belly enlarges (now at the five-month mark), spending quite a few of her days following her Sat Nav inexpertly around the Fens—*Turn around where possible*—to interview people who couldn't remember much about last week, never mind a decade ago. Telling herself this is fine. This is what's called Having It All (though most of the time, it feels like having small slivers of the duller bits), home by five, pick up some washing powder. *You have reached your destination on your right*.

Christ, really?

Harriet has marched off in a hurry.

"Davy, oi Davy," Manon whispers loudly as he thumbs his mobile phone and Davy—who used to work for *her,* who used to do *her* bidding while *she* shushed *him*—shushes her with his finger. Now he's the DS running the job while she . . . Well, she is quite tired to be fair.

"Just tell me what's up," she says, when he's off the phone.

"Stabbing, male, in Hinchingbrooke Park."

"Nice of him to kark it so local."

"Actually, he might not even be dead yet," says Davy, eyes darting with all the thoughts he's having, checklist and scene log and SOCO,

no doubt. "Right by the forensics lab as well. We can all walk it from here. Really couldn't be more convenient."

And he is back on his mobile, heading for MCU's double doors.

Her nineties house, squat in its tray of mown turf, the very image of a child's drawing complete with pitched roof and windows like eyes. Not too bright: a stoic face, happy with its lot. Around the lawn is a frill of box hedging—so low you could step over it, and what's the point in that, she wonders, remembering the burglary prevention advice she used to dole out when she was in uniform. Plant prickly bushes under windows. *Halt! This is a shrubbery!*

Her key in the plastic door with its fake leaded lights, letting herself in and noticing that the reality is a step removed from what she'd hoped for, moving back to Huntingdon. She thought it would be all spacious living and glorious rural(ish) childhoods for Fly and Solly.

"I don't want to bring up a black boy in London," she said to her sister Ellie at the start of her campaign for them to move back to Cambridgeshire. This had followed Manon being summoned to the headmaster's office at Fly's vast, terrifying comprehensive school and an encroaching fear that he was getting in with the wrong crowd, or possibly that he *was* the wrong crowd.

"That's exactly where you should bring up a black boy," Ellie said.

"And watch him get stopped and searched every five minutes of his life? Arrested for stuff he didn't do? Looked at by old ladies who think he's going to mug them? I watch them, you know, giving him a double take, and it breaks my fucking heart."

"So what, you'd rather take him out to the bigotry heartlands, would you, where he'll be the only black boy for miles around?" Ellie said. "You should see the old ladies out there."

"We can't afford to stay here. The rent's crippling me. It's crippling you as well. Come on, we could get a big house, the four of us. Fly would never agree to leave Sol, you know that."

Ellie looked uncertain. "It *is* astronomical," she admitted. "But God, I hate being uprooted. Having to start again somewhere new, making new friends. Makes me feel exhausted just thinking about it. I've got a group of mums I feel comfortably ambivalent about, right here."

"We could get a mansion in Huntingdon or Ely or Peterborough," Manon pleaded. "You could—"

"Start a course of antidepressants?"

"Go back to work."

Their charmless four-bedroom house opposite police HQ in Hinchingbrooke is costing a fraction of what they were spending on two flats in the capital, and is more than double the size. They each—Manon, Ellie, twelve-year-old Fly (whose trainers alone, like cruise ships adrift, have their own housing needs), and Ellie's nearly-three-year-old Solomon—have a capacious bedroom, hers and Ellie's both with en suites. The house has one of those tacked-on hexagonal conservatories made from uPVC and, beyond, a 150-foot lawn dotted with menacing conifers. The Bradshaws can even boast a utility room (and what says you have arrived more than a utility room?) with gray marble-effect laminate worktops.

Manon calls "Hello?" into the volume of the house, clattering her keys onto a glass-topped console in the hallway (an irritant none of them could be bothered to remove—whatever domestic improvements are hatched in the utopias of the night are laid waste in the harum-scarum day). She smells cooking—whatever Solly has just had for tea.

She stands in the doorway to the lounge, already disappointed by the scene in front of her: an oatmeal vista, its candelabra lights descending stiffly from the low ceiling (a persecution of a ceiling—she feels at times as if it is lowering in real time and will one day crush her). The three-piece suite, extra wide and squat, is the most engulfing Manon has ever sat in, so much so that she often feels she is being consumed by it. Everything beige, so that the whole atmosphere is one of porridgy comfort. They've lived here for five minutes, and she's already nostalgic for the high ceilings of Victorian London.

"Oh Fly, don't play Temple Run with him," she says, removing her coat. "His brain's not even formed yet."

"He loves it," Fly answers without looking up from the iPad he is hunched over, Solly nestled in his lap. Manon walks back out to hang her coat on the banister and to drop her bag at the foot of the stairs. *Where is Ellie?* At work? Her shifts run from 7:30 A.M. to 3:30 P.M. or 1:30 P.M. to 8:30 P.M., and this is considered part-time. The entire shift usually on her feet, sometimes with no chance for a break. When she's

on nights, she'll often have Solly all day the next day because she's trying to save money on the childminder (Ellie's sense of impoverishment is their microclimate). She'll doze on the sofa while he plays in front of rolling episodes of *Peppa Pig*. There has never been a worse time to work for the NHS, Ellie says. The management obsessed with targets and budgets, every shift short-staffed. No love, only constraint and a communal sense of harassment. Yet her sister has also been a master of evasion lately, time thick yet hollow. The stresses and strains mingled with absences unexplained. "Shift ran over, sorry." Or, "Training. Kept me late."

Manon frowns at the children. "He'd also love to bury his face in Haribo, doesn't mean he can, does it?" She strides over and lifts the iPad out of Fly's hands and Solly—predictably—howls, launching himself, starfish-shaped, to the floor. The passion erupting from him, their three-foot Vesuvius. Solomon Bradshaw is either happy or angry. There appears to be nothing in between.

"See what you did?" says Fly.

Home three seconds, and already she's the object of hatred.

"Where's Ellie?" Manon asks, keeping hold of the iPad and wondering where she can hide it this time. Out in the shed? In the freezer? This is the wonder of parenting: behind every new low is a lower low, to which you thought you'd never stoop.

"Gone out."

"Out? Where? Working?"

"Dunno."

"Well, how long did she leave you alone with Solly?"

If Ellie's on a shift, she should have cleared it, made sure Manon could cover her. Or is she having some fun, *Heaven forfend!* leaving Manon sore, biceps straining as she holds aloft her measuring jug of what is owed and what's been taken. A life with children has brought out in Manon her meanest spirit—never a moment when she isn't keeping a tally.

Fly has got up, lifting Solly's stiff body off the floor. "Not long," he says. "Anyway, I don't mind. Come on dude, time for the bath."

Manon watches them walk out toward the stairs, Solly's puce face, his breathing juddering with outrage, his little splayed fat hands on Fly's close-cut hair.

Flumping into an armchair, Manon feels her tiredness mingle with

affection for her adopted son; so much older than his years. She's often washed over with it—pride in his reading, in his gentleness, his soft manners, his decency, his care of Solly.

Solly's mission statement, bellowed while trying to climb the cupboard shelves toward the biscuit tin, is "MY DO DAT!" He can turn purple at the prospect of being denied complete autonomy—for example, not being allowed to start the car or push his buggy blindly into oncoming traffic; eat a snail or run off with the back-door key. Hot cheeks, angry square face torn up with his despair; trousers descending below the nappy-line, impossibly short legs. His unreasonableness smiled at (most of the time), especially when, tears spurting, he rubs furiously at his eyes and shouts "MY NOT TIRED" as if the mere suggestion was a gross slur on his toddler honor.

She could sleep right now.

She could sleep walking up the stairs.

She could sleep stirring a pan at the stove.

The baby squirms, bag of eels.

Yes, it's laughable that she should consider herself the author of Fly's best qualities. She's been his mother for such a short time she can no more claim credit for his good qualities than his bad. His goodness is courtesy of his alcoholic mother, Maureen Dent, slumped with her bottle of cheap cider in front of *Cash in the Attic* (no cash in their attic, in fact no attic), and of his brother Taylor, who loved him, who took care of him, probably in much the same way Fly cares for Solly, now she thinks about it—you love in the way you have been loved, after all. Taylor turned tricks on Hampstead Heath and was murdered because of it—the homicide that brought Manon and Fly together. Perhaps his goodness is down to the genes of a Nigerian father Fly has never met. The more Manon lives with children, the more she believes in the determination of genes.

Neither a child nor a teenager, though if she has to pick, Manon would place Fly closer to the adolescent camp. People who meet him think him nearer fifteen than twelve. She has come to realize adolescence is not switched on at once—it seeps, gradually, during late childhood. There are glimpses from age ten. Some say earlier, though she doesn't know about that. It's more like a litmus paper turning blue, as the hormones leach.

Fly can read a room before she can. If there is an accident in his vicinity, he acknowledges vicarious feelings of guilt; can trace the root of awkwardness in a conversation. He once said of a rather sadistic PE teacher, "She's mean to us because she had an injury and now she can't be an athlete." He can identify envy without judging a person for it. All this he does quietly, and though she has always thought of empathy as imbued or developed, with him it seems innate. Its flip side is heightened sensitivity—an aversion to high collars and the congestion of cuffs under his coat, which means he wears only a fraction of his wardrobe: one beloved pair of tracksuit bottoms and one hoodie—with the hood *down,* Manon is forever insisting, though he takes less and less notice of her. Tall black youth with his hood up? He might as well wear a sign saying "Arrest me now."

Storklike, he is all limbs. Silent much of the time and unknowable. Fly is unhappy—she knows that much, knows too that she is the cause, and this she can hardly bear. She has uprooted him, unfurled his sensitivities like wounds open to the air. He is not himself. She hopes he'll settle in.

Even so, he has his playful moments—has begun taking pleasure in irony: putting his arm around her shoulder, towering lankily above her, and saying, "I'm just off out," and her saying, "No you're not," and him saying, "That's right, I'm not, I don't know where that came from." Both of them smiling at each other. They can begin to enjoy a new kind of conversation, with meanings other than what is said.

"You are *so* down with the kids," he'll say to her when she puts some kind of easy-listening mum-pop on the iPod.

Not yet old enough for a man, nor young enough for a boy. What is that? Lines from *Twelfth Night* embedded in her brain. Funny that she'd resented all the drumming and drilling at school, the tittering and yawning in uniforms as lines were delivered by lackluster boys and girls leaning back in their chairs. The essays on *Coriolanus* or *Much Ado*. She hadn't realized those lines would be the ones to comfort her most in the second half of her life. Perhaps the teachers knew, had thought to themselves, "You'll thank me one day."

DAVY

• • •

It's good to have Manon back, he thinks, striding across the police station car park toward the featureless grass expanse of Hinchingbrooke Park. He plans to cut through to the wooded area where the body has been found—quicker than trying to walk the enormous curve of Brampton Road. That road is gridlocked with rush-hour traffic, the headlights of school-run mums and commuters out of Huntingdon. Only around five-ish—an unusual moment for someone to meet a violent death. And opposite a school, too.

He's anxious to get there, to be the first. He breaks into a jog. In the distance, he can see blue lights illuminating the trees in a rhythmic sweep, the flash of a couple of fluorescent jackets.

It's good to have her back, but Manon has to understand that things have changed. He isn't her DC anymore—she can't sit in a car the way she used to and bark orders at him. He'll likely be leading this case, not as SIO, that'll be Harriet, but on the ground, running the constables.

The thought makes him jog faster. He wants to get there, get started. But his excitement—or is it a stitch?—is tugged at from below by something like aversion. His body pushes forward but his inner self pulls back. *He can't do it. He isn't up to it. He's been overpromoted by the Super, who thinks of him as a son.*

Davy is panting (it's a wonder he passed his last bleep test), his heart knocking with impatience to master the scene and his fear also. He might be unmasked at any moment.

"The shallowness deep within," Manon said, ages ago now—just after his promotion—when he'd discussed his Imposter Syndrome with her. "You're not the only one, you know." And he'd wondered whether she meant, "You're not the only one who thinks you're a useless twat."

Why does he keep thinking about her? He wishes she was here, that's why. She seems a more substantial person than he does. He slows to a walk because the stitch is really painful now. Even more substantial these days: her breathing labored, her breasts enormous. He doesn't want to be one of *those* men, but it's like trying to pretend you're looking out to sea when there's a vast mountain range right in your sight line.

He comes alongside the body. Looks around him. Harriet's not here, nothing's started yet. Within half an hour this place'll be crawling with uniforms. Looking down, he sees the clothing has been cut open so paramedics could work on the victim's chest—white shirt, suit jacket, wool coat, *Ozwald Boateng* written on the purple shimmering lining. The eyes are open, mouth too, his chest caked in dried blood and the small incision of the wound itself, evidently from a knife, like a cut in an uncooked joint of pork. Small red opening in waxy yellow flesh.

Davy looks around him again.

He crouches down unsteadily, and a gust of wind nearly pushes him on top of the corpse. He puts a hand out to balance himself. You don't want to contaminate the scene—isn't that the first rule, the only thing they drum into you at training? *Keep your hands in your pockets.*

If only he could cop a glance at that wallet he can see poking out of the purple silk lining—then he could get started. If he could get a name off a bank card, an ID, then the story could start, and it'll be a whopper. This one will be all over the news. The pressure, he can feel

it already popping at his temples, is going to be massive. *Keep your hands in your pockets, Davy Walker.*

"What the fuck are you doing, Davy?" It is Harriet.

He jumps up. "Nothing," he says. "I'm not doing anything."

"Yeah, well, step away from the evidence until SOCO gets here," she says.

"Know who he is?" Davy asks.

"Not yet. But he'll still be dead in an hour after forensics have got what they need so there's no need to be patting him down."

He takes a step back.

"We need to cordon this section of wood, make it wide," Harriet says. "Where's your notebook, Davy? C'mon, or do you not want to run this scene? First priority is hands-and-knees search for a weapon. No point getting the dogs out, too many people around. But we do need community policing down here—I want the public reassured by not being able to move for police officers. We need a community inspector to go into the school, talk to the head, make sure all the kids get home safely. Same at the hospital."

"We should check Acer Ward," Davy says.

"Yes, good thought. See if you can track down the consultant psychiatrist, ask him if they had any psychos go walkabout this afternoon. I didn't just use that word, by the way."

"What about an ARV?"

"No, leave them out—what can armed response do, realistically? Let's not blow the budget. I want scene guards on the cordon, not the idiots we had on the last one. There's a lot of footfall, I don't want this scene contaminated, okay?"

"Who found him?"

"Judith Cole, over there," Harriet says, nodding toward a woman whose hair is matted against her head with blood. It's smeared down her cheek and has soaked the collar of her coat. She has the distant look of a person who has yet to take in what has happened to her. Someone, a paramedic probably, has placed a foil blanket over her shoulders of the kind used by runners at the end of a race.

"She's significant, obviously—last person to see him alive. We need her clothes for forensics."

"Why is there blood on her face and hair?"

"She cradled the victim, tried to listen to his last words apparently."

Davy is writing furiously, his hand cold and shaky. Harriet doesn't stop, *rat-a-tat-tat*. "Also at the hospital, let's check to see if anyone's self-admitted. Knife wounds." She nods at the executive detached homes curling around the cul-de-sac adjacent to the school. "Over there, Snowdonia Way, that's where I want house-to-house to start. And we can warn them to be vigilant while we're at it. Set up a roadblock. We want witnesses, people who were driving in this direction."

Davy is writing down *Acer Ward* while his brain tries to keep a tab on the subsequent items on the checklist. Nothing must fall off the checklist. He's thinking Snowdonia Way, that was next, then—*what?*—something to do with clothes.

At the same time some other part of his brain is thinking, This isn't a tidy one—not the usual kind of murder where the person who did it is lying smashed next to the victim, or is making a cack-handed run for it, toward a waiting panda car, or where their perp is just, well, obvious because of the backstory: in a relationship with the victim, threatened them with it last time, just did a massive drugs deal and owed someone money. Sent a text saying, "I'll get you, you're for it." Their perps, often, were not the brightest bulbs in the chandelier and the cases were tidy. Dirty but clean, as in ring-fenced, not leaching toward the executive new builds of Snowdonia Way with their gas barbecues and two-car garages. Davy feels the anxiety reach its fist around his stomach.

"So that woman Judith Cole," Harriet is saying, while Davy scribbles *hosp—knife wounds?* "He died in her arms apparently. At least, he was dead by the time the paramedics arrived. They tried to resuscitate him but no luck."

"Funny place to die," Davy says.

"Yes. Very public. Who the fuck is stabbed at four in the afternoon?" Harriet's swearing always peaks at a crime scene. "Let's start with a statement from Ms. Cole, down at the station. Send someone to get her a change of clothes. She only lives over there, Five Snowdonia Way."

"He looks well-to-do, not our usual lot," Davy says, nodding at the body.

He steps across the seeping ground to take a look at the man's face the right way up. He has pouches beneath his eyes the size of teabags, a

Roman nose. In fact the whole head seems Roman: his hair, cut close, curling forward toward his forehead like Caesar's crown of leaves. What was it made of? Manon would know.

As she walks away, Harriet adds, "Need to get the CCTV off the road and this footpath, if there is any."

Time is of the essence, even when your victim is dead. Witnesses move, rain washes fibers away, memories fade. The commuter who might have noticed something vital goes home to his family, eats dinner, watches TV, and soon cannot distinguish between Tuesday and Wednesday. CCTV gets inadvertently wiped by a shopkeeper who knows no better, car number plates forgotten, descriptions blurred with other memories. They don't call them the mists of time for nothing.

Investigations, Davy realizes as he looks at his checklist without knowing quite where to begin, run on the energy of time, run against it sometimes if a living person's in danger—a kidnapping, say, or a kiddie lost. Other times it's justice that runs against the clock. Given time, your perp can get rid of the weapon, wipe down his prints, cook up an alibi or hotfoot it to somewhere sunny. The Costa Brava is bristling with British time-share criminals.

Time blunts all.

It's a relief, now, to be in the warmth of MCU: frying drips on the coffee machine hotplate; the clack of fingers on computer keys; muffled mobile calls saying, "No, I won't be home, job's come in." There is no one for Davy to call, no one who minds whether he stays out all night. There's been no one since Chloe, and that had ended more than a year ago. Not so much that she put him off all relationships, more that he didn't get back on the horse, and now he's not even in the vicinity of a stable.

As with investigations, so it is with heartbreak: time drains the sharpness from the picture. When Davy'd first broken up with Chloe, she was in every thought he had. He cried every day when they separated, even though it was his choice (doom balloon that she was). Nowadays, he can think of her dispassionately as a significant ex, could even bump into her without a rise in his vital signs. The love has run cold, just like it will with the evidence if he doesn't get a shifty on.

Davy glances at his watch—eight P.M. Being outside for three hours has made his checklist damp. He spent it standing in that patch of wood, sometimes taking a break to sit in an unmarked car; receiving updates from his DCs. Nothing from the hospital, nothing from house-to-house except varying degrees of alarm, nothing from the roadblock.

He'd spotted a scene guard smoking a fag and throwing it to the ground.

"What's that?" he asked, pointing at the fag butt.

"What? Nothin' to do with me."

"Better not be," Davy said, "because it's going to be tested by forensics and if your DNA is anywhere near it, you'll be in big trouble."

"Okay, well, actually it might be mine," the chap said, picking the butt up and putting it in his pocket.

"Victim's name is Jon-Oliver Ross," Harriet told him, when SOCO were done. "Banking type from London. Business card says Dunlop & Finch Wealth Management."

"Never had call for a wealth manager myself."

"No, me neither. I find an overdraft is all the wealth management I need," Harriet said. "Anyway, we need to find out why he was in Huntingdon, when he traveled in and how. Fella that did it might not be local either. We've also got a photo of a woman found in his jacket pocket. A four-by-six of a blonde, real stunner. She'll be an ex, so we better know who she is soon as possible."

SOCO discovered drips of blood at wide intervals along the footpath leading away from where the body was found, and these are being analyzed. The phone found on the body is an iPhone, latest version, locked with a passcode so as good as useless. Call data from the telecom company will tell them when texts were sent and to which number, but not their contents. For that, you need access to the handset. Same with other apps like WhatsApp and Snapchat.

Davy stretches back, trying to release the stiffness in his shoulders. The frenetic atmosphere has calmed somewhat. Hinchingbrooke School kids have all gone home, there are no other reports of anyone being stabbed, so it's looking less and less like a random psycho on the rampage, which doesn't surprise him because it's almost never a ran-

dom psycho. Relationships are what drive people to murder in Davy's experience.

DC Kim Delaney appears before him, her arms arranged like a forklift, piled with folded clothes. "Change of clothing for Judith Cole," Kim says. "Brought in by her husband. He's downstairs."

"D'you want to talk to her about changing out of her clothes?" Davy says. "Better coming from you, really."

"Why?" Kim asks.

"Oh, you know, you being"—he coughs—"you know, a woman."

"So I have to have all the underwear chats, is that it?"

Davy colors up. It'd be just his luck to fall foul of some kind of mishandling of the politics of the sexes.

"No, no, of course not. I'll do it then, shall I?" he says.

"Don't be a twat, Davy. I was only joking."

"Oh," says Davy. "Oh, right."

MANON

• • •

As they turn out the light and close Solly's door, Manon whispers to Fly, "You're so good with him."

She can hear her neediness, as well as the distant sound of Sol singing to himself; he will sleep on his front, bottom in the air like the ruck in a blanket.

They stump downstairs, Manon with one hand on Fly's shoulder. "Hungry?" she says.

He doesn't reply and she's used to this. She'll often have to say things five or six times before he responds. This is not particular to Fly—she's heard of parents hauling their children for hearing tests, the doctor saying witheringly, "There's a difference between not being able to hear and not listening."

"I'll need your help when this one comes," she says, her other hand on her bump, and even as she says it she thinks, *Leave the poor boy alone,* remembers some parent or other at school saying, "Never plead with

children" and the way she'd nodded, thinking, *I'm always pleading with children. It's my base position.*

Lighten up, she tells herself. *He's all right.*

And yet he isn't.

Five days ago, the headmaster called at nine A.M. to say Fly hadn't arrived at school.

"I don't understand it," Manon said. "He left half an hour ago in his uniform. Where is he?"

"I was hoping you'd know the answer to that."

"Leave it with me," she said.

First thing she did was run out of the house, jogging the route of his walk to school, all the while on her mobile phone, checking admissions at the hospital, calling Fly's mobile over and over.

She drove around Huntingdon, paced the high street, barging in and out of cafés. She wondered whether to call it in, really scare him with a police search, but she had a gut feeling he'd come in for tea. He wasn't a baby, wasn't *her* baby. He had lived without any assistance from her for ten of his twelve years.

Other thoughts tugged at her: he's been mugged, he's in some trouble he can't get out of, he had his buds in his ears as a car mowed him down. She checked the hospital again.

He came in carrying his schoolbag, at a calculated 3:45 P.M.—trying to pass it off. Bag by the banister, shoes off, uniform disheveled.

"Don't give me that," she said, her body shaking, wanting to hit him.

"What?" he said.

"Look at your phone."

He looked at it. "Twenty-eight missed calls."

"So what was that performance all about? I've been worried sick."

He sniffed. Shrugged.

"Where've you been?"

"Home," he said.

It was like a sinkhole opening up beneath her.

He has gone to watch TV while she puts the pasta on. Endless pasta, endless cooking it, throwing it in the bin, cooking it again, emptying

the dishwasher, loading the dishwasher, picking up clothes off the floor but not his. Fly is too fastidious.

He calls her "Mum" only sporadically—consciously, to please her or as a deliberate expression of connection. When he is unthinking, she is "Manon." They are mother and son by degrees, not innately and not to their core.

"How was school?" she asks, serving his spaghetti.

No response.

"Fly, how was your day?"

"Shit, as usual."

The truancy took her into the head's office—a discussion about how to help Fly settle, in-school strategies (greater teacher focus), support at home (in this she read criticism). Fly promised not to do it again, said he understood it was about his own safety. To be fair, he looked shaken by the adult response. Perhaps he'd never been under such intense scrutiny before and found it unexpected. The trouble with this sort of thing, she thinks now, lying in bed with a book flattened onto her chest, is she can't solve it. She can't solve Fly, can't make him better overnight. She must let his feelings granulate over time and often she finds it impossible to summon the patience to back off. She wants to work on him like a case. She should have more faith.

She's roused from dozing by the sound of Ellie coming in and by a reawakening anger (she is angry so much of the time and it is *exhausting*). She must have words. Ellie cannot leave Sol alone with Fly whenever she wants; Fly who is after all only twelve, much as he seems older, and not old enough to bear responsibility for a two-year-old, certainly not when there is the possibility of the Internet within a thousand-mile radius.

DAVY

• • •

Kim has placed the clothes on the table in front of Mrs. Cole, saying, "So, if you could change out of all your clothes. Your husband has brought you some clean things to wear. Put everything in this evidence bag if you wouldn't mind."

"Evidence bag? You want my clothes?" says Mrs. Cole, taking the brown paper bag from Kim with a shaking hand.

"We'll need to send them to forensics, yes," says Davy.

"What, even my underwear?" she asks, with a brittle laugh.

"Why not your underwear?" Kim says, looking at her very directly. Eyeballing her, Davy would go so far as to say.

"Just seems a bit . . ." Mrs. Cole begins. The blood has dried to a crust on her cheek and neck and has made her hair stiff.

"These things can feel intrusive," Davy says, "but there's nothing to worry about. Your clothes will be returned to you in due course. When you're ready, we'll start the interview, okay?"

He and Kim close the door behind them and walk in silence along the corridor outside. At the turn of the stairs up to the second floor, Kim says, "What's in her undies she doesn't want us to look at?"

Would Kim know the meaning of her clothing, Davy wonders, in the way Manon would—not the clothing sent to forensics, well those, yes, as well, but her clothing in general: the colors, the price bracket, the shop they came from. These were all markers that Manon could "read." He's not sure Kim is feminine in that way. Oh Lord, is he being sexist? Not feminine then; *judgmental*. Manon was master of the snap judgment, which often contained a kernel of truth.

The clothes Judith Cole has changed into are smart and unadorned: navy cardigan with a funny wavy edge and no buttons, very white T-shirt, so white it could have come straight from the packet. Dark, well-cut jeans. Everything new-looking. The bloodstained clothes, from what he could tell beneath the dark burgundy discoloration, were in a range of colors he would describe as light brownish, though he's aware that there are more sophisticated words for it. Mushroom? Apart from her jeans, which were white—before she cradled a stab victim, that is.

Judith Cole is well turned out, that much he can see as he returns to interview room one and sets his pad down on the table.

"Is my husband still downstairs?" she asks. He hasn't set the tape yet.

"He is, yes," says Kim.

"There's really no reason for him to stay. Our house is only a five-minute walk from here."

Kim remains silent. She told Davy earlier she likes to create discomfort in interviews, said it provides the space for confession. Davy's acute sense of embarrassment can barely tolerate this.

"I can't see what help he would be, he wasn't even there—" Mrs. Cole adds.

"Right, here we go," Davy says, as the long beep rings out from the recording device.

He lists the date, time, and people in the room.

"Mrs. Cole, you live on Snowdonia Way, is that correct?"

"Yes."

She confirms she's forty-four and works in insurance, is married to Sinjun Cole, which she spells more than three times for Davy, who cannot understand why she seems to be spelling out "St. John." Eventually she does it so aggressively, he drops the subject. The Coles have twelve-year-old twin boys attending Hinchingbrooke School, situated opposite the crime scene and adjacent to Snowdonia Way.

"Did you know the victim, Jon-Oliver Ross?" Davy asks.

"No, I've never seen him before."

"Can you describe what happened when you came across the victim?"

"Yes, I was facing the park and he was walking toward me. I saw him swaying, really weaving side to side and I thought he was drunk, so I started to think of ways to avoid him but then he fell, right there in front of me. Something about the way he fell—his legs literally went from under him—I knew it wasn't right. I could see he was ill. I rushed over to him and saw the blood coming from his chest. He was awake but he was panicking. He was really very distressed. I had his upper body in my lap. I called the ambulance on my mobile and I held him, which is why I got so soaked in his blood." She puts a hand gingerly to the side of her face. "His eyes were rolling back in his head, his chest was going up and down. I was trying to comfort him, saying, 'Help is coming, hang on in there, stay awake,' that sort of thing. He whispered something which I didn't hear so I put my head next to his mouth and he said, 'Sass.'"

"Sass? S-A-S-S?" says Davy, pen poised on his notepad, not wishing to open up another spelling debacle.

Mrs. Cole shrugs. "I couldn't understand it either. Perhaps it wasn't even a word, more like an exhalation. But he repeated it. I wondered if he was trying to say 'mass' if he was religious—a Catholic. But he said it again, 'Sass.' A name, perhaps?"

"And why were you in the woods at that time, Mrs. Cole?" asks Kim.

"You can call me Judith," she says, wrinkling her nose in a way that Davy supposes is intended to be friendly. "I was taking the dog out for a walk—I crossed Hinchingbrooke Park Road with the intention of going to the open ground where I can let him off the lead. He can run about there."

"And what was your dog doing, when you were seeing to the victim?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Where was the dog?" repeats Kim.

"Sorry, I don't understand what you're asking me," says Judith, shifting in her seat.

"It's a simple question. You drop to your knees to cradle a dying man. Where's the dog?"

"Oh, right, well, I didn't really notice. I suppose he was snouting around the verges somewhere, you know what dogs are like. Sniffing tree roots, that kind of thing."

"We didn't see him at the crime scene. The dog. Did you lose track of him?"

"No, no, I didn't lose him. He's back at home. My husband must've taken him—picked him up I mean."

She has flushed. She flaps at her cardigan to cool herself down. Is she of an age for a hot flash? Davy isn't versed in such things.

"I'm not under any suspicion am I?"

"Why d'you ask that?" says Kim.

"Only, you're talking to me as if I were a suspect."

"No we're not."

"Why are you asking me all these questions when I'm just an innocent bystander?"

"You were the last person to see the victim alive," says Kim. "That makes you a significant witness."

Day 2, December 15

DAVY

• • •

"Time, everyone—time is of the essence," Davy says to the eight a.m. briefing—a semicircle of gray-faced detectives who haven't been to bed. "Priorities—"

Harriet coughs.

Davy looks at her, flushes; steps aside.

Harriet's voice is loud and strong. "Jon-Oliver Ross," she informs the team. "Thirty-eight years old, of Holland Park, West London. Wealth manager to high-net-worth individuals at a private bank called Dunlop & Finch. This victim was well-to-do, probably well connected. First priority while we wait for forensics is his journey to Huntingdon. Did he come by car or train? I want CCTV off the stations including King's Cross. Did he travel alone or did our perp mark him? There will be a lot of financial work on this one and yes, I'm looking at you, Colin Brierley."

Colin is MCU's resident nerd—an expert in technology, the

evidence-compiling software called Holmes, and the minutiae of financial records. Colin can tolerate vast panoramas of tedious detail, where others glaze over and lose not merely their thread but the will to live. Colin, though, has a childish excitement about the more inanimate side of police work. He doesn't like to leave the office and so is handed laptops and iPads, phone records or reams of bank statements and he can sit and sit, drilling down into them with a kind of prurient glee. Colin is also the least politically correct man in East Anglia, and for this accolade he has seen off stiff competition.

Harriet has finished and the silence gives space for a discussion, so Davy says, "Who or what is Sass?" Just to open it up, really.

"Person who killed him?" says Kim.

"Judith Cole might have killed him," Davy says.

"That's a bit of a stretch—they didn't know each other by all accounts," says Harriet.

"Something about her isn't right," Kim says. "Her husband told us he was unexpectedly working at home at four-thirtyish, the time she went to 'walk the dog'"—at this Kim makes large quotation marks in the air—"but he says the dog was lying on his feet the whole time."

"Should we question the dog?" asks Colin.

"Yeah, let's *ruff* him up," says Kim, making a little barking sound.

"Where were the children?" Harriet asks.

"At a sports club at the school," Kim says.

"Ross's next of kin," Harriet says to the room. "Gareth and Branwen Ross, mum and dad, from north Wales. I sent a plod round this morning to notify them, so we should expect them sometime today or tomorrow. In their eighties. They'll be knocked sideways, so respect and care, everyone, yes?"

In Davy's periphery, Manon ambles in through the double doors carrying her usual paper bag of pastries and a coffee. She has a rolling gait these days, as well as a double chin, as if someone has attached a bicycle pump to her backside and inflated her. She hails team four across the room, saying "Don't mind me," and Davy can tell she's wanting to sidle in on the briefing. She'll perch on a desk and Harriet will be all ears, awaiting her pearls of investigative wisdom. Well, he's not having it.

"Boss," he whispers to Harriet, nodding in Manon's direction, "shouldn't we keep it confidential, it *is* a murder briefing. . . ."

"Oh for fuck's sake, Davy, it's only Manon. She'll nod off in a minute."

"Who was he then?" says Manon, breathless. She is smiling at Harriet, and Davy can see the vicarious excitement on her face. "Your posh stiff," she says. "Got an ID yet?"

"Jon-Oliver Ross," says Harriet, peering into Manon's paper bag. "Have you got an apricot one of those? Posh banker type, from Lon—"

"Fuck," says Manon.

"What?" says Harriet.

"Fuck," Manon says again, feeling behind her for a surface on which to perch or steady herself. "He's Solly's dad. Jon-Oliver is Ellie's ex."

MANON

• • •

"Only met him a couple of times, for like five minutes, but he'd started having contact in the last six months. Wanting to see Solly. That'll be why he was here—in Huntingdon, I mean."

Her mind is whirring, too full to listen to what Harriet is saying in reply. She must tell Ellie. Should she just blurt it out? Will Ellie be upset? Does some corner of her carry the residue of love for him, like a cupboard shelf that hasn't been wiped? Does she harbor faint hopes of a reconciliation? Or will she not care? Perhaps she'll be relieved he's out of her hair.

No, she thinks, Ellie had come round to the idea of Jon-Oliver playing a part in Solly's life. Visits once a month had been accommodated, though Manon was usually either working or on her way out when they occurred. The thought of Solly brings tears to Manon's eyes (tears come easily these days)—no chance of a father now. All the

potential of that relationship cut down, before it could begin. It is a tragedy for Solly.

The sound of Harriet's voice becomes louder and clearer as Manon rejoins the present. She becomes aware that the three of them—she, Harriet, and Davy—have moved into Harriet's office.

"Where's Ellie now?" Harriet is saying, pacing behind her desk; coiled spring, hitching at her bra straps. Harriet's body is sinewy, taut because she's a ball of constrained movement—a rubber band at full stretch, wanting to ping. Physically, Manon thinks, we couldn't be more different. I have no inner spring. I am in constant preparation for sitting down.

"Home with Sol I guess," says Manon. "They were there when I left for work."

"Let's bring her in for interview," Harriet says, half to herself and half to Davy. "What can she do for childcare?" she asks Manon.

"Childminder'll take Sol at short notice," says Manon. "Go easy on her. Look, can I break the news to her? I don't know how she'll . . ."

"You know you can't," says Davy. "You're connected to the case. We'll need to keep you away from all future briefings. And you're not allowed to search the database or ask officers about the case."

"He really needs to calm his tits," Manon says to Harriet.

"That's enough, you two," says Harriet.

Manon realizes Davy wants to tell Ellie himself so he can watch her, see how she reacts. Everyone close to the victim is a suspect and how they take the news is part of a closed-circuit observation that is often disguised as sympathy and support. *We are giving you a liaison officer to keep you informed/watch your every move and report it back to the investigation*.

"One more thing, Manon," says Davy. "Where was Ellie yesterday afternoon and evening?"

"Am I being interviewed?" asks Manon, placing a protective hand on her bump. "Because if I am, I want all the proper gear—recording device and everything."

DAVY

• • •

"Should we put a trace on Judith Cole's phone?" he says, now that he and Harriet are alone. "See what she was really doing in the wood at that time? Kim thinks she wasn't walking the dog."

Harriet has closed the door to her office and is pacing, the wings of her jacket pinned back by her hands on her hips. "Nah, Judith Cole's not the issue. Woman from across the road who didn't know him? Who cares what she was doing in the park? We don't have grounds for a trace."

"Except her being the last person to see him alive, and also lying," Davy points out.

"Yes, but she might be lying for some other reason. Just because she called it in, doesn't put her in line for investigation—you know the Samaritan rule. Priority is questioning Ellie Bradshaw. She's the person who can give us the most on Ross—who he was, who might have wanted to stab him."

"What are our main lines, boss?"

"I'd say financial work and exes—so that's Ellie. And the photo in his jacket, the blonde. We need to find out who she is. Maybe she's Sass. There's a strong money motive, with someone like him."

"Judith Cole has come in for reinterview," Davy says.

"Has she? Right, okay, you can have another go at her—*gently,* Davy—just to fill in the gaps in her statement while we wait for Ellie Bradshaw to come in. But no more than that—husband's a lawyer, I don't want a complaint. And Davy? Take Kim with you. Sounds like she was doing a very good job last time."

Davy is upended by jealousy, like a small boy in rough surf, while the adult in him says, "Righto, boss."

"YOUR HUSBAND SAYS YOU WEREN'T walking the dog," Kim says, as soon as the bleep sounds, without warning or preamble.

Judith Cole blanches to the color of her semi-sheer white blouse, which has a white vest visible beneath. At her throat is a sparkling pendant, a single diamond on a silver chain. Unlike last time they saw her, she is freshly blow-dried and wearing immaculate makeup.

"I did have the dog," she says, though Davy hears uncertainty in her voice. "He must be mistaken."

"Why would you walk over a busy main road to Hinchingbrooke Park when there's a nicer one at the end of your road, which is nearer?" Kim asks.

"I don't think it's nicer," says Mrs. Cole. "I like Hinchingbrooke Park. I can let the dog off the lead and he can run around."

"It was pitch dark though," says Kim. "Seems a bit odd."

"Yes, it was dark, but it wasn't late—only four-ish. Do you have a dog?" Mrs. Cole asks.

Kim and Davy are silent.

"Well, you see, if you had a dog, you'd know that owning one means venturing out in snow, hail, darkness, you name it. A dog's gotta do what a dog's gotta—"

"Davy?" Harriet is at the door. "A word please."

He and Kim step outside.

"CCTV from King's Cross has come in. I'd like you to take a look."

• • •

"Right, so there's Ross," Harriet says, pointing at the screen. They are standing around Colin's computer, looking at the grainy images of King's Cross station platform as people make their way to board the train.

Davy watches Ross put his ticket into the barrier and walk through it. He strides down the platform with confidence, coat well cut. He looks like a businessman on his way to a meeting that will not challenge him greatly. His face is unfazed, neither angry nor anxious. *How little we know of what lies ahead.*

"Look at this fella," Harriet says.

"Who?"

Harriet is leaning over Colin and tapping on his keyboard to set the tape back a few frames. "There."

She points at a big man, bald with a black smudge at his ear, possibly an earpiece. He wears a bomber jacket and underneath it he is stocky and muscled, causing his arms to sit wide. The image quality is poor. He is coming through the ticket barriers shortly after Ross.

"He's looking at Ross like he's dinner," Harriet says.

Even on grainy CCTV footage, they can all see the man's focus is on his quarry, who is just ahead of him. He glances down briefly to get his ticket from the barrier, but then his eyes are back on Ross, hurrying to keep up with him and then boarding the same carriage.

"Who is he? That's what we need to find out," Harriet says.

They all straighten, away from the screen.

"I've looked at the Huntingdon CCTV and this chap does not get off the train with Ross, so where does he get off? That's question one," Harriet says. "And where does he go? It's identifying him that's going to be the problem."

"What's the timing on that?" Davy asks. "We need to get the information off that ticket machine."

"So, Ross goes through the barrier at 3:08 p.m. and 40 seconds. The other guy is going through 20 seconds later, so at 3:09 p.m. exactly. We're going to need the station staff to identify whether his ticket was bought with a card."

"Might've paid cash," says Davy. "We should also capture the rest of

his journey at the London end, off station CCTV and Underground, roads."

"We could email his picture to local forces, see if anyone recognizes him," Kim suggests.

"How about *Crimewatch*?" Davy says. *"Do you know this man?"*

Everyone groans.

"I don't think we're ready to be buried in a gazillion false leads just yet," says Harriet. "But he's marking him, right? I mean, he's definitely marking him."

The others nod, Davy regretting he is not more reassuring in the face of her need for it. There is so much to do, so many tiny steps to complete in just this fragment of the case. He can feel himself getting into a state, a feeling of panic that renders him inactive when what he needs to do is hurry up. And forensics will be in tomorrow, which will present them with still more avenues for inspection. And he hasn't even resolved the dog/no-dog question and the small matter of why Judith Cole is lying. Not to mention the fact he's starving. And who, or what, is "Sass"?

"Are you all right, Davy?" Harriet asks.

He realizes he has been rubbing his brow and frowning at the floor.

"Yes, boss, I'm fine. Just wondering where to begin," he says, with a weak smile. He wishes his face was more Jack Reacher, less Charlie Brown. "I'm still curious about what Ross was saying, the Sass thing."

Harriet lifts her chin—a kind of worried nod—and Davy wonders if his display of anxiety will make her fearful that she's put the wrong man on the job. He needs inspiration—the kind of moment when the memory of a phrase in interview, an unconscious connection made, an imaginative idea of an avenue to try, all these coalesce into investigative brilliance. Combined with luck, you can sometimes crack them that way.

But not when you're desperate, overloaded, and vaguely panicking.

Perennials

A Novel

Mandy Berman

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Denise was supposed to drive Rachel to camp that morning, but she was hungover. Rachel had heard her come in late the night before, her heels clacking in the entryway of their apartment before she exhaled loudly and trod barefoot into the kitchen. Then came the slamming of cupboard doors and rustling through boxes; the crackling of plastic; the cereal tinkling into the bowl; the repetitive crunching. Denise had had a date with a tax lawyer who took her for French food in the Village. Most of her dates didn't leave the Upper West Side on the weekends, and neither did she.

Rachel imagined the night went something like this: They split a bottle of expensive wine. Denise tried not to drink it too fast, but they were done with it before finishing their entrées, and she was relieved when he suggested another. She

went home with him but didn't sleep there; she sobered up enough to remember she needed to take Rachel to Connecticut early the next morning.

When Rachel went out into the living room at seven, Denise's mouth was wide open like a cartoon fish's. Dark purple eye shadow was smeared over her closed eyelids. She hadn't bothered to pull out the couch. People always said Rachel and Denise looked alike; often it was a pickup line from a guy—that they looked more like sisters than mother and daughter. But aside from the same dark, wavy hair, Rachel never saw the resemblance.

"Mom," she whispered.

Denise swallowed, then sighed, like she was in the middle of a nice dream.

"Mom," Rachel said again, stroking the top of her mother's head. Denise groaned and put the pillow over her face.

On the ride there, with her Dunkin' Donuts iced coffee, Denise started to wake up. They sang Pat Benatar; Denise had one hand on the steering wheel, and the other dangled out the window, holding a cigarette. They didn't need directions. This was Rachel's fourth summer at camp, and they knew the route by heart now—a straight shot up the Taconic, a winding parkway that could be so unpredictable Rachel sometimes worried her mom wouldn't make a turn in time and they'd end up smashed against a concrete boulder on the side of the road.

Rachel always got the feeling when they pulled into camp that time hadn't moved since the previous summer. Everything was exactly the same: the wooden Camp Marigold

sign with the fading painted orange flowers; the smells of the horse manure from the barn and cut grass from the athletic fields. In the months leading up to camp opening, she would think maybe the grass wouldn't be as green. Maybe some building would be painted a different color. Maybe they'd fixed that one broken rail on the fence around the horse arena.

But none of that ever happened. Time didn't touch Camp Marigold, and that was what was so perfect about it.

They pulled into the circle of platform tents in the girls' Hemlock section, where the thirteen-year-olds stayed, and lugged Rachel's trunk from the back of the rental car. Counselors were greeting parents, helping them carry trunks and shopping bags filled with magazines and snacks, and girls Rachel knew well, girls with whom she'd compared nipples in their tents and stolen ice cream from the dining hall in the middle of the night, were hugging each other, holding hands, and gleefully yelling her name.

Denise put her arm around Rachel. "Happy, baby?"

Fiona ran over and embraced Rachel. "I saved you a bunk!" she said. She led Rachel into tent three. Their bunks were always at the top, head-to-head—best for late-night whispers after lights-out.

Fiona Larkin, Rachel's best friend at camp, was a nosy but brutally loyal girl from a big family in Westchester. It was Fiona's fifth summer at Marigold. She had already unpacked her own things and was now helping Rachel to unpack hers, taking items out of her trunk and organizing her cubby in a way Rachel would never be able to maintain.

Fiona stood with one hand on her hip, a box of Tampax raised in the other, and a questioning expression on her face.

"What?" Rachel asked. "Isn't it obvious?" She stood back and let Fiona appraise her. The changes were small, but there: slightly wider hips, and breasts in a real, underwire bra, size 34B.

"You need to tell me these things!" Fiona said.

"Sweetie"—Denise, who was tucking Rachel's mosquito net into the bunk, was shaking her head at Fiona—"it's nothing to be jealous about."

A few months earlier, Rachel had been home alone, lying on the couch watching a movie and eating Chips Ahoy! cookies. At a commercial she had gone to the bathroom and been shocked to see brown in her underwear. For a minute, she thought it had something to do with the cookies, like she had somehow gotten the chocolate on herself. But then she realized. No one ever mentioned it could be brown.

The next morning, Denise kissed her on the forehead. "I'm glad we got you those pads."

"I used one of your tampons."

"Really?" She cocked her head to the side.

Rachel shrugged. "It wasn't that hard."

"You shouldn't be going into my things, Rachel."

"The pad was so bulky."

"Why didn't you call me?" her mom asked.

"You were on a date."

"You can interrupt for something like *this*."

Denise turned around to put on some coffee. As she was

reaching for the ground coffee in the cabinet above her head, she paused with her hand there and turned to Rachel again.

"Are you having sex?"

"Mom. God."

"It's not impossible," she said.

"There's not even anyone I want to have sex with."

"*Want* to? I don't care if you want to or not. You're thirteen fucking years old."

"I didn't mean it like that."

"I don't know how you figured out the tampon so easy."

"There's an instruction manual, Mom. I can read."

"Don't be smart."

"I'm not."

"You know you have to be careful about these things now."

"I know what getting your period means."

"Don't be such a smartass, Rachel. I'm being serious." She poured water into the coffeemaker. "And you might want to start watching what you eat. No more full boxes of Chips Ahoy! in one sitting."

Fiona and Rachel thought it was weird that some girls were new to sleepaway camp at this age, as if they had been afraid to be away from home before now. One of the new girls cried quietly at night as if no one could hear her. Another was a tomboy who just played sports all day. Their counselor was from Poland, and Rachel and Fiona made fun of her accent when she left for the staff lodge after lights-out.

Fiona was the one who had convinced Rachel to take horseback riding, and then Rachel had convinced her dad to pay the extra money for it. Her dad wasn't around much anymore, but she knew she could still ask him for things. She knew at that age, though she didn't have the words for it, that she was using him and that she was allowed to. That, because he was the one who wasn't always there, she could ask for the things she wanted, and he would give them to her.

Riding was the first activity of the day, and Fiona and Rachel went down to the stables together after breakfast, walking arm in arm. Rachel got to ride only a few times throughout the year, when she was able to get her dad to take her out of the city, which wasn't often, so while Fiona was going on about boys—"Matthew Dawson was staring at you today at flag raising, Rachel. Didn't you see him?"—Rachel was thinking about Micah.

Most everyone else hated riding Micah. "His stubbornness is inconceivably annoying," their riding teacher used to say, making it obvious that she wanted to trade him in for a younger, more obedient horse. It was all the better for Rachel. He and Rachel had a sort of understanding that she'd never thought she could have with an animal, and when she got back each summer, she swore he had missed her.

He was a dark brown dun with a gleaming coat. When she saw him again, she hugged his neck and trailed her fingers down his mane. He let out a *neigh* by blowing out his lips, and Rachel laughed.

She and Fiona saddled and mounted their horses. Rachel and Micah remembered each other's rhythm as they can-

tered. She lifted off the saddle for one beat, stayed down for two. The air smelled like dry dirt and dandelions. She looked over at Fiona, whose face was clenched. She seemed nervous about what would happen next, her hands in tiny fists on the reins as if she would lose control of her horse if she let them slack even slightly.

Fiona rode a lot throughout the year; she lived just a short drive from a fancy stable. Rachel's mom had taken Rachel on Metro-North the previous fall to sleep over at Fiona's house in Larchmont, even though Rachel had insisted she could go alone. Fiona had a younger sister and an older brother, and they each had their own bedroom in their big house that looked the same as all the other big houses on the street. Inside there were freshly vacuumed carpets and a yellow Lab and parents who kissed each other on the cheek. There were brownies sitting warm and fresh on the counter like on those shows on Nick at Nite, and Fiona's mom was wearing an apron and cutting up vegetables and boiling water in the open kitchen. She asked Denise if she wanted to stay for a cup of tea, but Denise said no, she really had to be going. With her eyeliner and her cigarette breath, she didn't belong in that kitchen.

Then, when Fiona came to Rachel's apartment around Christmastime, Fiona's mom had stood in the doorway and looked inside with her mouth puckered like she'd just tasted something sour.

"You'll be here the whole time?" she'd asked Denise. Denise lied and said she would be. Later, after drinking a glass of white wine in the bathroom while she got ready for a date,

she winked at Fiona, saying, "This is our little secret." And Rachel could tell how much Fiona loved being able to have a secret from her mother. When the girls were alone, Rachel showed Fiona her room; then they ordered Chinese food with the twenty dollars her mom had left for them and watched *The Real World*. At the commercial, Fiona asked where Rachel's mom slept.

"Here," Rachel said, patting the couch they were sitting on.

"You mean there's only the one bedroom?"

"Yeah. Obviously."

"Wow," Fiona said. "She must really love you."

Rachel's dad paid for the apartment; her mom was a secretary. Fiona clearly had no idea how expensive a two bedroom in Manhattan was.

When *The Real World* was at commercial, Rachel asked Fiona, "Want to watch something crazy?"

She clicked through the channel guide and found Showtime, which she sometimes put on late at night when she was by herself. She clicked on the title of the movie that was playing, *Animal Instinct*. Immediately an image popped up of two people leaning against the bars of a cage in a zoo. The guy had no shirt on and was wearing army green shorts. The girl had on much shorter shorts and a matching army green, button-down shirt, which was open, showing a black lacy bra, and her legs were wrapped around his waist. He was holding her up around him with his strong arms.

"Ew!" Fiona said. "What is this, Rachel?"

Rachel giggled. "Look at her huge boobs," she said, and at that moment, the guy opened the front of the girl's bra

with his finger and thumb, and out they popped, these two giant things with two giant brown disks for nipples. Rachel's nipples were small and pink, like little bull's-eyes.

Fiona put a hand over her eyes.

"What are you so afraid of?" Rachel asked.

"This is so weird, Rachel," she said, her eyes still covered. "Please, just change the channel."

"Whatever," Rachel said. She turned back to *The Real World,* and they watched the rest of the episode in silence.

On the first Friday night of camp, they had a coed dance. Rachel wore a sequined, royal blue halter dress and silver heels with skinny straps. Fiona was in something flowered and paisley and flat, bone white sandals, because her mom wouldn't let her wear heels yet.

The dance was on the tennis courts in the boys' section of camp, with the girls standing on one side and the boys on the other until one of the boys made the first move. The previous summer, Rachel had been the first girl to be asked to dance. She knew that that sort of thing polarized people: There were girls who clung closer to her because of it and others who recoiled from her. She did wonder, in her limited, thirteen-year-old way, if Fiona only stayed friends with her because of what was, to Fiona, social capital.

That night it was Matthew Dawson, the tallest Hemlock boy, who breached the divide and tapped Rachel on the shoulder.

He was almost a foot taller than her, so anytime he tried

to talk as they danced—Who was in her tent this summer? Did she like this song?—he had to bend his head down, and she had to tilt hers up in a way that quickly became too tiresome to maintain. Soon they were dancing in relieved silence. Rachel could see Fiona and the other girls standing over in their circle looking at them. Matthew was in all the plays, and he was always the lead. That summer he was going to be Willy Wonka in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. He had all these big features: big eyes, big nose, big lips, big ears. During afternoon open, the free period on the flag lawn after lunch, he'd pretend to be a monster with the little Maple kids, picking them up and running around with them above his head.

A slow song came on, and Rachel was happy to see Geoff Mendelson ask Fiona to dance. Matthew moved in closer and put his arms around Rachel's waist. She clasped her arms tighter around his neck, and he crouched down, swaying with his knees in a sort of half bend. The positioning was awkward but made Rachel feel like she was being taken care of.

He cleared his throat. "Are you having a good time?" he asked, his eyes going wide with the question.

"Yeah. Are you?"

"Yeah," he said. "It's always a fun night."

She tucked a piece of hair behind her ear and then put her arm back on his shoulder.

"You look really pretty," he said, swallowing.

Now everyone was dancing in a clump, coupled up and

swaying to the song. Matthew moved his arms tighter around her waist and crouched more.

"Funny how so many of us are camp regulars now," he said. "When did we get so old?"

"Thirteen is not very old."

"Summer of 2000," he said. "The world was supposed to blow up by now."

"The real millennium isn't until 2001."

"Well, good," he said. "We have another six months."

By mid-July, the days were very hot, and the flies were worse than ever, but this didn't deter Rachel from riding. She took good care of Micah, and she was often the more thirsty and tired of the two. She made sure they stopped a lot to give him water on trail rides and took it easy, just trotting and cantering, no galloping. They were stuck together, so they had to move together. She was controlling him to move forward, but he was equally controlling her. There was a strength there that was almost scary but comforting at the same time. Some days the riding counselor let Rachel stay through lunch, when she would help straighten up the barn and feed the horses, and she would linger too long at Micah's stall, feeding him extra hay and carrots when the counselor wasn't watching.

Matthew started hanging around Rachel more: in the morning when the campers walked from the flag to breakfast, on the lawn during free period, in front of the dining

hall after lunch. "How's your day going?" he'd ask, and Rachel would tell him about riding and tennis and swimming or whatever else had happened that day. He talked about the play a lot.

"It's getting really good, I think," he'd say. "I hope you're excited for it."

Rachel was excited to see him in it. People started talking about them like they were a pair.

"What base have you gotten to with him?" Fiona whispered one night after lights-out.

"No base," Rachel said.

"Don't lie to me, Rachel! I'm your best camp friend."

"I'm not lying. No base."

She sighed. "Well, tell me as soon as you do get to one, okay?"

Fiona seemed ready to tell Rachel all her secrets at any moment.

"How far have you gone?" Fiona whispered in the bunk. "Like, ever?"

"I don't know," Rachel said. "Not far."

She sighed again. "You're so private sometimes."

In the city, kids saw things early; they learned the names of sex positions and underground drugs, and for many, it was not long before they tried them. And though Rachel knew things, she was something of a late bloomer in the Manhattan middle school social scene.

"You mean you don't get horny?" Karla once asked. Karla was Rachel's best friend at school; Karla had met her boy-

friend, Joe, who was in high school, late at night when they were both smoking weed in Riverside Park.

"I don't think you can be horny if you've never even done it," Rachel had said.

In the spring, Karla and Rachel had gone to Joe's apartment for a party, because his parents were never home. There were bottles and smoke everywhere, and there was loud rap music playing. Rachel sat on the couch between Karla and Kevin, Joe's younger brother. Kevin passed her a bottle of Bacardi, and she took a huge sip of it and swallowed. Kevin said, "Daaaaaamn, girl," and Rachel pretended it tasted like water even though inside, her lungs felt like they were tearing apart from each other. But the rush to her head was good, and it made her care less about where she was and about Kevin's arm clamped tight around her shoulder. She didn't remember how or when he started to kiss her, but she knew they were doing so right there in front of everyone.

The next day, Karla called her. "Kevin told Joe he had a great time with you last night."

"That's weird," Rachel said. "We hardly did anything."

"Yeah. He knows you're playing hard to get."

"I'm not meaning to."

"Well, meaning to or not," she said, "keep it up. It's working."

On Visitors' Day, Denise drove up in a rental car again and brought Rachel a bagel from their favorite neighborhood

deli. Fiona's family showed up to see her—her parents and her younger sister and their yellow Lab; her older brother was away at lacrosse camp. They had a picnic lunch together, Rachel's and Fiona's families; Mrs. Larkin had made chocolate-and-vanilla sandwich cookies, which weren't as good as regular Oreos.

After lunch, Rachel's mom took her to CVS to buy some toiletries; Fiona's thirteenth birthday was coming up the following week, so the Larkins went out for a "birthday surprise." Rachel filled up the shopping cart with necessities like toothpaste and bug spray, but also cans of Pringles, boxes of sugary cereal, and Pixy Stix, which she'd heard were fun to snort, while Denise wasn't looking. At the register, Rachel expected her mom to tell her to put all the junk food items back—partly because they weren't necessities and partly because Rachel wasn't supposed to eat that stuff anymore—but Denise was in a good mood. She smiled and didn't say a word, except to order a pack of Newport Lights from the guy behind the counter.

They drove back to camp with the windows open. Their relationship felt different in the country, all the stresses of city life left behind. There was no smog, no subways or sirens. Here it was just Denise and Rachel pared down, mother and daughter driving along a country road.

The unspoken element, of course, was that Rachel's dad made all this country ease possible. But he was the one with another family. He was the one who had left. This was, as they understood it, their due.

They parked next to the horse stables, and when they got out of the car, Rachel saw Fiona brushing a sandy-haired mare that wasn't one of the Camp Marigold horses. The rest of the Larkins surrounded them; Mrs. Larkin was taking pictures.

Rachel approached the fence of the arena, and Denise followed behind her with the CVS bags in her hands. When Fiona saw Rachel, she stopped brushing the horse and ran toward her friend.

She leaned against the fence, breathless. "They got me a horse, Rachel! Can you believe it? Her name is Josie. And you can ride her whenever you want."

Rachel looked up at her mom. Denise shoved the CVS bags into Rachel's arms and took the pack of Newports from her back pocket. She pulled one out and lit it right there. She took a long drag.

She wasn't allowed to smoke at camp. But Rachel decided not to say anything.

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory went on that night so the parents could see it, but Denise had already driven home to beat Sunday night traffic. The show was pretty bad, but Matthew had real talent, a way of dominating the entire stage.

At the end of the show, he came over to hug Rachel. He was sweating and had orange makeup on his face that she hadn't noticed from the audience. He smelled like he needed to put on more deodorant, but she liked it. It was a long hug,

their bodies closer than they had ever been, and she felt small and safe in it. She pulled away because otherwise she might have stayed for a long time.

"What'd you think?" he asked.

"You were great." Over Matthew's shoulder, Rachel saw Fiona watching them. "Do you want to meet up later?" Rachel asked.

His eyebrows went up, and he looked around the auditorium with all the kids and counselors laughing and buzzing.

"You mean sneak out?" he whispered.

"Yeah."

She knew that inside he was terrified and thrilled like her. She could tell by the way his nostrils were flaring and how his eyes had taken on a crazy wideness.

He slowly nodded. "Okay."

Later, after lights-out, it wasn't hard for Rachel to keep herself awake. Her pulse hammered against the flesh of her throat; her limbs were electric, tingling. When her watch said twelve-forty-five, she peeled up the mosquito net and climbed, very quietly, down on top of her trunk and then onto the wooden floor of the tent. She slipped on her flip-flops and tiptoed out of the back of the tent and stopped at the bathroom. She took her hair out of its bun and fluffed it around her face. She put on lip gloss and smacked her lips together. She pinched her cheeks to make them rosy.

She tiptoed out of girls' camp and all the way down the gravel road, which eventually ended at the stables. It was so

quiet and so hard to see at night that she had to move very slowly, so she didn't trip over a hidden root or a loose stone. Her eyes started to adjust to the dark, and she could see the rectangular wooden performing arts building ahead. They'd agreed to meet in the woods behind it.

When she walked around to the back of the building, a dead leaf crunched under her foot, and she paused. She saw a tall figure and held her breath as she moved closer.

"Hey," Matthew said. She moved toward him and saw he was also in his pajamas, flannel drawstring pants and a Camp Marigold hoodie.

They walked into the woods without talking. Marigold felt different at night: dark and scary but in a good way. Like it was uncharted territory. Like it was impossible there were hundreds of kids and counselors sleeping in their bunks in the very same camp.

Matthew slowed and stopped at a spot between two trees.

"This is good," he said and took off his backpack. Then he pulled a blanket out of it and spread it over the flat part of the ground. He was very careful to flatten and even it out just so.

They sat down on the blanket at the same time. They looked at their feet.

"I was really happy that you invited me out here," he finally said.

"Oh," she said. "How come?"

"Well, I've always had a crush on you." His voice cracked on the word "always," and he cleared his throat. "Well, not always. But you know. For a long time."

Just the edges of their kneecaps were touching.

"How long?" she asked.

He thought about it for a minute. "Since Buckeye summer, I think," he said. "Yeah, that was it. You were green team captain that year, weren't you?"

"I think so."

"You were. I remember you were standing in front of all the Buckeye girls at the pool before a swim race and leading a green team cheer. We were at the athletic shed playing four square, but I saw you all the way over at the pool in your green shorts and green paint under your eyes and your hair in two braids. I couldn't hear what you were yelling, but it didn't matter because everyone was listening to you and watching you. You were really, really in charge of all those girls."

"That's funny," she said. "I don't remember that."

"Anyway." He cleared his throat again. "I just am trying to say that I like you, Rachel." Before she could say anything back, he leaned in and pressed his mouth against hers. Then his tongue pushed its way into her mouth, poking and prodding as if it was going to find something in there.

They kissed like that for several minutes. She could tell Matthew thought that was what he was supposed to do. She didn't really know at the time exactly what you were supposed to do, but she knew it couldn't be that.

She finally pulled away to take a breath. He was panting.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she said, which he took as "Let's keep going," and he went back in. This time, though, he rolled over on top

of her. He pressed down into her, and she could feel his penis, erect and hard, poking the bottom of her stomach. He was slobbering, grunting, a different person from the one she thought she was starting to get to know. But as he moved down slightly, it started to feel right—not quite as good as when she was riding Micah, but a hint of it. They stayed that way for a long time, their bodies heating up inside their flannel pajamas, until she also began to feel like a different person.

Then in the midst of all the grinding and grunting, Matthew reached a hand up her pajama top, and as soon as he cupped his hand around her breast and squeezed, he went, *"Oh,"* and his body convulsed against hers.

"Sorry," he said, glancing down at himself, and it took her a moment to understand what had happened.

They lay on the blanket looking up at the stars for a few minutes until Rachel said, "We should probably go back now." They walked out of the woods not touching and got to the hill separating the boys' and girls' camps. He went in to give her a hug goodbye.

"You're supposed to kiss me good night," she said, and he did, dutifully.

Rachel was so tired in the morning that Fiona had to shake her awake.

"What's wrong with you, Rachel?" she asked.

Rachel groaned. She could barely keep her eyes open as they walked to the showers.

"You're seriously acting so weird," Fiona said when they were getting dressed and Rachel was practically silent.

"I just didn't sleep that well last night," Rachel said.

"Whatever," Fiona said, suspicious.

At flag raising, Rachel looked over at Matthew as he was yawning. He caught her glance and smiled with half his mouth, like he wasn't sure if he was supposed to or not.

Rachel offered a mischievous smile back, then flipped her hair behind her. She grabbed Fiona's arm, and they walked arm in arm to the dining room. He followed behind them the whole way. Rachel had never liked coffee before, but at breakfast she was so tired that she decided she wanted a cup. In the dining hall, boys and girls sat on opposite sides, but as Rachel went up to the coffee station in the middle—which was supposed to be for counselors only—Matthew came rushing toward her.

"Hey," he said conspiratorially. "Are you allowed to be up here?"

"I don't know," Rachel said without an iota of worry.

"Let me get it for you," he said, taking the cup from her.

"Skim milk, two Sweet'N Lows," Rachel said, which was the way her mom fixed hers.

He handed the coffee and the Sweet'N Low packets to Rachel and said, "Want to sit together on the lawn during free period?"

He was just a boy again—nervous and human. Whatever he had been the night before, in the middle of all the sweating and heaving, that was not who Rachel was looking at now. Now he was a boy who would do whatever she wanted.

Fiona could have her stupid horse.

"Maybe," Rachel said, and turned away, flipping her hair behind her once more.

When she got back and sat down at the table, Fiona leaned against her. She had been watching. "Did something happen with him last night?"

"Maybe," she said.

"What did you guys do?"

"None of your business," Rachel said, stirring the Sweet'N Low into her coffee.

The excitement on Fiona's face fell away. "That'll give you cancer," she said about the Sweet'N Low.

"See if I care," Rachel said, and took a scalding sip.

2

Denise smoked one cigarette after another on the drive home, lighting each new one with the butt from the last. She felt a stronger urge to smoke in the country than she did in the city, as if it were the clean air that didn't belong in her lungs. She had the radio tuned to classic rock and was pushing eighty on the Taconic. She just wanted to get home.

The blue lights of a police car lit up in her rearview mirror. She knew immediately that they were for her. "Fuck," she muttered to herself, and put on her blinker as she slowed and pulled onto the shoulder of the parkway.

She put out her cigarette in the car's ashtray and turned off the radio. The cop car, with the words HIGHWAY POLICE stamped on the hood, slowed and parked behind her. She checked her reflection quickly in the overhead mirror and

pinched her cheeks and lips for a flush of color. As the officer walked toward her, he grew larger in the side-view mirror. Aviator sunglasses obscured his eyes. She rolled down her driver's-side window.

"Hello, Officer," she said. He pushed his sunglasses to the top of his head, and now she saw what she was working with. He was probably in his early twenties, with chubby cheeks and a hint of a moustache that looked like it was having trouble growing. She took a quick look at his name tag: OFFICER DANIEL MCGILL.

"Ma'am, are you aware of how fast you were driving?" Officer McGill asked, tentatively peering into Denise's car.

"Was I speeding?" Denise had at least fifteen years on him. "I had no idea."

"I clocked you going eighty-three in a fifty-five."

Denise gasped—which, as soon as she did it, felt ridiculous to her. But she did what she had to do. "I'm so sorry, Officer McGill," she said, bringing an equally ridiculous hand to her mouth.

He took a pad and a pen from the breast pocket of his uniform and wrote something down. "License and registration, please," he said.

Denise beamed up at him. She wasn't as young as she used to be, but she was still attractive. Only, he wasn't even looking at her.

"Do you have kids, Officer?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"I was visiting my daughter at camp," Denise said. "I still

have another six weeks without her, and she's so young." She saw this elicited no response from him. "She's all I've got," she tried.

"It sounds difficult, ma'am." His voice cracked into a higher register, and he cleared his throat. "But if you could just give me your license and registration, I can run your information, and this will be over in no time."

She imagined how freeing it might be to start the ignition and drive over the divider onto the other side of the Taconic and go back in the direction she came from, to scoop up Rachel and bring her home. Every summer, Denise would see how happy her daughter became when she got to camp. But then, during Denise's drive back to the city, her regrets would grow. Rachel didn't belong there. She was a city girl, like Denise: hard and street-smart and tough. Denise knew it took two people to make one kid, but she resented every hint of Mark she saw in her daughter. Every time Rachel asked for a designer bag or went to the suburbs to ride horses with Fiona, Denise's heart flinched. That kind of spoiled, materialistic behavior could only have been borne from him.

"Let me tell you," Denise said, trying to make herself emotional. "It's the biggest sacrifice of your life. Don't ever do it." She wiped a fake tear from her eye. "They need you, and they need you, and then, just like that"—she snapped her fingers—"they don't need you."

"Ma'am," Officer McGill said, "I'm sorry that you're upset, but if you're not going to cooperate, I'm going to have to ask you to step outside of the car."

"And you know why?" she said. "It's because you can't

give them what they need anymore. Imagine that. A mother, not being able to give her own daughter what she needs."

Denise opened her purse and took out her wallet. She opened it, and then remembered the unpaid tickets. For some time now she had been receiving the envelopes with the red block letters on the front of them, and she had ignored them, quietly hoping they would go away. Mark always paid for a rental car in the summer for Denise and Rachel, for camp. Somehow last summer she'd managed to get pulled over several times. She couldn't help the feelings of rage that fucking camp brought out in her.

Quickly, she closed the wallet.

"Officer, I completely forgot my license back in the city," she lied, rapidly thinking of ways to get out of this.

"Ma'am, if you don't have your license with you, I'm going to need your name and Social Security number."

"Does it really need to come to that?" she said. He didn't smile back at her. So she took her hand and reached outside the car window, toward his leg, and grazed his inner thigh with her fingers.

But she could make contact for only a moment before he slapped her hand away and pulled the gun from his holster, which, she then realized, in an instant of panic, was inches from the spot she'd touched.

He pointed the gun shakily at her. "Ma'am, keep your hands inside the car."

Denise shrieked and cowered with her arms over her head. She squeezed her eyes shut. She heard him speak into his portable radio and report his location. She wanted to say

that this was all just a misunderstanding. She tried to explain herself, but nothing came out except a stream of tears—real this time—and short, labored breaths.

Someone radioed back. She peeked one eye open; the gun was still pointed toward her window. She made a squeaking noise when she saw it there so close to her face, and ducked farther down, squeezing her eyes tighter.

"Copy that," she heard the boy say into his radio. He let out a sigh.

She peeked again and now looked up at the boy. The gun was back in his holster. He was looking at her with an intensely worried expression on his face.

"Ma'am," he said, and she watched him with one squinted eye as he lowered his face to window level so that the worried expression was hidden away. "It's okay. I'm not going to shoot you."

Slowly she opened her eyes and lifted her head.

"You can't touch me again," he said. "Do you understand?"

She nodded emphatically. "I won't."

"It's a felony," he said.

"Okay," she said, wiping away a tear. "I didn't know."

He looked around. The other cops hadn't arrived yet.

"I'm sorry," he said, and exhaled. He put his face into his hands. He pressed his palms into his eye sockets and groaned.

When he removed his hands, his eyes were red from the pressure or maybe from tears. Denise couldn't tell.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I panicked."

"That's okay." Denise sat up straight. She wanted to touch him again, but in a comforting, maternal way.

"It's my first week on the job."

She nodded. He looked so uneasy. He was searching her eyes for reassurance. "You're doing great," she said.

The East Fishkill Police Station was a small gray brick building on a quiet country road. A stone pathway led to a modest garden up front, which a Hispanic man was happily tending. The building looked more like a tourist center in a nice country town than a police station.

"*Hola,* Oscar," said the older cop now accompanying her—Officer McGill's backup.

"Hola, señor," Oscar said back to him.

But inside, the station looked like what Denise had only seen on TV: linoleum flooring, fluorescent lights, one open room with a few folding metal chairs at the front, an old woman at a reception desk, and, behind her, rows of desks facing one another, mostly unoccupied, with scattered papers on top of them all.

"Hiya, Doreen," the cop said to the woman at the desk, who wore her hair in a frizzy gray bun and sipped coffee from a mug that said I'M SILENTLY JUDGING YOU.

"Hey, Bud," she said, looking up from her clunky desktop computer. She made eye contact with Denise and tilted her head in surprise, as if this were the first time in years she was seeing a stranger.

"She needs to use the phone," Bud said, and Doreen skeptically pushed the tan rotary phone across the desk.

Denise dialed Mark's cell number, which she knew by memory, and waited for him to pick up.

"It's me," she said.

A pause. She could hear some cheerful domestic commotion: a teen boy's laugh, a dog barking, the wife's upbeat voice in the background: "Who is that, sweetie?"

"Hold on a second," he said into the phone. She heard something muffled, imagined him covering the receiver, telling his wife it was work. Then shuffling and a door shutting.

"What the hell are you doing?" His voice was hushed. "It's a Sunday."

"I know. I'm sorry. It's an emergency."

"What's going on?" he said with sudden urgency. "Is she okay?"

"She's fine. She's doing great."

Denise looked up at Bud, who was standing expectantly, watching her, listening to the conversation, his arms crossed. And then at Doreen staring stone-faced, holding her oversized mug in both of her wrinkled hands.

"I got pulled over," she whispered into the phone, as if the people at the police station didn't already know.

"So what?" Mark said.

"So my license is suspended."

When Bud had gotten to the highway and run Denise's info, he'd discovered those many envelopes that had been accumulating over the year, and that another envelope had come informing Denise of the license suspension.

"Jesus, Denise."

"They won't let me drive," she said sheepishly. She felt like she was a little girl again, confessing to her father right before he spanked her that yes, she had stolen five dollars from his drawer.

"How the fuck were you able to even take out a car?"

"I dunno." She'd just gone to the same shoddy Avis that she went to every year, the one with the Mexican guys behind the counter who always flirted with her.

A sharp, angry exhale. "Where are you?"

After she hung up, Denise waited in one of the metal chairs near Doreen's desk. A few cops were milling in and out of offices, drinking coffee. Some made phone calls from their desks in the open room. Doreen typed, periodically looked at Denise, sipped her coffee, typed again.

"You work here long?" Denise finally said to break the silence.

"Thirty-seven years," Doreen said.

"Wow," Denise said. "Impressive."

Doreen raised her eyebrows in a way that said *Yeah, I know.*

"I'm a secretary too," Denise said. "In the city."

"The city, huh."

"That's right."

"Never liked it."

Denise nodded. "It's not for everyone."

Doreen leaned forward, took another sip from her mug. "That was your husband before?"

Denise shook her head. "We were never married."

"But you wanted to be."

Denise considered this. "It's complicated."

"But you got a kid with him?"

"I do." She thought this might be her in with Doreen. "Rachel. She's thirteen."

"Never had kids," Doreen said. "We didn't want 'em."

Denise had met Mark on her first day at Kimmel, Johnson, and Murphy, LLC, spring of 1985. She wore her pencil skirt and her kitten heels, and she was so nervous. She had been the receptionist at her stepdad's tiny real estate office in Downtown Brooklyn for the previous five years, since she had graduated from high school, but then her mom had divorced her stepdad, and the job went too. This was her first time working in Manhattan. She'd answered an ad in the classifieds, and amazingly, they'd hired her. She had a lot of experience, and her new supervisor said she had "spunk."

The law firm was on the thirty-fourth floor of a skyscraper on East Thirty-Ninth Street; the Chrysler Building was so close that Denise couldn't see to the top of it from the office. She was working for a short and fat attorney who sweated profusely, and she had been told in the interview that part of the job was constantly running to and from the dry cleaners to switch out his dirty shirts for clean ones. He went through at least two of them each day. Her desk was situated outside his office, and his phone did not stop ringing all morning. In fact, the whole office was men walking briskly

between offices in their suits, and phones continually ringing on the desks outside the offices, and secretaries at the desks picking up the phones and speaking in their cheerful yet professional, capable voices: "So-and-so's office; and who may I ask is calling?" Denise, on the other hand, felt as if she bumbled every time she picked up the phone and had already disconnected the line twice when trying to transfer a call to her attorney. At one P.M. on her first day, she had not yet eaten or gone to the bathroom, and she wouldn't have minded taking a fifteen-minute break to do so.

She noticed the man walking toward her attorney's office, swaggering, really, with his head held erect and a calm, satisfied expression on his face. He seemed so comfortable, so at ease, so very capable. He was tall and he had wide shoulders, and though Denise knew nothing about expensive suits, she recognized that he was wearing one. He noticed her—she knew he did—and bashfully she looked down to scribble nonsense onto the pad of paper in front of her.

"Hi there," she heard the man say, and she looked up at him. His face was so clean-shaven that there wasn't a hint of stubble, and she had the urge to reach out and feel how smooth it might be. He had long eyelashes, like a girl's, which made his eyes seem deep and important.

He put a hand out when she didn't say anything back. "I'm Mark," he said.

"I'm Denise."

His hand gripped hers hard. "Is it your first day?" he asked, so kindly, so sweetly, that she wanted him to wrap her up in his arms just then. It was odd; this man must have been

in his forties. He had some gray hairs on his head and lots of wrinkles around his eyes. She had a boyfriend in Brooklyn, a mechanic she met getting her car fixed, who was twenty-three like her.

She nodded. "Yes," she said.

"And how is it going?"

"It's fine," she said. "I really need to go to the bathroom."

He broke into a wide grin, showing his rich white teeth. "Do you want me to sit at your desk?" he asked.

"That would be so nice," she said with a grateful sigh.

When she came back, he was sitting in her chair, legs up on the desk, talking to someone on the phone with his fingers twirling around the cord.

"Oh yes, we've begun hiring male receptionists," he was saying into the phone. "Equal opportunity." He looked up at Denise and winked at her, as if he was crafting this private joke for just the two of them.

Mark appeared breathless at the front door to the police station an hour later. He was dressed in jeans, boat shoes, and a polo. Denise was used to seeing him in his suit jackets and loosened ties on weeknights. She wished that she wasn't still attracted to him—it would have made things so much easier—that his extra weight and increasingly high forehead repelled her, made her pity his age and his mortality, for she was twenty years younger than him and still wore the same dress size as she had when they met. But his aging made her feel a tenderness toward him. It was dignified, even, the way

he was growing older; it made her feel, as she always felt about him, as if he knew more than she did, as if she was being taken care of. It was just a few months since they had last slept together.

"You made good time," Denise said to him. At camp, after seeing the other mothers in their conservative Bermuda shorts, she had wondered if her outfit was too provocative. But now she was glad for what she was wearing: denim shorts that showed off her legs, platform wedges, and a tight graphic T-shirt that she shared with Rachel.

Mark took one wordless look at Denise and then walked over to Bud.

"Mark Weinberg," he said, shaking the older cop's hand. "Is this going to cost me anything?"

Bud seemed alarmed by Mark's brusqueness. He glanced at Denise sitting with her hands in her lap. "Technically, no bail posted. But your, um—"

"My ex," Mark said.

"Yes." Bud cleared his throat. "She has overdue speeding tickets. That's why her license was suspended. Altogether she owes four hundred and eighty-five dollars."

Mark turned to Denise. "How do you have so many speeding tickets? You only drive once a year."

"Three times," she corrected. "To drop Rachel off, Visitors' Day, and to pick her up."

"And you get pulled over every time?"

"How would I know?"

Mark paid to get a tow truck to pick up the rental. Then, in his own car, he took Denise into the city.

They were mostly silent on the drive. Ray-Bans shaded his eyes, even though the sun was beginning to set. He was speeding.

Soon the parkway widened, and traffic slowed at a light when the road turned local in Westchester. It was eight o'clock; the sky had become an expanse of dark purples and blues. As they merged onto the Saw Mill and got closer to the city, traffic slowed more dramatically. Mark wasn't giving in to the new pace. Each time the car in front of him decelerated, he waited until the last possible moment to slam the brakes, which would cause Denise's body to jerk forward, then jolt back into the seat.

"Could you stop doing that?" she finally asked.

Just then his cellphone rang. He looked at it and cursed. "Don't say anything," he told Denise, and then he turned the radio all the way down.

He told his wife that no, he didn't hear the office phone ring; it must be disconnected on weekends (a particularly bad lie, Denise thought; he was getting lazy with the lies). This case was such a shit show, he said. He would just be another hour or two. It was a Sunday night, so who knew how bad traffic would be? He said he was sorry again and again.

Denise missed hearing him saying sorry like that to her, plaintively, like he meant it. That was how it was at the beginning; he was always so sorry that he had to go back home to his wife. So sorry that he had to cancel their dinner plans again. When he got the apartment for Denise on the Upper West Side, she thought the sorries were close to over. He told

his wife that having a place in the city just made sense for the nights he needed to work late. His lies were getting craftier, more complex, and the stakes were higher. Denise knew this was a good thing for her, that it meant there would be more sorries for the wife and fewer for her.

He never told Denise he'd leave his wife, but he made her feel soft and pliable; she let him do whatever he wanted to her. How she ached just watching him walk naked across their bedroom—*their* bedroom! He made her whole body feel bright and calm. She didn't have to do anything but bask in that feeling, like lying on the side of the bed where the sun shines right on you.

When they got into the city, Mark's cursing and road rage worsened. He flipped off cabbies and honked at pedestrians. "This is why I don't drive here," he said as he held down his horn when a bus cut him off.

"You *were* in the bus lane," Denise said jokingly.

"Out of all people, *you're* going to tell me how to drive right now?"

"I was just trying to make light of it."

He let out a chortle without an iota of humor in it. "Light? Make light? Okay, let's make light of this." He took one hand from the steering wheel and started counting off with his fingers. "You call me on a Sunday. You have me leave my family and come up to Upstate New York to get you. You have me pay five hundred dollars—"

"I didn't ask you to pay that!"

"You couldn't pay it, Denise! You're broke!"

"I am not. They just wouldn't let me leave."

"And then I have to take you all the way into the city and lie to my wife about it. Yet again."

"I could have taken the train."

"Well, you didn't present that option at the time, did you?"

She'd promised herself she would never cry in front of him. Her mother used to warn her about that, even when she was a girl: "Don't you *ever* cry in front of a man. They'll take your weakness and build themselves up with it." But she'd broken that oath a long time ago. He'd seen her cry so many times at this point that he now held her weaknesses in the palm of his hand.

He turned onto Amsterdam. He looked over at her.

"I'm sorry," he said when he saw that she was upset. "That was uncalled for."

Denise quickly wiped away a tear with the back of her hand.

He pulled onto her block and slowed the car in front of the apartment building.

"Why do you hate me?" she said.

He put the car into park.

She wanted to hear him say "I don't hate you." Instead he took a breath through his nose, like a bull preparing to fight.

"I heard on a talk show that the opposite of love isn't hate," she said, sniffling. "It's neutral."

"It's not the same as it was."

"But don't you remember what it felt like? It was the best feeling in the world. That kind of thing just doesn't go away."

"I remember," he admitted, and then used his fatherly

tone again. "But you knew the deal. It was your choice to . . ." He trailed off, not saying the unspoken thing that was always there. Rachel was a choice; Rachel was *her* choice. "You know I wouldn't give her up for the world now. It's just that this"—he gestured between the two of them—"this was never going to happen in a real, long-term way." He put one arm on her shoulder. "It *can't* happen." He always said this, and then they would always fall into things all over again.

When Rachel was a little girl, Denise had tried to make it work, being a mistress. She raised Rachel in the apartment that Mark paid for. They would get a babysitter and go out on weeknights, and though Denise initially thought having a child together would put a damper on the sex, she found it actually brought them closer, sharing this person together. It was a more profound bridge between them than she could have ever imagined. As Rachel got older, Mark had started to pull away from Denise, but they would still sleep together from time to time. Their sex became more secretive and urgent—no more dates, just late-night visits, him leaving early in the morning before Rachel awoke.

"If Rachel hadn't been born," Denise said now, "do you think—"

"I'm married, Denise," he said softly. "I have a family."

"You have two families."

She could see how sorry he was, the bags underneath his eyes lined with weariness. "I have two families. And I love both of my families. I love Rachel very much, and this isn't good for her," he said.

She could tell by how sad he looked, how hard it seemed for him to say this, that he was serious about it now. Like picking her up from this faraway police station had been his final straw. She had done this to herself.

"The on-again, off-again. Her knowing about my situation, us literally shoving it into her face every time I'm around. The sneaking behind her back, which she definitely knows about. I just think . . . I think a strictly platonic relationship between you and me is healthier for her."

She fought it; she cried; she pawed at him and said hurtful things about his wife, about who he was as a person. Uncharacteristically, he sat there and took the flak, which also meant that he meant it this time.

But she knew he was right. He loved their daughter. He loved her so much.

Denise got out and slammed the door without saying goodbye. She starting walking toward the glass door of her apartment building and then, instinctively, turned around. She could see that he already had his hand on the gearshift, but she tapped on the passenger-side window before he could drive away.

He rolled down the window and looked at her.

"I'll pay you back," she said adamantly.

He shook his head. "No you won't."

"That was the deal," she said. "Not a dollar for me."

"I'm not saying you shouldn't pay me back. I'm saying that you won't."

"But you don't—"

"You are an adult woman, Denise," he continued. "This is not a matter of being 'too busy' to pay speeding tickets. You have responsibilities that you do not take seriously."

He had always taken care of her, but there didn't used to be this hardness.

"Frankly," he continued in that patriarchal tone, "it's worrisome."

"I'm paying you back," she said again. "And don't fucking talk to me like that. I'm not your daughter."

Denise looked into his face. Rachel got those long eyelashes from him.

THE WINDFALL

A NOVEL

DIKSHA BASU

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First Edition

FOR MY PARENTS
AND THEIR PARENTS

THE WINDFALL

ONE

Mr. Jha had worked hard and he was ready to live well.

"Seeing that all of you are here, we have some news," he said to the neighbors assembled in the small living room of his home in the Mayur Palli Housing Complex in East Delhi. He was nervous, so he looked over at his wife, who was standing in the doorway of the kitchen, and his son, Rupak, who was at home for the summer vacation, sitting on a dining table chair. His wife met his gaze and nodded gently, expectantly, encouraging him to hurry up and share the news. And he knew he had to, before the gossip spread through the housing complex. Tonight they had invited their closest friends—Mr. and Mrs. Gupta, Mr. and Mrs. Patnaik, and Mrs. Ray—to tell them that after about twenty-five years (they had moved in when Mrs. Jha was eight months pregnant) they were moving out, and not just moving out, but moving to Gurgaon, one of the richest new neighborhoods of Delhi.

It would have been easier, in a way, to announce a move to Dubai or Singapore or Hong Kong. Mr. Jha himself had often been part of conversations that criticized families for moving to different Delhi neighborhoods the minute they could afford to. And certainly nobody of his generation had moved out in recent

years. He was fifty-two years old, his wife was forty-nine, and their twenty-three-year-old son was in business school in America. The move was going to be seen as an unnecessary display of his newly acquired wealth. And since the money had come from the onetime sale of a website, everyone in Mayur Palli treated it with suspicion. Nobody believed it was hard-earned money. "A lucky windfall," he had heard Mr. Gupta call it. But Mr. Jha knew that it had been anything but luck; it had been hard work.

If an outsider, a stranger, were to see them all gathered here, would he see that Mr. Jha was different, Mr. Jha wondered? He was five foot eight and was neither impressively fit nor impressively fat. The fact that he didn't have the traditional trappings of success worried him these days. He liked fitting in.

The new house in Gurgaon was a two-story bungalow with front and back yards, and they knew nothing at all about the neighbors yet. The house was tucked into a quiet lane away from the traffic and chaos of the rest of Delhi. Unlike in other parts of the city, all the drains were properly sealed and the streets were swept and cleaned on a regular basis. Big, decades-old neem trees lined both sides of their lane, and it was the kind of quiet that made it a place that hawkers and beggars avoided.

It was a much more lavish home and neighborhood than Mr. Jha had ever imagined himself living in. Not only did the doors fit in their frames, but most of the light switches had dimmers. There was a separate servants' quarter at the back, and a wall went around the periphery so nobody could look in or out. Unlike Mayur Palli, and the rest of East Delhi for that matter, the houses in Gurgaon were spaced grandly apart and interactions between the neighbors seemed minimal. Mr. Jha knew he was supposed to want that—that was how rich people's tastes were supposed to be.

Above his head a fat fly thumped repeatedly against the tubelight. The new house had better screens in the windows to stop flies and mosquitoes from invading. Mr. Jha took off his rimless glasses and wiped them with the white handkerchief he always

kept in his shirt pocket. He wished he had opted for a short-sleeved shirt today instead of the long-sleeved blue one he had neatly tucked into his khaki slacks.

The Jhas were one of the original residents of Mayur Palli when they moved there in 1991. Mayur Palli meant, literally, the home of the peacock, but Mr. Jha had never seen a peacock anywhere near the area. Four buildings, each five floors high, were built around a dusty courtyard small enough for everyone to be able to peer into their neighbors' windows. Every morning, wet laundry hung from ropes on the balconies, water dripping down to the courtyard. Downstairs, what had once been a space for the children to run and play and ride bicycles was now a clogged parking lot. A parking lot filled with scooters and Marutis and maybe the occasional Honda, bought for aging parents as a gift by adult children living abroad.

But now, on top of the fact that the Jhas were moving, the Mercedes Mr. Jha had ordered had arrived early and, embarrassingly, he had to take possession of it here in the old housing complex. He hadn't wanted the car delivery person to see his current home, or his current neighbors to see his new car. What must the delivery person have thought driving it across the bridge to the wrong side of the Yamuna River? The silver car was big and shiny and completely out of place in the middle-class neighborhood and was nearly impossible to navigate past the cows in the narrow lanes. And clearly the car was annoying others. Just the previous morning, the undersides of the door handles had been covered with toothpaste and Mr. Jha had had a very minty-smelling morning drive. He was grateful it was only toothpaste.

Sometimes Mr. Jha himself couldn't believe how much money his site had made. It had been such an easy idea—www.simplycall.com—that began as an online resource for local Delhi phone numbers and services. Mr. Jha had been trying to call his old friend Partha Sen in Chittaranjan Park to reminisce about their college days but had accidentally called a Partho Sen from

the directory. He had chatted with the unknown Partho Sen for a good four minutes before either of them realized it was a wrong number.

Despite others' perception, this was no lucky windfall, Mr. Jha now reminded himself. He had sold the website a little over two years ago, after working on it for five years. And before that he had had several more complicated ventures that had failed completely. But all that was in the past. This was now and he had to break the news.

"You've found a bride for Rupak?" Mr. Gupta said before Mr. Jha could continue. He was leaning back on the sofa and holding a fistful of peanuts in one hand and a glass of whiskey with ice in the other. He wore a crisp white kurta and pajama, his uniform of choice ever since he had become the president of the housing complex, and his feet were bare and resting on top of his sandals. "Is she also living in America? Don't let her family talk you into having a wedding in America."

As the current president of the housing complex, and one of the biggest gossips in the neighborhood, Mr. Gupta was the one who was going to take the news the hardest. He would see the move from Mayur Palli as a betrayal. The Patnaiks, who were a few years younger than the Jhas and were quieter versions of the Guptas, would probably try to move on the Jhas' heels. Mr. Patnaik already dressed similarly to Mr. Jha and had recently bought the exact same pair of glasses but then claimed it was a coincidence. And if anyone asked Mr. Jha to describe Mrs. Patnaik without looking at her, all he would be able to say was that she had strangely curly hair but no other discernible features.

"That is true," Mrs. Gupta added. She was also eating peanuts, one of which had fallen and was cradled on her glasses, which were hanging off a metal chain around her neck. She wiped her hand against her sari and leaned forward to pick up her glass. "Our nephew got married there and all the Indian weddings end up in the huge halls of the local Hilton or Marriott. You make sure the wedding is in India, in a temple."

"Or outdoors," Mr. Gupta said. "Lots of young people these days want to get married outdoors."

"Personally I don't think that is a good idea. You don't want the flame of the fire to be blown out during the ceremony," Mrs. Gupta said.

"The flame will go out soon enough after marriage," Mr. Gupta said, laughing loudly and tossing the remaining peanuts into his mouth.

"That's not the news," Mr. Jha said.

"Rupak will find a good bride here," Mr. Patnaik said.

His wife nodded and added, "He will. It's best to find someone known. Someone close to the family."

She turned toward Rupak and smiled, but his attention was focused on his phone. Everyone in Mayur Palli knew that the Patnaiks wanted Rupak to marry their daughter, Urmila.

"No," Mr. Jha said. "This isn't about . . ."

"Oh dear. Is Rupak marrying an American girl?" Mrs. Gupta interrupted, twisting around on the sofa to try to look at Rupak.

"This isn't about Rupak," Mr. Jha said. "We have some other news. About us."

He stopped as Reema Ray entered his line of vision, settling into the seat across from him with a glass of white wine. He knew his wife had already told Mrs. Ray about the move but had still insisted on inviting her tonight for support. Mrs. Ray was leaning forward and fixing a strap on her sandal, and the pallu of her chiffon sari slipped off her shoulder. Her blouse was sufficiently low cut for the tops of her heavy breasts to be visible. Her hair, worn loose and messily around her shoulders—unlike any of the other women in the room—fell in front of her and she tossed it back as she leaned forward.

Mr. Jha looked toward Mrs. Jha, still standing near the entrance to the kitchen, wearing a stiff starched pale blue sari that was held up on the shoulder by a safety pin and her hair pulled securely back in a low bun. He knew that his wife would never run the risk of letting her pallu casually drop. And even if it did, her

blouse came up to her collarbones so nothing would be visible. And even if anything were visible, Mr. Jha would feel no thrill. Such was the problem with a stable marriage.

Mrs. Ray was sitting upright again, so Mr. Jha continued, "We wanted to invite all of you, our close friends, to dinner tonight, to tell you about our home. Our new home. Our—"

Mrs. Jha sniffed the air. "Oh no. Oh no, oh no, oh no. I've left the stove on. The chicken will be burnt."

She went rushing into the kitchen, irritated with herself. The stress of moving to Gurgaon was really getting to her. She wasn't sure she wanted to leave Mayur Palli. She didn't want to live surrounded by women in designer saris who shopped in malls. She didn't want to use olive oil instead of vegetable oil. She didn't want to understand what interior decoration meant. The point of life was not just to keep moving higher and higher. What happened if you made it to Buckingham Palace?

"Are you okay? Do you need some help in here?" Mrs. Ray came in after Mrs. Jha. "Your husband has started on what the idea of 'home' represents. He's having a hard time making this announcement, isn't he?"

"The chicken is burnt. Oh, Reema. The chicken is burnt. And the packing isn't finished. I know I should be happy, but I'm exhausted. I don't know why we decided to do this whole move in the middle of summer. The heat is just getting to me."

"Where are your maids? Do you want me to send Ganga over every morning until you leave? She hardly has anything to do for just me these days."

"That's very nice of you, but we still have our maids. But Anil has decided he doesn't want them at home all the time."

Mrs. Jha stirred the pan, scraping the wooden spoon along the bottom, trying to pry free the burnt bits of chicken. The screw holding the red handle in place was coming loose and she still had not ordered new kitchen supplies. This kitchen was made for maids to use; it was small and badly ventilated, and being in here meant being completely separated from the rest of the people in

the apartment. The new house had a huge kitchen where a few people could stand around while the host prepared dinner or put together a platter of appetizers. That kitchen, in fact, was specifically meant for nonmaids. It was a kitchen that was meant to be shown off. It was a kitchen that needed new pots and pans with secure handles.

"Why doesn't he want maids?" Mrs. Ray asked.

"We got this dishwasher installed and Anil wants people to notice it. He's convinced that if there's a maid picking up all the dishes, everyone will just assume she's washing them by hand and won't know that we have an expensive imported dishwasher. I don't know. I don't understand half the things he wants these days," Mrs. Jha said. The kitchen was small and stuffy, but she appreciated Mrs. Ray coming in here with her. On the next stove, the pressure cooker hissed and Mrs. Jha jerked away from its angry sound. Mrs. Ray came to the stove and turned it off.

"Move," Mrs. Ray said. "You relax. Take the raita out of the fridge. I'll handle the stove. You didn't need to invite us all over in the middle of your packing."

Mrs. Jha stepped away and opened the fridge. She could feel the sweat gathering under her arms. She leaned down and allowed the refrigerated air to slip down the front of her blouse. She was gaining weight. She looked over at Mrs. Ray, who seemed to become younger and more beautiful every day. Granted, at forty-two, Mrs. Ray was seven years younger than Mrs. Jha, but her glow wasn't just about age. She looked younger now than she did when Mr. Ray had died five years ago. Mrs. Ray had been only thirty-seven when her husband died, and at first widowhood had forced her to immediately become older. But Mrs. Jha had noticed Mrs. Ray gradually reversing that trend, and now she looked over at her friend with happiness and a sudden stab of envy. Even her hair seemed to have become thicker.

"Your hair is looking good these days." Mrs. Jha said, and shut the fridge. "Are you using some new hair oil?"

Mrs. Ray turned around from the stove, wiped her hands on

the towel that was on the counter, and touched her right hand to her hair.

"It's improved, hasn't it?"

"Share your secret, Reema."

"The usual," Mrs. Ray said. "Lots of leafy green vegetables and coconut oil in the hair overnight once a week."

"We've been doing that for years. It must be something else," Mrs. Jha said.

Mrs. Ray laughed a little and turned back to the stove to open the pressure cooker.

"What is it?" Mrs. Jha asked. "What secret are you keeping from me?"

Mrs. Ray faced Mrs. Jha.

"Oh, Bindu, it's ridiculous. Prenatal supplements! I'm taking prenatal supplements because I read that it helps the hair, and it's true—my hair has never looked better! Every alternate day I take one pill," Mrs. Ray said. "I feel so crazy when I go to the chemist to buy it; I make up some excuse or the other each time, as if I'm buying it for my niece or for a friend or something. Imagine a childless widow getting prenatal vitamins."

Mrs. Ray spooned the daal into a glass bowl for serving. She shook her hair out and looked over her shoulder at Mrs. Jha, laughed, and said, "Prenatal vitamins for widows! Don't tell anyone."

In a way, being widowed young and childless allowed Mrs. Ray to have a second youth, one unencumbered by family. And as far as young deaths go, Mr. Ray's quick and powerful brain aneurysm five years ago at age forty was as simple as possible. At least he didn't suffer and Mrs. Ray didn't have to deal with the guilt in the aftermath of a loved one's suffering. Mrs. Jha knew it had been difficult for Mrs. Ray—young widows make people nervous. When Mr. Ray died, a lot of the other women in Mayur Palli treated Mrs. Ray like a bad-luck charm or a seductress—but Mrs. Jha looked over at her friend now and saw only vitality and a good head of hair. She immediately felt guilty for envying a

widow. *May God always keep my husband safe,* she quickly said to herself.

"Do you know what I had to do this afternoon? I had to unpack all the decorations for the drawing room and put them back up so the guests wouldn't guess as soon as they walked in," Mrs. Jha said.

She took out the bowl of chilled yogurt mixed with onions, cucumbers, tomatoes, and spices, pushed the fridge door closed with her hip, leaned against it, and sighed. Mrs. Ray was now ladling the chicken into a large glass serving bowl, and she laughed.

"You're living the dream, Bindu," Mrs. Ray said. "In any case, you should be glad you're getting out of here. This housing complex is not the same as it used to be."

Mrs. Ray reached over for a napkin to wipe the curry off the rim of the bowl. She turned off the second flame on the stove and said, "Someone stole a pair of my yoga pants from my balcony."

"What?" Mrs. Jha said. "Are you sure?"

"One hundred percent," Mrs. Ray said. "Anyway, it's silly. I didn't even want to mention it, but be glad you're moving. Everybody here interferes too much in each other's lives. You are lucky to be going somewhere where you will have some privacy. Count your blessings."

"Reema, you have to complain about this at the next meeting," Mrs. Jha said.

"And what? Draw more attention to myself? Forget it. It's my fault. I shouldn't be doing yoga on the balcony." Mrs. Ray said. She turned back to the counter and put a large spoon in each serving bowl. "Here, the chicken and the daal are in the bowls. I'll take them out to the dining room. Do you need anything else?"

Mrs. Jha turned to Mrs. Ray and said, "Thank you. Just send my husband in here, please."

Mrs. Jha picked up the pan from the stove and dropped it in the sink. Water splashed out and wet her sari, darkening the blue fabric near her bellybutton.

Mr. Jha came into the kitchen. It was smoky and felt as

though the loud exhaust fan above the window was pushing hot air back into the kitchen. It would be nice for his wife to have a new kitchen with a door leading out to the backyard instead of this small space that was the same size as one of the bathrooms in the new house. All the surfaces had become sticky with years of oil splatter. Mr. Jha wanted one of those kitchens he had seen in television cooking shows—all stainless steel with pots and pans hanging off hooks above the stoves. Even though he never cooked and hardly even entered the kitchen, he wanted the spices kept in clear glass bottles in a wooden holder hammered into the wall. He was sick of the salt and sugar being browned by fingertips and clumpy through humidity.

"I think they're ready for the news now," Mr. Jha said. "I tried to get them started on the idea of 'home.' Said it isn't defined by location. I made some quite moving points, I think. I talked about home being where the heart is and all that. No need to mention that home is where the double servants' quarter is."

He paused, then continued, "What are you doing in here? I was just about to announce our plans when you rushed off screaming about the chicken. Would you prefer it if I called people in here? The Guptas have definitely not been over since we got the new dishwasher."

"I am not screaming about anything. I'm just trying to serve our guests a decent dinner. If you had let the maid stay, I would have had the help I needed. I have been spending all day every day packing boxes, going back and forth from Gurgaon in the heat, setting up the water filters, dealing with the air-conditioning installation—"

"It's your fault that you're going back and forth in the heat. I've told you a thousand times to take the car. You act as if you're scared of the car. The car, the new house, a washing machine, everything. Everything, Bindu. You think the new dishwasher will ruin the serrated knives—you're scared of everything."

Rupak entered the kitchen.

"What are you two doing? The guests are getting restless.

And, Dad, Reema Aunty wants some more wine. Should I take out another bottle of white from the fridge?"

"Don't call him Dad!" Mrs. Jha said as Mr. Jha returned to the living room. "What's wrong with calling him Papa? You're studying in America, but you aren't an American."

Mrs. Jha didn't want Rupak turning into one of those typical rich kids who assume they'll never have to work hard. For that, she was grateful that they had lived very average lives until recently. But Rupak was changing fast. As soon as they were settled into their new home, it would be time for them to go to the United States to see how he lived.

Rupak ignored his mother and rummaged in the fridge for the wine. His parents had gone from keeping no alcohol at home, to keeping some Kingfisher beer and Old Monk rum, to keeping bottles of white wine that was made in vineyards outside Mumbai, to keeping imported bottles of red and white wine from countries as far as Chile. Rupak closed the fridge and opened the freezer to take an ice tray. It was next to a frosted bottle of Absolut vodka that still had the plastic seal around the neck. So much had changed at home since he had left for the States.

Once the food had been brought to the dining room and the guests had sat down and begun to serve themselves, Mrs. Jha whispered to her husband, "Will you please tell them? Stop avoiding it. I can't organize one more dinner like this."

Across the table, while taking from big bowls of food, Mr. Gupta said quietly to his wife, "I think you've got enough chicken. Leave some for the others. It looks bad."

"The chicken is half burnt. I am doing Mrs. Jha a favor by eating so much of it," Mrs. Gupta whispered back, peering into the other bowls to see what else had been cooked. "Otherwise it will all be left and she will have to give it to the maids and she'll be embarrassed. I'm being kind."

"Would you like another drink?" Rupak asked Mrs. Ray on the other side of the table.

Ever since he had gone to America, Rupak had decided he would never date an Indian woman again, but seeing beautiful Mrs. Ray made him aware that there were exceptions to every rule. But Mrs. Ray wasn't that old, he reminded himself. He knew that she was friends with this group only because she had never had children, so now she had more in common with the older women whose children had left home. And glancing to his right and seeing Mrs. Gupta trying to pry a piece of burnt chicken out from her teeth reminded him of the rules.

"Rupak," Mr. Gupta said. "Bring me another whiskey and come and tell me more about America. My wife's niece also studies in America. Sudha, where does that girl study?"

"I can never remember," Mrs. Gupta said. "Perhaps New York? I will find out."

Mr. Gupta wobbled his head and said to Rupak, "Maybe you know her. We will find out where she is studying."

"I doubt it," Rupak said. He was always amazed by how small some people in Mayur Palli thought America was.

"Urmila is planning a trip to America next year," Mr. Patnaik added. "She should add Ithaca to her list of places to visit."

"You must meet lots of pretty women there," Mr. Gupta continued. "White skin, white hair—those girls are like cotton balls. Do you have a girlfriend?"

"Do it," on the other side of the table Mrs. Jha whispered to her husband. "Tell them now, otherwise I will. You've done well, you've bought a new house—I don't know why you're so ashamed."

"A girlfriend?" Rupak said. Here was his chance to tell them. His parents would have to react calmly to the news of his American girlfriend if all the neighbors were watching. "Well, you know in the U.S. . . ."

"He doesn't have time for girlfriends while he is studying. A wife will come later. He's just like his father. They both want

to do well in life," Mrs. Jha said. "Such ambitious men I'm surrounded by. In fact, that's why we called all of you here tonight."

"So that is all," Mr. Jha said. "Nothing too big to discuss. We are not selling this apartment. We are simply renting it out for now. We have found a lovely young couple from Chennai who are going to move in. They have a young son also. Very decent people. And next time we will have dinner in Gurgaon. Enough about us. Why don't we have some more food?"

"Wait," Mr. Gupta said. "This new house you've bought—is it through the Meritech company? I heard they got in trouble with the government about bribes. Did they accept the full amount in check?"

Mr. Gupta was certain that Mr. Jha was a tax evader. All these new-moneyed people were the same. People acted as though engineers were honest, simple-minded people, but look at Mr. Jha here—he was obviously making lots of money now and had probably paid for his house with mostly black money. But Mr. Gupta knew that just because he himself had been a police officer, the assumption was that he was corrupt. It was unfair. He had never taken a bribe over five thousand rupees. A lot of other policemen had worked their way up financially and drove fancy Hondas and Toyotas, but Mr. Gupta had simply upgraded from a scooter to a Maruti 800 to a Swift. He had been content with his life in East Delhi. He knew many young couples who used it as a stepping-stone to fancier neighborhoods, but people of his generation stayed put. They no longer got their walls painted after every monsoon, and they no longer complained about the regular electricity outages. Their lives, he thought, had fallen into a nice comforting rhythm. They didn't need to impress their spouses or their neighbors. But now here was Mr. Jha announcing their move to Gurgaon while his pretty wife looked on proudly. Their son was visiting from the United States of America and probably

had a white girlfriend by now. Mr. Gupta looked over at his own wife, who was heaping her plate with another helping of chicken curry. Their daughter, married to a chartered accountant and also living in East Delhi, was turning into her mother far too quickly, and Mr. Gupta knew he would never have the luxury of objecting to a white boyfriend.

"I really prefer not to talk about finances like this," Mr. Jha said. "Especially not in front of the ladies. But, you know, India is changing. International business comes with different standards."

Mr. Jha had in fact paid more than the usual amount with taxable money. It had raised the cost of the house considerably, but ever since he sold to a company based in America, he knew that the government was keeping an eye on him.

Mr. Gupta shook his head as he used his thumb to push another bite of chicken and rice into his mouth. These people would never give a straight answer about taxes.

BEAUTIFUL ANIMALS

A NOVEL

LAWRENCE OSBORNE

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First Edition

FOUR

At the port the Haldane sister and brother arrived with only their father and met Naomi at the Pirate Cove for a coffee before they embarked. Amy had preferred to stay at home and do some painting and cooking, and even Jeffrey looked as if he had been prevailed upon to come by his children. He put a brave face on it, however, and drank cup after cup of *sketos*.

The three-member crew of the *Black Orchid* were also there and they all sat together. The three Greeks were suddenly interested in the explosive beauty of the American girl, and Jeffrey bristled with protective annoyance as the caffeine went to his head. Naomi was observant. The Haldane males were wearing similar khaki shorts and black-top sneakers, the same University of Pittsburgh sweatshirts and the same baseball caps. A family whose men had a uniform. It was fantastical—she had seen such things in movies—and it made them, in some way, easier to deal with. The boy was in a good mood but said nothing. He obviously didn't need to. He was doing exactly what he wanted to do on that day.

"It's a real yacht," he eventually did say to Naomi, his face bright with appreciation. "Do you guys fish on it? You could catch bluefins."

Naomi caught Sam's eye at last and there was silent laugh-

ter between them. As they walked to the boat along the gangplanks, they exchanged a private *Yassou*, and to Naomi Sam looked exceptionally vibrant, more so even than the previous day. Perhaps it was the dowdy uniform that played to her strengths. There was also a blush from the sun.

They boarded the yacht and the boy rushed around inspecting everything with many a guttural "Wow!"

"There's a bedroom down there," he called up to his father. "There's a sign over the bed that says *Disgrace*."

"That's an artwork," Naomi explained.

She and Sam went out onto the back deck and sat in the chairs there. The sun hit them and the crew set up the awning. The table had been arranged with an ice bucket, a cooler, glasses, and china plates. Sam looked up at the burned brown hills and something in her bristled. It was like the Middle East, a corner of Lebanon or Syria centuries ago. Slaves moving among the saddled donkeys in the caves high up among the glaring rocks. It had its enigma. It wasn't quite what she had expected. As they moved off into open sea the mountain named for Eros rose above the toytown of cafes and discos and scuba shops. She saw people walking along the path above Sunset and the early-morning swimmers on the flat rocks below it. The collective pantomime of a holiday. Then the crew turned up the engines and they moved swiftly along the coast, passing Vlychos and the Haldanes' house. And then Amy was there waiting for them with an energetic wave, like a gaunt lone figure in an Andrew Wyeth painting; the yacht sounded its horn. They went past Molos and the remoter headlands, Cape Bisti and Tsigri Island and the Aghios Konstandinos. Then they turned in to follow the edge of the island as it led to Cape Aghios Ioannis. On this far side there were no houses or roads; the beaches

were hemmed in by dramatic cliffs and rock formations. The sea looked darker and more volatile. When they anchored for a first stop the waves came hard against one side of the boat, shaking it gently. Under the awning the group was served with fruit juice and coffee, croissants and *tulumba*. Some music was put on—calypso, Naomi explained, and some Louis Armstrong from the soundtrack of *High Society*. Her father loved it. She took Sam down to the bedroom and they changed into their bathing suits. Sam saw that there was indeed a tubular neon light above the bed that spelled out the word *Disgrace*.

"It's sick, isn't it?" Naomi whispered. "It cost him twenty thousand dollars."

Sam looked around the disorderly melange of art, the bedside lamps made of solid glass and the Keith Haring panels inset into the walls. It could have been so cool, she thought, but somehow it wasn't.

They went back up to the deck and found the crew lowering the steps into the water. Jeffrey and the boy peered over at long thin gar speeding through the blue like animate needles. The shore was about a hundred meters away, a comfortable swim. From the boat the sandy bottom was now visible, a shimmer of dark gold. Sam and Naomi put on rubber flippers and masks but decided to do without the snorkels. They slipped down into the water and quietly swam away from the calypso, the brilliant silverware, and the anxious fatherly gaze. Jeffrey was thinking that, after all, he was not so sure about this self-assured British girl. She had prized his daughter away from them a little, and he and his wife were both aware of it. But it seemed to him that it was not deliberate. Naomi was one of those people who exert an entirely unconscious influence on others and who cannot be held responsible for the effects. It was tropism, not conspiracy.

This, of course, made her more dangerous. His earnest and upright mind was, moreover, ruffled by her ease of movement and her offhand manners—they seemed to him proof of a superiority that he would have to belittle in order to survive.

THEY WERE AT the shore in minutes, hauling themselves back into the air and lying flat on boulders facing the yacht. They could still hear Louis Armstrong and the calypso rhythms, and the crew had broken out a bottle of champagne, probably as much for themselves as for their unknown and unimportant guests. The foam shone for a second as it spewed into the water. *"Eviva!"* Naomi shook out her wet hair and leaned back. Once again, that aristocratic ease of movement and gesture, and Sam did the same, stretching out her toes with their crimson warlike paint. She had painted them the night before. There was a rustle of lizards darting under rocks and she turned, but they were faster than her eye.

After a few minutes they got up and climbed a steep hillside. They had soon reached a platform from where they could look down at the boat and the father and son hunched together playing chess under the awning. Sam thought how restful it was to be separated from them finally, away from the bickering and the family trivia. One of the crew was swimming around the boat, his voice carrying up to them with great clarity. *"To nero einai gamo kryo!"* one of the others called back to him. Their tongues had loosened in the absence of any Greek speakers.

The hillside behind them cast a shadow far out into the water that just clipped the aft of the boat and dimmed the little Greek flag hanging there. Another disheveled slope led down to a cove congested with rocks and rubble, a place that must have

been well out of sight of the boat. There was something tempting about it, with the absence of a track and the cactus proliferating across it. They got up. As they slipped out of view of the boat Jeffrey looked up and felt a moment of unease, but the crew didn't notice. A small shadow had suddenly passed across his world. But the crew knew that Naomi was familiar with the island. In reality, the girls were exultant. The opalescent purity of the sky, the absence of cloud and contamination, made them feel secure. They skipped off down the shelving stones toward the second cove and the heat rose up toward their faces.

Sam felt freer as soon as she was out of her father's sight. She remembered the warning her mother had uttered to her earlier in the day about the sun. To hell with her, though. To hell with the family brand. Her skin liked the sun's ferocity.

"What does *skatofatsa* mean?" she asked as she trailed her guide.

Naomi turned and said, "Shitface."

"Is it a useful word?"

"I use it pretty much every day."

"*Skata-fatso.* Fantastic."

"*Fatsa*. You can use it in America."

At the far side of the cove they sat again and caught their breath. The boat had disappeared behind the land's shape, but they could still hear the music from *High Society.* When the wind swept across the hillside, however, it vanished and all they could hear was dust and grit flying.

"Should we keep going?" Sam asked. "Maybe they'll follow us and pick us up farther on."

"I didn't bring my phone. We'd have to wave to them from somewhere."

"Then let's wave."

They turned and climbed up the next slopes until they could see the boat again. They waved, but no one saw them. Forgotten already, Sam thought with amusement and with a certain amount of satisfaction. They shouted and the abrupt echoes came back to them. They wondered what to do next; beyond their vantage point lay ravines and coves, desert scrub shining under dark blue light. It was so still and undisturbed that it provoked in them a childish desire to ruffle it up and make it less pure. Without even talking about it they walked on, plunging down toward the sea a second time, singing as they went, threading their way carefully through prickly pears to the words of "Paperback Writer."

What beautiful animals we are, Sam thought, beautiful as panthers. When they reached the white rocks along the water she saw two red spots as she stepped past them. Blood, she thought at once. She stopped and kneeled to look closer, and there was a sudden bafflement in her face. She had been right. They were two dried spots of blood, like small things that have been casually mislaid. She felt a quick thrill whose root was hidden to her.

"It can't be," Naomi said.

"They have animals here?" Sam wondered aloud.

"No one hunts in these parts."

Something in Sam stiffened and her instincts kicked in. She touched one of the spots. "Just two spots? No, it's a drip. From a height."

"I guess so," Naomi said.

"It must be from a person. Hikers, maybe?"

People did come here on private boats, like themselves. But Naomi was skeptical.

"We didn't see any boats leaving before us."

"Then they must've walked over the mountain."

"No."

They rose and looked around but saw nothing. A mood of doubt went through them, but they said nothing to each other. They merely kept walking, scaling the next rise until they were peering down at slopes thick with glistening thistles. There was a curve of rock and sheltered water beneath it, waves foaming a few feet out on the hidden stone. At first, nothing to see. But here, in the full sunlight, a figure lay stretched out in the thyme bushes, a man asleep on his side in a pile of rags with a plastic bottle on the ground beside him.

The man was half naked, in tracksuit pants, with thong sandals. A tattered sweater was laid out on the cactus a few feet away as if drying. He looked young to them, long-haired, the beard grown out and ungroomed. An exhausted hobo of the sea. Naomi could tell that he was not Greek. It was something about the clothes, the totality of his exhaustion. But Sam was thinking differently. She looked farther down the coast and saw nothing. Not even the flimsiest dinghy or a discarded paddle. She was an avid news reader, being the daughter of a journalist, and something had already occurred to her, and though she might have come to the same conclusion as Naomi she was less moralistic about it. They couldn't now pretend that they hadn't seen him, and they couldn't walk back to the yacht without making sense of it. She was curious for a moment, but she then wondered about the extreme concentration that seemed to have come into Naomi's face.

Gradually, the English girl lost her alarm; it was Sam who held herself tense and wanted to go back immediately. But Naomi calmed her with hand gestures. There was nothing threatening about the sleeper. He was abject and abandoned,

self-abandoned even. The two drops of blood were his. A cut hand, a cut foot: his misery had expressed itself. There was a way of telling that he had come from the sea, not from the port, and that he was not sleeping through a surfeit of leisure. Suddenly there was motion in the skies and they looked up. Two huge birds were circling overhead, turning slowly and looking down at the three humans as if there was something in their arrangement that needed to be deciphered. Slowly, they dropped closer. The man turned equally slowly onto his back and his mouth fell open. His naked torso was covered with long weals and scratches, and the skin had begun to darken. They moved back to the ledge from where they had started out, one step at a time, not a pebble displaced.

"He's not dying," Naomi said. "He's just sleeping. He's washed up from the sea."

Sam wondered aloud if they should go back anyway and talk to him. It seemed cowardly to just return without doing anything, without making contact.

"Make contact?" Naomi smiled.

"I didn't mean it weirdly. I meant—just go down and see who he is. He was bleeding."

"Not today. Another time."

Naomi signaled and they set off back the way they had come, but more hurriedly.

When they were close to their original landing, Naomi said, "We definitely shouldn't say anything to your father. Nothing at all. Right?"

"Nothing."

"I'm sure he'll overreact. He'll probably go to the police straightaway. He'll think it's the right thing to do."

She had reached out and gently locked a hand around Sam's

wrists so that the younger girl was forced to look up into her metal-steady blue eyes. There was a quivering little threat inside the pupils.

"He's an Arab, isn't he?" Sam blurted out.

There was a long silence as they worked their way back into view of the yacht, which had not after all dislodged itself in order to find them, and when they scaled the first hill on their itinerary they waved, as before, and the crew, who might have been growing a little anxious at their long absence, made signals in response as if it were they who had gone missing for a while.

When they got back to the port, Naomi and Sam slipped away by themselves and went to a taverna inside the labyrinth of alleys. It was dusk. The first moment of cool in many hours and they gulped down a carafe of Moschofilero at a table on the street. Around the amphitheater of the port rose the terraced captains' houses of centuries past while, increasingly audible, starlings babbled in the trees of the squares. Birds on the wire, Naomi always thought, in honor of the Cohen song. Sam's hands were shaking; she seemed about to launch into an outburst. But about what? I haven't asked her to do anything outrageous, Naomi thought. I haven't made her do something illicit. She hasn't been forced.

But Sam was not thinking that. She was, on the contrary, filled with an elated trepidation that was shy and quiet. She had the feeling that Naomi was thinking so fast that she wouldn't be able to catch up with her, that she had an idea what to do, but entirely for her own reasons.

"Don't worry," Naomi said now. "It's just between us. You

and me. We can do whatever we want. There's nothing dangerous in it, Sam. We ought to help him."

"Even though we don't know who he is."

"Does it matter who he is?"

"Yes, it matters."

Naomi sighed. "It *doesn't* matter. People like him are coming here on bits of wood. Don't you think it's appalling?"

"Of course I think it's appalling. But so what?"

"Then we have a chance to help. I'm a lawyer—that's what we do."

Sam rolled her shoulders and her tone was suddenly dismissive.

"Really? I don't think that's your reason. I think you want an adventure."

"Well, if I did, it's not a crime."

"No, it's not a crime, but you're talking to me like a lawyer. When in fact you don't know who he is."

More gently, Naomi admitted that she didn't. All right, she thought, maybe I'm atoning for coming from money that I didn't earn. But would that be so bad? She lowered her voice and tried to be more persuasive. "Wanting to help the helpless is not an uncommon desire, and if you want me to explain it I'd say that I'm determined to make a difference. It's not just an adventure. And if it is, it's one with a purpose."

"My ass."

Sam pursed her lips and her face lost its color. She hadn't really meant it, and she realized that what she'd said a few moments earlier sounded cowardly. Accordingly, she doubled down in order to disguise the fact.

"It's such a dumb situation to put yourself in. Now I have to hide something from my father, and I've never done that."

"You've never hidden anything from him?"

"No."

"That's hard to believe. Anyway, I can't see what difference it makes. What's he going to do if you tell him?"

"It just feels gross."

"Trust me," Naomi reassured her. "We should really wait and think a bit before we do anything. I know you're interested to see what happens and you can rise to the occasion if we decide to help a migrant, but it can't be something that's really ours if your father knows about it—admit it!"

"Let me think, then. It has nothing to do with my dad."

"Come on, let's have some tsipouro and go home."

But Sam had felt the needle used against her, and the little wound bled. Before long, however, her mood picked up, spurred by the pomace brandy. Naomi gave her a crash course on this lesser-known Greek liquor. There was anise-flavored tsipouro and the plain kind. There was Tsililis and there was Kosteas; there was Idoniko without anise and Babatzim with it. Unlike ouzo, tsipouro was made from grapes and you could taste the pomace. And the anise here was fruity—Naomi taught her how to say one word for it, *glykaniso*. Tsipouro was also peerlessly alcoholic, it prised apart mind and spirit. They forgot about the Arab on the far side of the island and began talking about upcoming parties instead. Naomi explained to her how the scene worked in the summers: the families who returned every year, the famous artists who set up their studios between June and September, the influx of journalists and interns and hangers-on that made the parties unpredictable and fun. They knocked back three rounds of ouzo. Night had fallen without

their noticing it, and the alleys glowed with their creamy whitened walls. Windows opened in the houses; from the upper floors came the sound of pianos and *Tosca* and Greek heavy metal. A smell of booze began to touch the air, but very lightly. The restaurants slowly filled up. The lights grew brighter. Into their own came wanderers and drifters looking for friends and interesting strangers, which meant of course pretty ones. Sam was alert with curiosity. It didn't seem possible that such a social world could exist on such a small island. Many of them knew Naomi. They came up, embraced her, glanced with a smile at the young sidekick and stayed for a drink or two. There were some young Americans, too, boys more cynical and worldly than anyone she knew, and she was interested in the effect they had on her. Even the New York ones were not from her world, they were not what she was used to. Perhaps it was because here they were out of their element and therefore unleashed. Their eyes had a different cruelty and freedom. Their schools and parents were far distant and out of mind, and they were free to do as they liked: on their way to other people's houses, to drinks parties on terraces above the port or yachts stationary for the night in the harbor. That was what summers were for. Soon Naomi and Sam were being whisked up to one of these parties as if it was the most normal thing in the world.

They went to the villa of an elderly American painter whose name Sam should have known but didn't; it was surrounded by one of the island's characteristic high walls, and in the garden behind them tortoises inched their way through a garden of long grass studded with enormous fallen lemons. But why, she wondered, did they have candles soldered to their shells? This was Naomi's world, and nothing about it was obvious. Yet

there was an air of madness and fun that would probably last all night and without foreseeing it she had been dropped into that atmosphere at just the right moment.

The painter Ed Milne was there with his wife, both ancient and burned to a handsome crisp by thirty reckless summers, and on the walls were his creations, small oblong abstractions of pale gray and blue with titles in Greek that she couldn't understand. *Oinopos Ponton*, and so on. The rooms looked Ottoman as she wandered through them with her highball—a Turkish official had built the villa at the end of the eighteenth century—and soon she had lost Naomi and was among strangers, innocent and beautiful, as she was well aware, and with the added advantage of being unknown to them all. It was an advantage that might only last a single night, but it was a huge one all the same. But not all strangers enjoyed this privilege. She thought of the other one on his cliff sleeping out in the open, and she wondered whether he did, in fact, enjoy an advantage by virtue of being unknown. She couldn't tell yet because he was not a stranger of the same sort. He was, thus far, almost entirely a creation of her own imagination.

Hum If You Don't Know the Words

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One

ROBIN CONRAD

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I joined up the last two lines of the hopscotch grid and wrote a big "10" in the top square. It gave me a thrill writing the age I'd be on my next birthday because everyone knew that once you hit double digits, you weren't a child anymore. The green chalk, borrowed from the scoreboard of my father's dartboard without his knowledge, was so stubby that my fingers scraped against the concrete of the driveway as I put the final touches on my creation.

"There, it's done." I stood back and studied my handiwork. As usual, I was disappointed that something I'd made hadn't turned out quite as good as I'd imagined.

"It's perfect," Cat declared, reading my mind as she always did, and trying to reassure me before I washed the grid off in a fit of self-doubt. I smiled even though her opinion shouldn't have counted for much; my identical twin sister was easily impressed by everything I did. "You go first," Cat said.

"Okay."

I pulled the bronze half-cent coin from my pocket and rubbed it for luck before launching it into the air from my thumbnail. It arced and spun, glinting in the sunlight, and when it finally landed in the first square, I launched myself forward, eager to finish the grid in record time.

I finished three circuits before the coin skittered out of the square marked "4." It should have ended my turn, but I shot a quick look at Cat who was distracted by a hadeda bird making a racket on the neighbor's roof. Before she could notice my mistake, I nudged the coin back in place with the tip of my canvas shoe and carried on jumping.

"You're doing so well," Cat called a few seconds later once she'd turned back and noticed my progress.

Spurred on by her clapping and encouragement, I hopped even faster, not noticing until it was too late that a lace on one of my *takkies* had come loose. It tripped me up just as I cleared the last square and brought me crashing down knee-first, my skin scraped raw on the rough concrete. I cried out, first in alarm and then in pain, and it was this noise that brought my mother's flip-flops clacking into my line of vision. Her shadow fell over me.

"Oh for goodness' sake, not again." My mother reached down and yanked me up. "You're so clumsy. I don't know where you get it from." She tsked as I raised my bleeding knee so she could see.

Cat was crouched next to me, wincing at the sight of the gravel imbedded in the wound. Tears started to prickle, but I knew I had to stop their relentless progression quickly or suffer my mother's displeasure.

"I'm fine. It's fine." I forced a watery smile and gingerly stood up.

"Oh, Robin," my mother sighed. "You're not going to cry, are you? You know how ugly you are when you cry." She crossed her eyes and screwed up her face comically to illustrate her point and I forced the giggle she was looking for.

"I'm not going to cry," I said. Crying in the driveway in plain sight of the neighbors would be an unforgiveable offense; my mother was

very concerned with what other people thought and expected me to be as well.

"Good girl." She smiled and kissed me on the top of my head as a reward for my bravery.

There was no time to savor the praise. The trill of the ringing phone cut through the morning and just like that, one of the last tender moments my mother and I would ever share was over. She blinked and the warmth in her eyes turned to exasperation.

"Get Mabel to help clean you up, okay?"

She'd just disappeared through the back door into the kitchen when I became aware of whimpering and looked down to see that Cat was crying. Looking at my sister was always like looking into a mirror, but in that instant, it felt as though the glass between my reflection and me had been removed so that I wasn't looking at an image of myself; I was looking at myself.

The misery etched onto Cat's scrunched-up features was my misery. Her blue eyes welled with my tears and her pouty bottom lip trembled. Anyone who'd ever doubted the veracity of twin empathy only had to see my sister suffering on my behalf to become a true believer.

"Stop crying," I hissed. "Do you want Mom calling you a crybaby?"

"But it looks like it hurts."

If only it were that straightforward in the eyes of our mother. "Go to our room so she won't see you," I said, "and only come out when you feel better." I tucked a strand of brown hair behind her ear.

She sniffed and nodded, and then scurried inside with her head bent. I followed a minute later and found our maid, Mabel, in the kitchen washing up the breakfast dishes. She was wearing her faded mint-green uniform (a coverall dress that was too tight on her plump frame, the buttons gaping apart where they fastened in the front) with a white apron and *doek*.

My mother was on the phone in the dining room using the carefree, happy voice she only ever used with one person: her sister, Edith.

I left her to it, knowing that if I asked to speak to my aunt, I'd be told either to stop interrupting grown-ups' conversations, or to stop being so in love with the sound of my own voice.

"Mabel, look," I said as I lifted up my knee, relieved that it wasn't one of her few Sundays off.

She cringed when she saw the blood, and her hands flew up to her mouth, sending suds flying. "*Yoh! Yoh! Yoh!* I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" she exclaimed as though she'd personally caused my suffering.

To me, this litany was better than all the plasters in the world and an immediate balm to my pain.

"Sit. I must see." She knelt down and inspected the scrape, wincing as she did so. "I will fetch the first aid things." She pronounced it *fes-taid* in her strong accent and I savored the word as I savored all Mabel-English. I loved how she made regular English words sound like a totally different language, and I wondered if her children (whom I'd never met and who lived in Qua-Qua all year round) spoke the same way.

She fetched the kit out from the scullery cupboard and knelt down again to tend to the graze, the cotton ball looking especially white against her brown skin. She soaked it with orange disinfectant and then held it to the wound, murmuring words of comfort each time I tried to pull away from the sting of it.

"I am sorry! *Yoh*, I'm sorry, see? I am almost finished. Almost, almost. You are a brave girl." *You arra brev gell.*

I basked in her focused attention and watched as she blew on my knee, amazed at how the tickle of her breath magically eased the pain. Once Mabel was satisfied that the broken skin was clean enough, she stuck a huge plaster over it and pinched my cheek.

"Mwah, mwah, mwah." She placed lip-smacking kisses all over my face, and I held my breath waiting to see if this would be the day I finally got a kiss on the mouth. Her lips came as close as my chin before returning to my forehead. "All better now!"

"Thank you!" I gave her a quick hug before heading out again, and I'd just stepped out the back door when my father called me.

"Freckles!" He was sitting in a deck chair next to the portable *braai* he'd set up in the bright patch of sunlight in the middle of the brown lawn. "Get your old man a beer."

I ducked inside again and opened the fridge, pulling out a bottle of Castle Lager. My inexpert handling of the bottle opener resulted in a spray of foam across the linoleum floor, but I didn't stop to wipe it up. Mabel clucked as I made a run for it, but I knew she'd clean it without complaint.

"Here you go," I said handing the still-foaming bottle to my father who immediately used it to douse the flames that had leapt up beyond the barrier of the grill.

"Just in time," he said, nodding for me to sit in the chair next to him.

My father's blue eyes twinkled out at me from a handsome face that was mostly hidden behind a thicket of hair. Wavy blond curls flopped over his eyebrows in the front, and grew long at the back so that they dipped over his shirt collar. He'd also cultivated long mutton-chop sideburns that fell just short of meeting up with his bushy moustache. Kissing him was always a ticklish undertaking, and I loved the bristly texture of his face against my skin.

I sat down and he handed me the *braai* tongs as if he was passing me a sacred object. He nodded in a solemn way and I nodded back to show I acknowledged the transference of power. I was now in charge of the meat.

My father smiled as I leaned into the smoke rising from the grill, and then he glanced at the plaster on my knee. "You been through the wars again, Freckles?"

I nodded and he laughed. My father often joked about having a son in a daughter's body. He especially loved to tell the story of how I'd come home from my first and only ballet lesson when I was five years old with ripped tights and my leg covered in blood. When he'd asked

me how in the world I'd managed to get so roughed up in a dancing class, I confessed that I'd injured myself falling out of the tree I'd climbed in order to hide away from the teacher. He'd roared with laughter, and my mother had lectured me about wasting their money.

Teaching me how to *braai* was something my father should've taught a son. If he felt cheated that he never got one, he never said so, and he encouraged my tomboyish behavior at every opportunity.

Cat, on the other hand, was a sensitive child and in many ways, my complete opposite. She was also squeamish about raw meat. There was no way my father would ever have taught her the subtleties of cooking meat to perfection, or how to hold your fist when throwing a knockout punch, or how to bring someone down with a rugby tackle.

"Okay, now turn the *wors*. Make sure you get the tongs under all the coils and flip them together or it's going to be a big mess. Good. Now, nudge the chops to the side or they're going to be overdone. You want to crisp the fat but not burn it."

I followed his instructions carefully and managed to cook the meat to his satisfaction. Once we were done, I carried the meat in a pan to the table Mabel had set for us on the flagstone patio. The garlic bread, potato salad and *mielies* were already there, protected under a fly net that I sometimes used as a veil when I played at being a spy disguised as a bride.

"Tell your mother we're ready," my father said as he sat down. He didn't trust the giant hadedas with their long beaks not to swoop down and steal the meat; they often swiped dog food left outside in bowls and had been known to go for bigger prey like fish in ornamental ponds.

"She's on the phone."

"Well, tell her to get off. I'm hungry."

"We're ready to eat," I yelled around the doorway before stepping back outside again.

I'd just sat down next to my father when Cat trailed outside to join

us. She'd washed all evidence of tears from her face and smiled as our mother sat down next to her.

"Who was that on the phone?" my father asked, reaching for the butter and Bovril spread to slather over his *mielie*.

"Edith."

My father rolled his eyes. "What does she want?"

"Nothing. She's got some vicious stomach bug that's going around and she's been grounded until it clears."

"I suppose that's a huge crisis in her life? Not being able to serve shitty airplane food on overpriced flights to hoity-toity passengers. God, your sister can make a mountain out of a molehill."

"It's not a crisis, Keith. Who said it was a crisis? She just wanted to talk."

"Wanted to suck you into the drama of her life, more like it."

My mother raised her voice. "What drama?"

Cat's eyes were wide as they darted between our parents. She pulled her gaze away from them and stared at me. Her meaning was clear. *Do something!*

"Everything's a drama with her," my father said, matching my mother's increased volume. "It's never just a small hiccup; it's always the end of the world."

"It's not the end of the world! Who said it's the end of the world?" My mother thwacked the serving spoon back into the salad bowl. She glowered at him and the vein in her forehead began to bulge, never a good sign. "God! Why must you always give her a hard time? She just wanted to—"

The doorbell rang.

Cat's expression of relief said it all. *Saved by the bell!*

"Oh, for God's sake!" My father threw down his cutlery so that it clattered across the table. "Look at the time. Who has no bloody manners rocking up at lunchtime on a Sunday?" My mother stood to go but my father held her back. "Let Mabel get it."

"I told her to take the afternoon off and said she could come in tonight to do the dishes."

As my mother disappeared into the house, my father called after her. "If it's the Jehovah's Witnesses, tell them to piss off or I'll shoot them. Tell them I have a big gun and I'm not afraid to use it."

"I wonder who it is," Cat said and I shrugged. I was more interested in the gun.

When my mother returned a few minutes later, she was flushed and carrying two books, which she thumped down on the table in front of Cat.

"What's that?" my father asked. "Who was at the door?"

"Gertruida Bekker."

"Hennie's wife?"

"Yes."

"What did she want?"

"To complain about Robin who's apparently corrupting her daughter."

"What?" My father looked at me. "What did you do, Freckles?"

"I don't know."

My mother nodded at the books. "You gave those to Elsabe?"

"I didn't give them to her. I borrowed them to her."

"Lent them," my mother corrected.

"Yes, lent them."

My father reached across the table to pick up the books. "*The Magic Faraway Tree* and *Five Go Adventuring Again*," he read. "Books by Enid Blyton?"

"Yes, apparently Gertruida took exception to the character's names and told me, in no uncertain terms, that Robin is a bad influence and she doesn't want her playing with Elsabe anymore."

"What names? What is the bloody woman talking about?"

My mother paused before answering. "Dick and Fanny."

"Are you being serious?"

My mother nodded. "Yes, she said they're disgusting names that shouldn't be allowed in a Christian household."

My father guffawed and that set my mother off. They were both in fits of giggles and it was my turn to look to Cat in mystification. I didn't know what was so funny.

I hadn't meant to upset Elsabe or Mrs. Bekker; all I'd tried to do was start my own secret society like the children in the books. I wanted to solve mysteries and have hidden clubhouses; I wanted to think up exotic passwords about cream buns and jam tarts that no one else would ever guess. Unfortunately though, all the other girls in our whites-only suburb of Witpark in Boksburg were Afrikaners and, from what I could tell, were only interested in playing house. All that cooking, knitting, sewing, baking, looking after screaming babies and yelling at drunken husbands who came home late from mine parties didn't appeal to me. I wanted, instead, to broaden their horizons and introduce them to a whole new world they were missing out on.

"I just wanted her and the other girls to read the books so they'd join my Secret Seven Club," I said. "So far, it's just me and Cat and we need five others."

"Bugger them," my father said, reaching over and fluffing my hair. "You girls can have a Gruesome Twosome all on your own. Or better yet, forget the girls and go play with the boys."

My mother rolled her eyes again, but she was still in a good mood and I didn't want to ruin it by complaining about how none of the boys would play with me. She didn't like whining and always said that instead of dwelling on the negative, I should try to think up solutions. Which is what got me thinking about what my father had said earlier.

"Where's your big gun, Daddy?"

"What?"

"Your big gun? The one you said you'd shoot the Jehovah's Witnesses with?"

"I was just joking, Freckles. I don't have a gun."

"Oh." This was disappointing. I was hoping to use it as a conversation starter with the boys. "Maybe you should get one."

"Why?"

"Piet's dad said the *kaffir* black bastards are going to kill us in our sleep because we're sissies. He said if we don't own guns, we may as well just bend over and take it up the backside like the *moffies* do."

"Oh yes, when did he say this?" my father asked just as my mother told me not to say *kaffirs* and *moffies*.

"The other day when I was there playing with the dogs. What do the *moffies* take up the backside?"

"That's enough questions for one day, Robin."

"But—"

"No buts." He shot my mother a look and they both snorted with laughter. "End of conversation."

It had been an ordinary Sunday in every way. My parents fought and then made up and then fought again, switching from being adversaries to allies so seamlessly that you couldn't put your finger on the moment when the lines were crossed and recrossed. Cat perfectly acted out her part of the quiet understudy twin, so I could take my place in the spotlights playing the leading role for both of us. I asked too many questions and repeatedly pushed the boundaries, and Mabel hovered like a benevolent shadow in the wings.

The only difference was that, without my knowing it, the clock had started ticking; in just over three days, I'd lose three of the most important people in my life.

Two

BEAUTY MBALI

14 June 1976
Transkei, South Africa

My daughter is in danger.

This is my first thought when I awaken and it spurs me on to get dressed quickly. Dawn is still two hours away and the inside of the hut is black as grief. I can usually move around the room and skirt the boys' sleeping mats in the darkness, but I need a light now to finish the last of my packing.

The scratch of the match against the rough strip of the Lion box is grating in the confines of the silent room, and my shadow rises up like a prayer when I light the candle and place it next to my suitcase on the floor. The lingering scent of sulfur, an everyday smell that has always made me think of daybreak, feels portentous now. I breathe through my mouth so that I do not have to inhale the smell of fear.

I am quiet but there is nothing to help muffle my movements. Our dwellings are circular and entirely open within the circumference of the clay outer wall. No ceilings crouch above us, bisecting the thatch roofs from the dung floors. No partitions cut through the communal

space to separate us into different rooms. Our homes are borderless just as the world was once free of boundaries; there would be no walls or roofs at all except for the essential shelter they provide. Privacy is not a concept my people understand or desire; we bear witness to each other's lives and take comfort in having our own lives seen. What greater gift can you give another than to say: I see you, I hear you, and you are not alone?

This is why, no matter how quiet I try to be, both my sons are awake. Khwezi watches as I roll up my reed mat; the reflected light of the candle's flame burns in his eyes. Thirteen years old, he is my youngest child. He does not remember the day, ten years ago, when his father left for the goldmines in Johannesburg, nor the agony of the months of drought that came before. He does not remember the gradual slump of a proud man's shoulders as Silumko watched his family and cattle starve, but Khwezi is old enough now to be fearful of losing another family member to the hungry city.

I smile to reassure him, but he does not smile back. His thin face is serious as he reaches up absentmindedly to rub the shiny patch above his ear. The mottled pink tissue, in the shape of an acacia tree, is what remains from a long ago fall into an open fire. There was a reason God placed the scar in a spot where Khwezi cannot see it but where I, from my height as a mother, cannot overlook it. It serves as a reminder that the ancestors gave me a second chance with him; one I was not granted when I failed to protect Mandla, my firstborn son, from harm. I cannot fail another of my children.

"Mama," Luxolo whispers from his mat opposite his younger brother. His gray blanket is wrapped around him like a shroud to ward off the morning chill.

"Yes, my son?"

"Let me go with you." He posed the same plea soon after my brother's letter arrived yesterday.

The crumpled yellow envelope bearing my name, Beauty Mbali,

has traveled a circuitous route to get here from my brother Andile's home in Zondi, a neighborhood in the middle of Soweto.

Our village is so small that it does not have an official name that can be found marked on a map of the Transkei, and so there is no direct mail delivery to the foothills of this rural landscape in our black homeland. Once the letter left my brother's hands, the postal service carried it out of the township of Soweto—on potholed and sandy roads—into Johannesburg, the heart of South Africa, and then south across the tarred arterial highway the Transvaal, over the Vaal River, and into the Orange Free State.

From there, it traveled south still over the fog-cloaked Drakensberg Mountains and then down, down, down zigzagging through hairpin bends to reach Pietermaritzburg, after which it branched off into the veiny, neglected side roads that would officially deliver it to the post office in Umtata, the Transkei's capital city.

Its journey not yet complete, the envelope still had to be passed hand to hand from the postmaster's wife to the Scottish missionary in Qunu—a distance of thirty kilometers that would take six hours for me to walk, but takes the white woman forty minutes to drive in her husband's car—and then onwards still from the missionary's black cleaning woman to the Indian *spaza* shop owner. The final leg of its journey was made by Jama, a nine-year-old herd boy, who ran the three kilometers over dusty pathways to my classroom to proudly hand it across to me.

I do not know how long the envelope took to travel the more than nine hundred kilometers from black township to black homeland to bring its warning; the post stamp is smudged and Andile, in his haste, did not date his letter. I hope I will not be too late.

"Mama, take me with you," Luxolo entreats again. It is only his desire to prove himself as the man of the house that spurs him on to challenge a decision I have already made. He would not risk disrespecting me for any other reason. Only fifteen years old, Luxolo tries

to fulfill the duties of a grown man in our household. He believes that protecting the womenfolk is as much his responsibility as tending the cattle that is our livelihood; by accompanying me on the journey, he will help keep his sister safe from harm and ensure that we both return safely.

"The village needs you here. I will fetch Nomsa and bring her home." I turn away from him so that he cannot see the worry in my eyes and so I cannot see his wounded pride.

My bible is the last of my possessions I pack. Its black leather cover is careworn from hours spent cradled in my hands. I slip my brother's letter between its hope-thin pages for safekeeping though I have already memorized the most worrying parts of it.

> *You must come immediately, sister. Your daughter is in extreme danger and I fear for her life. I cannot guarantee her safety here. If she stays, who knows what will happen to her.*

I blink away the vision of Andile writing in his cramped scrawl, the wave of ink blowing back over his sentences like ash from a *veld* fire as his left hand smudges over the words he has just written. With it comes the memory of our mother superstitiously hitting him over the knuckles with a sapling branch every time he reached for something with the wrong hand. She could not torture his left-handedness out of him no matter how hard she tried, nor could she quench my thirst for knowledge or my ambition. Just as I could not rid Nomsa of her obstinacy.

Once I've wrapped a *doek* around my head, I slip the shoes on. They are as unyielding and uncomfortable as the Western customs that dictate the donning of this uniform. Here in my homeland, I am always barefoot. Even in the classroom where I teach, my soles connect with the dung of the floor. However, if I am to venture out into the white man's territory, I need to wear the white man's clothes.

I unzip my beaded money pouch and check the notes folded inside. There is just enough for the taxis and buses as I journey north. The return fare will have to be borrowed from my brother and it is a debt we can ill afford. I slip the pouch into my bra, another constrictive Western invention, and say a silent prayer that I will not be robbed during my journey. I am a black woman traveling alone, and a black woman is always the easiest target on the food chain of victims.

A cock crows in the distance. It is time. I hold my arms out to my sons and they rise silently from their beds to step into my embrace. I hug them fiercely, reluctant to let go. There is so much I want to say to them. I want to impart both words of wisdom and remind them of trivial matters, but I do not want to scare them with a protracted farewell. It is easier to pretend that I am leaving on a short journey and will return before nightfall. It is also important for Luxolo to know that I have complete faith in him to take care of his brother and the cattle while I am away; I will not belittle his efforts with entreaties for caution and vigilance. He knows what needs to be done and he will do it well.

"Nomsa and I will be home soon," I say. "Do not worry about us."

"And you, Mother, must not worry about us. I will take care of everything." Luxolo is somber. He wears this new responsibility well.

"I will not worry. You are both good boys who will soon be great men."

Luxolo steps out of my embrace and nods as he accepts the compliment. Khwezi is reluctant to let go. I kiss his head, my lips touching his scar. "Try to get another hour of sleep." Like the good boys they are, they obey me and return to their mats.

I step out into the dawn with a blanket wrapped around my shoulders and make my way down the narrow hillside trail. The scents of wood smoke and manure rise up to say their farewells. Crickets chirp a discordant good-bye. My breath is visible in the cold moonlight; ghostlike puffs of air lead the way ahead of me, and I trail them just as I trail the phantom of my daughter down this sandy path. My feet fall

where hers did seven months ago when she traded our rural idyll for a city education.

I try to recall how she looked on the day she left but what comes to mind instead is a memory of her at the age of five. Our thatch roof needed repairing, and for that, I had to use the panga to cut the long grass. Fearful of the children getting in the way of the blade, I sent them to the *kraal* to see the lamb that had been born in the night. Three-year-old Luxolo ran off trying to keep up with his sister and I set to work harvesting the thatch.

Later when the cry tore through the fields, setting a flock of sparrows in flight, I dropped the panga and started running. By the time I neared the *kraal* behind two other women who were racing ahead of me, the cry had turned to shrieking. Another more ominous sound threaded through the noise though I did not register what it was until I cleared the last hut.

There Nomsa was standing with her stubby legs apart in a fighter's stance. She had inserted herself between Luxolo and a low-slung jackal that was snapping and snarling at her with foam frothing from its muzzle. The jackal was rabid and out of its mind with aggression.

Nomsa's small fist was raised and she shook it while shouting at the beast that was sloping towards her. Before I could begin running again, Nomsa reached for a rock and threw it with such force that it hit the jackal square in the head, sending the animal staggering off to the side. When I got to them, I grabbed both Luxolo and Nomsa and pulled them up into my arms while the village women chased the jackal away. Nomsa was trembling with fright. My daughter, only five years old, had bravely fought off a predator to protect her younger brother. I expected to see tears in her eyes but what I saw instead was triumph.

I force the memory and the accompanying uneasiness from my mind. There are still six kilometers of dusty paths to walk before I reach the main road near Qunu. A rural village like ours, sunken into a grassy

valley surrounded by green hills, Qunu is inhabited by a few hundred people, which has accorded it a proper name. It is rumored that Nelson Mandela grew up in those foothills so the soil is said to foster greatness. Perhaps touching it along my journey will bring me luck.

From Qunu, I must catch the first taxi to take me out of the protection of the Bantustan of the Transkei into the white man's province of Natal, specifically four hundred kilometers northeast through sugar cane and maize fields to Pietermaritzburg via Kokstad. After that, I will need to make my way north past the Midlands, through the Drakensberg Mountains and then on to Johannesburg.

My journey will take me from this rural idyll where time stands still to a city that is rocked from below its foundations by the dynamite blasts used in the mining of gold, and assaulted from above by the fierce Highveld thunderstorms that tear across its sky. Almost a thousand kilometers stretch out between here and Soweto in a thread of dread and doubt, but I try not to think of the distance as I hold my suitcase away from my body to stop it from drumming into my thigh.

I follow the morning star and look forward to sunrise, which is my favorite time of day, though Nomsa prefers sunset. There is no lingering twilight in Africa, no gentle gloaming as day eases into night; a tender give-and-take between light and shadow. Night settles swiftly. If you are vigilant, and not prone to distractions, you can almost feel the very moment daylight slips through your fingers and leaves you clutching the inky sap that is the sub-Saharan night. It is a sharp exhalation at the closing of day, a sigh of relief. Sunrise is the opposite: a gentle inhalation, a protracted affair as the day readies itself for what is to come. Just as I now must ready myself for whatever awaits me in Soweto.

I have just turned into the valley to follow the meandering path of the river when a thin voice calls out to me.

"Mama." The word expands in the hushed sanctity of the morning and is absorbed by the mist blanketing the riverbed. I think I have

imagined it, that I have conjured up my daughter's voice from across the country calling to me for help, but then I hear it again. "Mama."

I turn and look back upon the trail I've walked and a figure bounds down the path towards me. It is Khwezi, sure-footed as a mountain goat. Within a few minutes he is next to me, our breaths mingling in puffs of exertion as we face one another.

"You forgot your food," he says, holding up the bag in which I wrapped the roasted *mielies* and chicken pieces the night before. "You will be hungry."

He looks so much like his father—the boy his father was before the goldmines took his joy and crushed it—and he smiles an unguarded smile, proud of himself for having spared me from hunger. My hearts swells with love.

"You will bring Nomsa home?" he asks and I nod because I cannot speak. "You will come back?"

I nod again.

"Do you promise, Mama?"

"Yes." It is a strangled sob, a fire of emotion robbed of air, but it is a promise. I will bring Nomsa home.

THE READYMADE THIEF

Augustus Rose

Viking

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ONE

LEE was just six the first time she stole something. Deposited by her mother at a birthday party to socialize with kids she barely knew and hardly liked, she secreted herself in the bedroom closet of the birthday girl's parents during a game of hide-and-seek. Lee was a tiny child, mostly silent and near-invisible anyway, so hiding was easy, and the game was a good chance to be alone. She stayed in the closet a very long time—lingering well after the other kids had moved on to other games—and, while there, she discovered a box covered in faded green velvet and tied with old twine. Something inside rattled when she shook the box. Lee didn't intend to open it, but then her finger caught in the loop of the bow and the twine just kind of fell loose.

Inside the box was a stack of yellowing letters held together by more twine, a painted iron toy steamship, an old wooden pipe, and the source of the rattling: a small glass bottle with something trapped inside. Lee crouched there, listening to the shrieks of the other kids and holding the bottle up to what dim shafts of light came in through the slats, trying to guess what was inside. When she heard her mother

calling her name, she panicked—stuffing the bottle in her pocket, then pushing the box back below the pile of sweaters where she'd found it. As Lee followed her mother through the house and out to the car, she realized it was late, well after dark, and all the other kids' parents had come and gone. Her mother held the back door open as she climbed in, and Lee's father turned to her from the front seat and gave her one of his smiles, the smile he used when he'd screwed up, and handed her a partially eaten chocolate bar. "Did you have a nice time, honey?" he asked her, but Lee's answer was caught in the slam of her mother's door. They were silent the whole ride home. That night Lee tented herself beneath her covers with a flashlight, then took the object out and examined it again. The bottle was blue glass clouded with age. Lee felt a twang of guilt at having taken something that was not hers. But when it rattled in her hand, a surge of pleasure ran down her spine. She had to hold the bottle up to the light to see the tiny silver die inside.

When Lee would come home after school, her mother would be at work, but her father was usually there. Sometimes he'd be in the driveway, working on his old Dodge Dart, its hood up, and he'd let her sit up on the fender, her feet dangling into the engine compartment as she'd hold the carburetor or distributor in her hands and he'd explain what all the parts were. When it was running, he'd sometimes take her out for a drive and even let her sit in his lap and steer on the byroad straightaways.

Often when she'd come home, the house would be full of her father's friends, people from the local music scene and the occasional semifamous bassist or ex-drummer from this or that band passing through whom Lee was too young to recognize. Her father worked an irregular schedule, inspecting and repairing hospital x-ray machines, but really he was a singer-songwriter and musician. He put out a self-titled album with an indie label a year before Lee was born,

and sometimes he was invited onstage to perform on a song during some band's show, but he never made a living off of any of it. His friends all said he could have been another Elliott Smith, if only his life had gone a little differently.

Her father had a disarming smile that softened any room he entered, and people naturally gravitated to him, the center of some subtle magnetic force. Lee loved coming home to a crowded living room, where she could sit in a corner unnoticed and listen to the stories. She loved watching her father especially, seated in his usual spot at the end of the sofa, staring down at his socks as someone would be telling some tale of loss or excess. And she loved watching others watch him, as her father would inevitably look up, smile from the corner of his mouth, and deadpan some line that Lee rarely understood beyond the fact that it would set everyone else in the room off laughing.

As though through some unspoken understanding, the visitors always left a good half hour before her mother, a nurse, returned home. By which time her father would (with Lee's help) have the errant glasses collected and washed and put away, and some semblance of dinner going. On one occasion they'd missed a few glasses that had been set down in a planter, and her mom had taken her aside and asked if anyone had been over. Seeing no reason to lie, Lee told her yes, a few of dad's friends were here.

"What were they doing?"

"Just hanging out and drinking grapefruit juice and talking."

As soon as Lee said this, her mom's jaw set, and she walked to the kitchen and placed the two glasses on the counter above the dishwasher. Lee understood that it was for her father to find—a simple, direct message that her mom knew.

They argued that night, Lee could hear it from her room, and she never understood what could have been so bad about drinking juice with your friends or why her mom was always so wound up and angry. Her father wasn't around in the morning and didn't come back

for several days, but this brief vanishing act was something he did all the time, and Lee was used to it.

Lee was seven when her father left for good, disappearing without a word. She simply came home from school one day to a house that felt different. Lee looked around without landing on anything until she went into her parents' bedroom and saw that all her father's stuff was gone, emptied from the drawers and the closet and the top of the dresser. The bathroom was clear of his things as well.

He'd taken more than he usually did, but Lee still expected him to return after a few days. When five days passed, then a week, she asked her mom.

Her mom looked down at her dispassionately. "He might come back tomorrow, or he might never come back. I can't tell you which. I think you'd better just get used to it."

"Where did he go this time?"

"I wish I knew."

Her mom said nothing more about it, though as the days, then weeks, and then months passed and it seemed finally clear that her father wasn't coming home or even sending a letter, Lee could see her mother crumble, bit by bit, from the inside. Some nights Lee could hear crying behind the closed door of their bedroom, until she didn't anymore; but by then her mother seemed emptied out entirely. Lee liked to listen to her father's CD sometimes when she came home from school, before her mother got off work. It was sad and funny at the same time, scratchy and full of longing, and Lee liked the way she felt when she listened to it. One day she came home to find it gone.

At eight she stole a glossy black paintbrush from the desk drawer of Mrs. Choi, her pretty English teacher, who used it to keep her hair bunned. At nine Lee slipped things from the backpacks of her peers: pencil cases and charm bracelets and sticker books. At ten she made a game of trying to steal one thing from each of the kids in her class:

pens and mittens and colored Nalgene drinking bottles, never anything of real value. She kept her swag in a box in her closet, and sometimes she would lay it all out on the floor of her room. It was the only way she used any of it. Lee didn't consider any of the kids friends. It wasn't that they teased her or ostracized her or thought her weird, but none of them seemed to see her, either. Holding these objects in her hands allowed her to imagine something like closeness.

Her mom was a palimpsest. She had erased herself a layer at a time, until only the dim outline of who she was remained. Every now and then the mom Lee knew would emerge to celebrate her daughter's birthday or Christmas, and she made sure the bills were paid and that food was on the table, but mostly she was gone. Lee hated her for her slow retreat into herself, for leaving Lee behind. Her mom's hours at the hospital kept Lee from seeing her much anyway, but even when she was around, Lee felt she could almost see through her.

So when she told Lee, now twelve, that she was bringing a friend home for dinner, Lee didn't know what to think. Steve was the opposite of her father. He wore a white linen tunic and crisp linen pants and white canvas slip-on shoes. Around his neck was a leather cord tied around a pale crystal. His hands were soft when he shook Lee's, and when he saw her looking at one of the half-dozen braided colored-leather bracelets he wore on his wrist, he took one off and gave it to her. Lee smiled thank you and put it in her pocket. Over dinner he asked her a few bland questions about school, wiping his hands and the corners of his mouth after every bite.

He came by more and more frequently and sometimes stayed over. Steve didn't talk much, and when he did, it was often in whispers to Lee's mom. He moved in so stealthily that Lee didn't realize he had until she noticed he'd set up a small meditation area in the corner of the living room, with a floor pillow, a mandala on the wall, and a small bowl of incense. Lee would often come home to the smell of that incense, Steve facing the wall with his back to her. He asked her to join him one time, and she did, but Lee didn't understand

what he wanted her to do. How was she supposed to empty her mind when it was constantly filling back up?

At thirteen Lee stuffed a vintage Misfits T-shirt into her backpack because she had seen a girl in the store admiring it. When she wore it to school, a boy mumbled "Cool shirt" as he passed, which left a ringing in her ears. The next day she dropped the folded shirt on the cafeteria table in front of the boy. The gesture had taken every ounce of nerve she could muster, and she felt dizzy with it as she walked away. He never said another word to her, but the day after, another boy gave her ten bucks to get one for him, and a business was born.

Soon she was regularly taking orders from her classmates, anything from jeans to jewelry to CDs. She'd hit the boutiques and department stores on Walnut Street in downtown Philly, shop small and steal big, then sell the stuff for a third the price. The money—loose change and wadded bills—she pushed into a hole in her father's old guitar case. Lee's tastes were simple—jeans and hoodies and Chuck Taylors—and so she had little to spend the money on. It wasn't about the money. Stealing scratched a locationless, tingling itch in her.

At fourteen she stole a stack of blank birth certificates from the hospital where her mother worked, along with a stamp of the hospital's seal. She laid the sheets out on her roof, exposing them to several days of sunlight, and aged them with coffee grounds until they looked like they'd been sitting in a drawer for twenty years. Then she sold them to her classmates for a hundred dollars apiece so that they could use them to obtain fake IDs at the DMV. This earned her the attention of Edie Oswald. Pale and athletic, tall without being gawky, Edie had a face that looked as though it had been carved from marble by some Renaissance genius. She carried herself with the ease and insouciance bestowed by a life of privilege and was the only girl in school who could dress like a 1960s socialite one day, an early- '80s punk the next, and get away with it.

"Can I bum one?" Edie asked.

Lee was standing against the wall outside the gym where no one ever came, the remains of a sandwich on the ground by her feet. She fished a cigarette from her pack and handed it to Edie, then helped light it with her own.

"I've been looking all over school for you. For a while I thought you might be one of those gone kids."

Over the past few months seven kids from the Philadelphia area—two from their school—had simply disappeared without a trace. One of them showed up again a few weeks later, a fifteen-year-old boy from a foster home in the suburbs, but he was still gone. His eyes were engorged and depthless, and it was as though his consciousness had been scooped out—he'd lost the ability to communicate and responded only to simple commands. Lee hadn't known any of them, but she knew Edie did; one of them had run with her crowd.

"So this is your spot, huh?" Edie looked around the patch of dirty grass and wrappers and cigarette butts as though it were Lee's living room.

The buzz of Edie's recognition left Lee mute. To be seen by Edie Oswald was to suddenly exist.

Edie pointed to a bit of graffiti, a cartoon stick figure with a cock rammed through its mouth and out the back of its head. "That one of yours?"

Lee took this opportunity to stare into Edie's unblinking green eyes. Edie had a jagged black bob and a mouth that was always turned up at one corner as though perennially on the verge of amusement. Lee understood she was supposed to say something clever back, but the moment for that had passed, and now there was just awkwardness.

They stared out across the football field. Lee watched a kid arc out for a long pass and stretch his arms, only to have the ball drop through his hands. Edie wasn't the kind of girl who needed to go trawling for friends, so Lee knew the score: within a minute or so Edie would ask her for something. She began counting in her head: one, two, three, four, five . . .

"I hear you can get things," Edie said.

Five. The girl was to the point, Lee had to give her that. She looked down at her cigarette.

"So how's it work?" Edie flicked her cigarette away. "You take orders or what?"

Edie asked for a green cashmere sweater with abalone buttons from Bloomingdale's. She even had a picture, and Lee couldn't help but be a little thrilled when Edie texted it to her—they now had each other's numbers on their phones. Edie probably had hundreds of numbers on hers, but not Lee. Lee now had twelve.

What Lee didn't expect was that a few days later, after she had delivered the sweater, Edie would invite her over to her house after school. They ended up drinking from Edie's parents' liquor cabinet and gossiping about the kids in school Lee only ever watched from afar. Edie asked Lee things no one had ever thought to ask her—about what she wanted to do after high school, where in the world she most wanted to visit, what kind of man her father was—and Lee realized she didn't know how to answer these simple questions. She had never talked to anyone about her father and did not know how to start. She asked Edie about hers, and Edie lit up when she spoke of him: what an important man he was and all the places he took her. She talked about where she wanted to go to college, and when she asked Lee about it, it was as though Edie were asking what pro basketball team Lee wanted to play for. Lee was silent. Edie drunkenly put one finger to the mole above Lee's lip and seemed about to say something, then just giggled.

This is what it must be like, Lee thought as she walked home, drunk on Edie's attention even more than the booze, to have a friend.

They began hanging out more and more after that, and Edie was careful to ask Lee for things only occasionally, insisting on paying her even when Lee would refuse her money. Lee took notice of Edie's taste, and she couldn't help stealing for her the more-than-occasional

gift. Her feelings for Edie were as formless as a weather pattern. All Lee knew was that she tingled under Edie's attention and sometimes placed herself in Edie's path after school in the hope that Edie would collect her. With this friendship came an acceptance into Edie's crowd, and before long Lee found herself invited to parties and out to clubs.

For the first time she went to a school dance. She gave Edie the combination to her locker, because it was near the gym and accessible, and Edie stashed a few booze-filled bottles of Coke there earlier in the day. Drunk and emboldened, Lee even danced, awkwardly bouncing around with the kids in Edie's crowd—her crowd now, too, Lee reminded herself—listening in as they gossiped and gave each other shit about who was fucking whom behind whose back and who'd pissed on whose toothbrush. But for Lee the highlight of the dance took place in the bathroom with Edie, as they sat up high by the windows and shared a joint. When she was with Edie, it was as if Lee were the only person on Earth; Edie focused in so totally, with such sincere interest, that Lee felt herself seen in a way she never had before.

"What do you think of Danny Poole?" Edie asked her.

She hadn't much noticed this boy from Edie's crowd, except that sometimes Lee would feel herself being stared at, though he always looked away when she turned. Lee tried to see him through Edie's virescent eyes.

"He likes you," Edie said.

"He told you that?"

"I can tell. You want to go out with me and Deke sometime? The four of us could have some fun."

Deke was Edie's boyfriend. He dressed like a headbanger and played guitar in a metal band but drove his parents' Infiniti and wore four-hundred-dollar boots. Lee felt as though she'd been chosen. "Sure," she said. Why not.

"Cool. I'll set it up." Then Edie reached into her purse and took

out a folded Kleenex. She unwrapped it, revealing two powder-filled gel caps. Edie held them out until Lee took one. She waited for Edie to go first, then swallowed the one in her hand.

"What did we just take?"

"Molly-olly-oxen-free!" Edie trilled.

Lee had never taken Ecstasy before. "What's it feel like?"

"You're about to find out." Edie hopped down from the window, and Lee followed her back into the dance.

Lee didn't remember much about that first time; it just got swallowed up with all the other times. She did remember dancing in a way that felt as fluid as a river. She remembered a sensation of pure joy, and she remembered the people all having auras, trembling outlines that she kept trying to touch. Mostly she remembered going home with Edie that night, sharing Edie's bed and the feel of Edie's skin against hers, Edie's fingers tickling up and down her back, Edie's eyes on her own.

"Why'd you choose me?" Lee asked her, the drug making all questions suddenly possible. "You can have . . . you can hang out with anyone in school you want. Your crowd, they wouldn't have anything to do with me if you hadn't taken me in."

Edie eyes were softening with sleep, but when she opened them wide again, Lee thought she could see herself reflected in the pupils. "You want to know what's special about you."

It made her feel stupid to hear it phrased that way, but yes, Lee supposed that is what she wanted to know.

Edie was silent for a moment. "When I was nine, I found a little baby bird. It couldn't have been more than a week old, but it had all its feathers and it was walking around in drunken little circles on the sidewalk. So I bundled it up in my jacket and took it home, made a nest in a cardboard box, and fed it seeds and ladybugs and Cheerios. It was the first thing I woke up to every morning, and every day after school I rushed home to take care of it."

"You think I need rescuing?" Lee asked.

Edie looked at her with a mix of affection and pity. "The first time I saw you, I wanted to bundle you up and take you home with me. You're so pretty, a beautiful little bird, but you look so lost, Lee—anyone with a heart would want to do the same."

Lee thought about how to take this. She wanted to be seen, especially by Edie, as strong and capable of handling herself, but the drug was making her so velvety inside, it was hard not to smile. "What happened to the bird?" she asked.

But Edie was already asleep.

Lee was used to being invisible, she had been her whole life, so it wasn't easy to know what to do with the spotlight, even if she was only taking up the diffuse edge of the light shined on Edie. The drugs helped. White powders and blue pills and yellow pills, little red plasticky stars, mossy purplish weed laced with crystals, things snorted and smoked and ingested. Stimulants and sedatives and entactogens and dissociatives and psychotropics and hallucinogens. Things that made her at once open up into the world and sink so deeply inside herself that she grew scared she'd never find her way out. Meth made her jerk and flop on the inside like a windup mechanical toy. Ecstasy made her oozy with love. Ketamine made her float. Oxy wrapped her in a warm, steamy blanket. Soon enough she was trading stolen goods for drugs, and soon after that for drugs in bulk, which she sold to the kids in her crowd.

Danny Poole turned out to be a nice boy, shy but thoughtful. He played drums in Deke's band. Lee could tell that he mistook her disconnection for shyness like his own and saw an affinity where there wasn't one. But she liked having him around all the same, and for several months they went to movies together and got drunk together and had clumsy, gawky sex that turned sweet with time.

Lee honestly didn't know what to feel when he broke up with her, in a long handwritten letter, which he made sure to point out was blurry with his tears. The letter detailed how much he cared about her,

how he even thought he might *love* her (at least that is what Lee thought she could read within the big blue smudge), but that they were just too similar—"too shy together and too silent together"—and that he felt as alone with her as he did by himself.

Lee couldn't bring herself to feel much of anything, though she missed those nights they would sit together in his room, wordlessly playing some drinking game until they were buzzed enough to fumble toward each other.

Life went on, and Lee remained the go-to girl for drugs and stolen merchandise. All the money she made she stuffed into the hole in the guitar case, until it became too full to squeeze in another wad. And so, for the first time in nearly four years, she opened it. The money fell out onto her bed in a big green pile of bills: crumpled bills, folded bills, rolled bills, wadded bills, a geological strata of bills—the smaller denominations, from when she'd just started out, at the bottom; the larger ones layering the top. The pile had an earthy, fungal smell. To get the money back into the case, she sorted the bills and flattened them and bundled them, counting as she did, feeling her hands grow a filmy layer of dry mold. By the end she had just over twenty thousand dollars, an amount of money Lee could hardly fathom. She began to feel like getting out was really possible; that she might actually make something of her life. College, maybe, something she and her mother had never even discussed.

Lee was apprehended for shoplifting at sixteen, pinched in a Nordstrom by an undercover security guard she'd marked but had taken for oblivious. He led her by the arm through the store, the evidence—one crumpled teal cashmere cardigan—draped casually over his shoulder. She felt the eyes of the shoppers on her in a way they never had been before, and burned with shame.

The store security called her mother and involved the police as well, and though they did not press charges, the police made her aware that the incident would remain on her record and that a second

arrest would entail real consequences. Lee promised that she had never stolen before and would never do it again. Her mother didn't speak to her at all except to ask her, in the parking lot on the way to the car, what the hell she wanted with a sweater like that? Did Lee think they were country club people?

The second time she was caught came only a month later, and the police threatened to throw the book at her, chuck her into a juvenile detention center and see how she fared with a little structure in her life. Her mother had begged them to give Lee another chance, had described the disappearance of Lee's father and how tough the years had been on both of them.

Lee's mother wasn't happy to have to do the whole song and dance for the officers of the Philadelphia Police Department, and on the way home she made it clear just how long was the limb she had gone out on for her. Lee soon stopped listening, wondering if her mom had meant any of what she'd said about Lee's father.

Lee was curfewed for the rest of the semester, and she kept her hands clean. She stopped stealing, stopped doing drugs, stopped partying. She worried that Edie might no longer want to be her friend, but this wasn't the thing that cracked their friendship.

They were sharing a table at a café downtown, talking vaguely about college, when a tall young man wearing some sort of vintage military uniform, a few dull medals peppering his chest, sat with them and asked for a cigarette. He had short black hair, severe avian features, and intense, sunken eyes. He put the cigarette behind one ear and chatted easily with them, talking music mostly. He performed a little puppet dance on the table using two spoons and a napkin, his eyes on Lee the whole time. "You know, you remind me of someone," he told her.

Lee pulled a cigarette out for herself before realizing she couldn't smoke here. "Oh, yeah? Who?"

"Someone very special. What did you say your name was?"

"I didn't."

"Her name's Lee. Lee Cuddy."

Lee gave Edie a dirty look, but Edie just grinned back.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Lee." One of his spidery hands flipped open an old canvas shoulder bag and pulled out a stack of fliers. He handed them one each. "Why don't you two come to a little party we're throwing this Friday." He pulled a small black notebook from the bag and wrote something in it. "Go to this Web address on here and type in the code on the bottom. It will give you a time and a place to meet one of my associates. She'll take you there." When he turned to leave, Lee could see a large star shaved into the back of his head. She watched him hop onto an antique bicycle and ride off.

"Do you know what this is?" Edie said, gaping down at the flier in disbelief.

The flier was on thick cardboard stock, about the size of a greeting card, and it had an old black-and-white photo that looked like an aerial shot of some just-excavated ancient city. TO RAISE DUST was typed in, by manual typewriter, at the top, and SOCIÉTÉ ANONYME was printed at the bottom. Below that it read ADMIT ONE. There was a date, September 3—this coming Friday—but no street address. Only a Web address, followed a different six-digit code on each flier.

"Isn't that your birthday?" Edie said.

It was. Lee was turning seventeen.

"Well, happy fucking birthday. This is an invitation to an S.A. party." Edie looked around the café and slid her flier quickly into her bag, as though someone might try to take it away from her.

"What's an essay party?"

"Dude. These things are legendary. They're underground events thrown in an old missile silo outside the city limits. I've been trying to get into one for months. The thing is, you can't just buy a ticket; you have to wait for one to come to you."

Lee handed Edie her flier. "Give it to someone else. You know I can't go."

"What are you talking about? That guy was totally into you."

"I'm grounded?"

"So sneak out. Your mom doesn't even have to know you're gone."

It was true; she could probably get away with it. But Lee liked that she was no longer doing drugs or staying out nights drinking. She was thinking more clearly, and her grades were moving back up.

Edie seemed to take Lee's pause as answer enough. "Fine," she snapped, grabbing the flier from Lee's hand. "I'll ask Claire."

Edie really knew how to stick it where it hurt. Claire Faver had been Edie's best friend before Lee came along, and Claire's animosity toward Lee was barely concealed.

Lee spent her birthday at home, sharing a dishwater-colored cake that tasted of socks with her mom and Steve. "We noticed some links you left up on the computer." Steve took a bite of cake and closed his eyes with pleasure. "Looks like you've been researching colleges?"

Lee took a mouthful of cake and shrugged. She tried to get a view out the window, but Steve's face was in the way.

"College is expensive, you know. That means debt."

Lee forced the cake down. "I can get financial aid. Scholarships."

Steve nodded. "Financial aid is complicated. And scholarships take really good grades. Maybe if you had thought of that a few years ago . . ."

Steve had no idea what Lee's grades were. She'd kept them up, despite everything. She felt like grabbing last year's report cards and shoving them into his smug face.

". . . but anyway, we think college is a fine idea."

Lee looked at her mother. "You do?"

"Sure we do," Steve said, waiting until she looked at him before continuing. "But we also think that a year or two of real life under your belt would do you some good. Most kids waste college because they're not mature enough to handle it yet. And after a year or two you might find that it's not really for you anyway. I never went to college. Did you know that?"

Lee looked down at her hands. She had bent the fork nearly in half.

"It's true. And look at me. I love what I do. My business is booming. And I could use a smart, energetic assistant soon."

Lee knew he was waiting for her to look up, but she wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

"Julia and I talked about this. She's on board, too." Steve looked at Lee's mom, who was trying to smile. "Anyway, just give it some thought. Oh, and happy birthday." He handed her a bright red box with a sheaf of loose papers inside. She didn't take it, and he set it down in front of her.

"It's for a Buddhist liturgy," he said. "These are sutras. You sit with them in the morning and chant them, aloud or silently. Like this." He opened the box and read aloud from the first page: "Shelter is the foundation for all you will set out to do. Shelter is the milk and honey of daily life. Shelter is the doorway to liberation." He cast a smile at her. "Happy birthday from your mother and me."

"I'm going for a walk," Lee said.

"Just be sure you're home by dinner." Steve carefully placed the paper back in the box and closed it. "Curfew doesn't go on hold for your birthday."

Lee left the house for Edie's. It was a long walk but still early. Edie wouldn't have left yet for the party. Fuck her curfew. When she got to Edie's, a medieval-looking two-story stone Tudor with elaborately manicured hedges, she made her way around to the back, to Edie's room on the first floor. Peering through the window, she could see Edie from behind, applying makeup in a mirror. Lee was about to tap on the glass when she spotted a pair of oxblood Doc Martens in the mirror, attached to a pair of stockinged legs on Edie's bed. Lee couldn't see the rest of the person, but she didn't need to to know it was Claire. When her eyes shifted back, she could see Edie staring at her in the mirror. Then Edie returned her attention to her own face, and Lee knew she'd been dismissed.

On her way home, hurting in a way she hadn't let herself feel in

years, Lee began to notice a man following her. Edie had often complained about unwanted advances from strange men—in cafés, on the subway, walking down the street—but Lee rarely had that problem. The man was heavyset and a little hulking and was not at all subtle about stalking her, especially considering his attire: an old-fashioned tailcoat with brass buttons over a tight black waistcoat, black trousers, and a black bow tie. He looked ridiculous, like an English butler lost in the city. Lee quickened her pace, ducked down into a subway station, walked through it, and came out at the other end. She thought she'd lost him, but then he was right in front of her, blocking her way. Lee felt frozen in place. "What do you want?" she said.

He said nothing. When she looked into his eyes, she could see that his irises were weirdly misshapen. He shuffled in place, smiling at her, and there was something childlike about him. Lee was suddenly more curious than afraid. Then she noticed a black box in his hand, about the size of a cigar case. He clumsily flipped it open, and a lens on a bellows popped out. He raised it to his chest and snapped a picture of her. Then he bowed slightly, turned, and walked away. Lee wanted to tell someone about the encounter, to confirm the weirdness of it, but there was no one to tell.

The following Monday at school Claire and Edie spent the day huddled together, whispering and laughing and sharing glances. A door had been shut in her face. The one time she found Edie without Claire, she asked her about the party, but Edie just shook her head and laughed, then went back to texting.

The prospect of college, and with it the prospect of reinventing herself, had become something more than a distant, formless hope. She began looking into programs, researching college towns. Edie had slowly opened the door to Lee again, and Lee spent every day after school at Edie's house, where they leaned against each other on Edie's bed and fantasized about disappearing. They began making plans,

which were vague at first but solidified as they discussed which schools offered the brightest fields of hope and possibility and plain old American fun. Lee persuaded Edie to look out of state—New York or California or some small town where they could rent a house together and bicycle to class.

Edie wanted to study psychology, and Lee considered that as well, until she happened upon a photo in a *National Geographic* magazine. The article was about the discovery of a buried Assyrian city, which was being carefully unearthed, and in the photo a young woman in boots, khaki shorts, and a green cotton shirt squatted low as she brushed dirt from the head of a statue. The woman had a scarf wrapped around her black hair, and her clothes and tanned skin were dusted in red earth. She worked solo. Lee knew immediately that she wanted to be that woman. She tore the photo from the magazine, put it into her pocket, and brought it out again in the seclusion of her room that night. She tacked it to the wall above her bed and fell asleep wondering what it would take to become an archaeologist.

As she turned down requests from the kids at school and stopped dealing drugs, Lee found herself growing invisible again by degrees. Her new friends, the kids in Edie's crowd, had always found Lee to be a little off, too distant and inside herself to ever be one of them. They tolerated her when she was dealing and stealing for them, but she no longer sensed the eyes of the other kids on her as she'd walk the halls, no longer felt the twitchy anxiety of some boy nearby trying to get his nerve up to ask her for something.

Edie persuaded Lee to introduce her old dealer to Edie's boyfriend, Deke, and Deke became the new go-to guy. The itch to steal never went away—in fact, it got worse—but Lee refused to scratch it, and after a while it became like a phantom limb.

Claire seemed pleased with Lee's fall from favor with their crowd, and even warmed to her some, until one day Claire just didn't show up at school anymore. Poof, gone, just like those other kids. When Lee asked Edie about it, Edie looked around the quad as if she'd only

now noticed. “Maybe she finally ran off with that skinny indie bassist dude,” she said. “She was always threatening to.”

Then two detectives came by the school one day to interview her friends, and Edie took Lee aside and made her promise not to tell them about the S.A. party she and Claire had gone to.

“Why?” asked Lee. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“It doesn’t. It doesn’t have anything to do with anything. But if my father finds out I went, he’ll kill me. And if the police find out about it, you can bet my father will, too.”

Lee promised, but it didn’t matter. The detectives never asked her anything anyway.

Lee was seated by herself on the bleachers with a sandwich and a short list of colleges. She had narrowed it to four, and Edie was supposed to narrow hers to four, and together they were to agree to a first choice, then a second and a third. Lee had a 3.7 GPA and had scored a 2100 on a practice SAT test. Edie had money and connections. If they didn’t shoot too high, they were sure to get into one of them together, and they had made a pact to choose only a school that accepted them both. Lee saw Edie approaching from across the field, hugging herself against the wind. Edie skulked up the bleachers, her big eyes moist and smeared in mascara. She snatched the cigarette from Lee’s mouth and sat beside her.

“What’s wrong?” Lee asked.

Edie took a drag and handed the cigarette back to Lee, sniffling as she gazed out across the empty football field. Despite the chilly October air Edie wore only a short skirt and a tight-fitting cardigan.

Lee pulled a sweatshirt from her bag and held it out, but Edie ignored it, taking the cigarette back. “I really fucked it up this time.”

Edie Oswald. Golden girl. Touched by angels. Nothing ever went wrong for Edie. How bad could it be?

“I got scared. I panicked. I’m sorry, Lee.”

Something in the distance spooked Edie, and she stood up and

inhaled from the cigarette, then made her way down the bleachers. She turned. “My father will help you, I swear. I’m really sorry.”

Lee leaned forward and squinted. An amorphous blob across the field resolved itself into three separate figures as they approached. Lee recognized Mrs. Bartlett, the school principal, followed by two uniforms of the Philadelphia Police Department.

Home Fire

Kamila Shamsie

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BOOK DESIGN BY LUCIA BERNARD

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ISMA WAS GOING to miss her flight. The ticket wouldn't be refunded because the airline took no responsibility for passengers who arrived at the airport three hours ahead of the departure time and were escorted to an interrogation room. She had expected the interrogation, but not the hours of waiting that would precede it, nor that it would feel so humiliating to have the contents of her suitcase inspected. She'd made sure not to pack anything that would invite comment or questions—no Quran, no family pictures, no books on her area of academic interest—but, even so, the officer took hold of every item of Isma's clothing and ran it between her thumb and fingers, not so much searching for hidden pockets as judging the quality of the material. Finally she reached for the designer-label down jacket Isma had folded over a chair back when she entered, and held it up, one hand pinching each shoulder.

"This isn't yours," she said, and Isma was sure she didn't mean *because it's at least a size too large* but rather *it's too nice for someone like you*. "I used to work at a dry-cleaning shop. The woman who brought this in said she didn't want it when we couldn't get rid of the stain." She pointed to the grease mark on the pocket.

"Does the manager know you took it?"

"I was the manager."

"You were the manager of a dry-cleaning shop and now you're on your way to a PhD program in sociology?"

"Yes."

"And how did that happen?"

"My siblings and I were orphaned just after I finished uni. They were twelve years old—twins. I took the first job I could find. Now they've grown up; I can go back to my life."

"You're going back to your life . . . in Amherst, Massachusetts."

"I meant the academic life. My former tutor from LSE teaches in Amherst now, at the university there. Her name is Hira Shah. You can call her. I'll be staying with her when I arrive, until I find a place of my own."

"In Amherst."

"No. I don't know. Sorry, do you mean her place or the place of my own? She lives in Northampton—that's close to Amherst. I'll look all around the area for whatever suits me best. So it might be Amherst, but it might not. There are some real estate listings on my phone. Which you have." She stopped herself. The official was doing that thing that she'd encountered before in security personnel—staying quiet when you answered their question in a straightforward manner, which made you think you had to say more. And the more you said, the more guilty you sounded.

The woman dropped the jacket into the jumble of clothes and shoes and told Isma to wait.

That had been a while ago. The plane would be boarding now. Isma looked over at the suitcase. She'd repacked when the woman left the room and spent the time since worrying if doing that without permission constituted an offense. Should she empty the clothes out into a haphazard pile, or would that make things even worse? She stood up, unzipped the suitcase, and flipped it open so its contents were visible.

A man entered the office, carrying Isma's passport, laptop, and phone. She allowed herself to hope, but he sat down, gestured for her to do the same, and placed a voice recorder between them.

"Do you consider yourself British?" the man said.

"I am British."

"But do you consider yourself British?"

"I've lived here all my life." She meant there was no other country of which she could feel herself a part, but the words came out sounding evasive.

The interrogation continued for nearly two hours. He wanted to know her thoughts on Shias, homosexuals, the Queen, democracy, *The Great British Bake Off*, the invasion of Iraq, Israel, suicide bombers, dating websites. After that early slip regarding her Britishness, she settled into the manner that she'd practiced with Aneeka playing the role of the interrogating officer, Isma responding to her sister as though she were a customer of dubious political opinions whose business Isma didn't want to lose by voicing strenuously opposing views, but to whom she didn't see the need to lie either. ("When people talk about the enmity between Shias and Sunni, it usually centers around some political

imbalance of power, such as in Iraq or Syria—as a Brit, I don't distinguish between one Muslim and another." "Occupying other people's territory generally causes more problems than it solves"—this served for both Iraq and Israel. "Killing civilians is sinful—that's equally true if the manner of killing is a suicide bombing or aerial bombardments or drone strikes.") There were long intervals of silence between each answer and the next question as the man clicked keys on her laptop, examining her browser history. He knew that she was interested in the marital status of an actor from a popular TV series; that wearing a hijab didn't stop her from buying expensive products to tame her frizzy hair; that she had searched for "how to make small talk with Americans."

You know, you don't have to be so compliant about everything, Aneeka had said during the role-playing. Isma's sister, not quite nineteen, with her law student brain, who knew everything about her rights and nothing about the fragility of her place in the world. *For instance, if they ask you about the Queen, just say, "As an Asian I have to admire her color palette." It's important to show at least a tiny bit of contempt for the whole process.* Instead, Isma had responded, *I greatly admire Her Majesty's commitment to her role.* But there had been comfort in hearing her sister's alternative answers in her head, her *Ha!* of triumph when the official asked a question that she'd anticipated and Isma had dismissed, such as the *Great British Bake Off* one. Well, if they didn't let her board this plane—or any one after this—she would go home to Aneeka, which is what half Isma's heart knew it should do in any case. How much of Aneeka's heart wanted that was a hard question

to answer—she'd been so adamant that Isma not change her plans for America, and whether this was selflessness or a wish to be left alone was something even Aneeka herself didn't seem to know. A tiny flicker in Isma's brain signaled a thought about Parvaiz that was trying to surface, before it was submerged by the strength of her refusal ever to think about him again.

Eventually, the door opened and the woman official walked in. Perhaps she would be the one to ask the family questions—the ones most difficult to answer, the most fraught when she'd prepared with her sister.

"Sorry about that," the woman said, unconvincingly. "Just had to wait for America to wake up and confirm some details about your student visa. All checked out. Here." She handed a stiff rectangle of paper to Isma with an air of magnanimity. It was the boarding pass for the plane she'd already missed.

Isma stood up, unsteady because of the pins and needles in her feet, which she'd been afraid to shake off in case she accidentally kicked the man across the desk from her. As she wheeled out her luggage she thanked the woman whose thumbprints were on her underwear, not allowing even a shade of sarcasm to enter her voice.

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The cold bit down on every exposed piece of skin before cutting through the layers of clothing. Isma opened her mouth and tilted her head back, breathing in the lip-numbing, teeth-aching air. Crusted snow lay all about, glinting in the lights of the terminal. Leaving her suitcase with Dr. Hira Shah, who had driven two hours across Massa-

chusetts to meet her at Logan Airport, she walked over to a mound of snow at the edge of the parking lot, took off her gloves, and pressed her fingertips down on it. At first it resisted, but then it gave way, and her fingers burrowed into the softer layers beneath. She licked snow out of her palm, relieving the dryness of her mouth. The woman in customer services at Heathrow—a Muslim—had found her a place on the next flight out, without charge; she had spent the whole journey worrying about the interrogation awaiting her in Boston, certain they would detain her or put her on a plane back to London. But the immigration official had asked only where she was going to study, said something she didn't follow but tried to look interested in regarding the university basketball team, and waved her through. And then, as she walked out of the arrivals area, there was Dr. Shah, mentor and savior, unchanged since Isma's undergraduate days except for a few silver strands threaded through her cropped dark hair. Seeing her raise a hand in welcome, Isma understood how it might have felt, in an- other age, to step out on deck and see the upstretched arm of the Statue of Liberty and know you had made it, you were going to be all right.

While there was still some feeling in her gloveless hands she typed a message into her phone: Arrived safely. Through security—no problems. Dr. Shah here. How things with you?

Her sister wrote back: Fine, now I know they've let you through,

Really fine?

Stop worrying about me. Go live your life—I really want you to.

The parking lot with large, confident vehicles; the broad avenues beyond; the lights gleaming everywhere, their brightness multiplied by reflecting surfaces of glass and snow. Here, there was swagger and certainty and—on this New Year's Day of 2015—a promise of new beginnings.

Saints for All Occasions

J. Courtney Sullivan

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Part One

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I

In the car on the way to the hospital, Nora remembered how, when Patrick was small, she would wake up suddenly, gripped by some terrible fear—that he had stopped breathing, or spiked a deadly fever. That he had been taken from her.

She had to see him to be sure. They lived then on the top floor of the three-decker on Crescent Avenue. She would practically sleepwalk through the kitchen and past Bridget's door, and then down the hall to the boys' room, her nightgown skimming the cold hardwood, the muffled sound of Mr. Sheehan's radio murmuring up from downstairs.

The fear returned the summer Patrick was sixteen, when they moved to the big house in Hull. Nora would awaken, heart pounding, thinking of him, and of her sister, images past and present wound up in one another. She worried about the crowd he ran with, about his anger and his moods, about things he had done that could never be undone.

She met her worries in the same old way. Whatever the hour, she would rise to her feet and climb the attic stairs to Patrick's bedroom, so that she might lay eyes on him. This was a bargain she struck, a ritual to guarantee safety. Nothing truly bad could happen if she was expecting it.

Over the years, there were times when one of her other three consumed her thoughts. As they got older, Nora knew them better. That was something no one ever told you. That you would have to get to know your own children. John wanted too much to please her. Bridget was a hopeless tomboy. They had carried these traits along with them into adulthood. When Brian, her baby, moved away, Nora worried. She worried ever more so when he moved back in.

But it was Patrick who weighed most on her mind. He was fifty now. For the past several months, the old fear had returned. Ever since John kicked things up again. Things she had long considered safely in the past. Unable to check on Patrick on those nights when the feeling arose, Nora would switch on the lamp and shuffle through her prayer cards until she came to Saint Monica, patron saint of mothers with difficult children. She slept with the card faceup on Charlie's empty pillow.

Tonight, for once, she hadn't been thinking of Patrick. Of all things, she was thinking about the boiler down cellar. It had been clanging since just after supper. Adjusting the temperature didn't help. Nora thought she might have to bleed the pipes. As a last resort, she tried saying a rosary to make it stop. When this seemed to do the trick, she went to bed with a fat grin on her face, thus assured of her own powers.

She was awakened not long after by the ringing telephone, a stranger's voice saying there had been an accident, she should come right away. By the time she reached the emergency room, pink flannel pajamas under her winter coat, Patrick was already gone.

The ambulance had taken him to the Carney.

It took Nora forty-five minutes to get from home to the old neighborhood.

They were waiting for her by the door: a doctor and a nurse and a priest about her age. The presence of the priest made it clear. She thought of how they left Dorchester all those years ago for Patrick's sake, but as soon as he was old enough he moved right back. This would be where his life had started, and where it came to an end.

They took her to a windowless office. She wanted to tell them she wouldn't go in. But she followed right along and sat down. The doctor looked terribly young for such a job, but then a lot of people were starting to look terribly young to her. He wanted Nora to know that they had tried to revive her son for close to an hour. They had done all they could. He explained in calm detail that Patrick had been drinking. That he lost control of the car and slammed into a concrete wall beneath an overpass on Morrissey Boulevard. His chest struck the steering column. His lungs bled out.

"It could have been worse," the doctor said. "If he wasn't wearing a seat belt, he would have been ejected from the car."

How could it be any worse than death? she wondered, and yet she clung to this detail. Patrick had worn his seat belt. He wasn't trying to die.

Nora wanted to ask the priest if he thought all her fears had pointed to this moment. Or if they had been the thing to stave it off for so long. She felt that she should confess something. Her guilt. She knew they would think she was crazy if she said any of it out loud. She sat there with her lips pressed together, holding her pocketbook tight to her chest like it was a fidgety child.

After the signing of papers, the nurse said, "We'll give you a minute with him, if you like."

She led Nora to a room down the hall and closed the door.

Patrick was lying on a gurney, a white blanket covering his body, a breathing tube protruding from his mouth. Someone had closed his eyes.

From the hall and the rooms all around came the beeping of machines, the scurry of feet, and low voices. A burst of laughter from the nurses' station. But in this room, everything was impossibly settled, final. Still.

Nora tried to recall what the doctor had said. It seemed that if she could just piece it together, figure out what was to blame, she might still have him back.

She felt overcome with anger toward John. She returned to that moment last May, when he first asked if she remembered the McClain family from Savin Hill. Their oldest son had approached John to run his campaign for state senate.

"They weren't very nice people," she said. "I don't think you should do it."

What she meant was *Don't do it*. But John went right ahead. It had led to that terrible fight at Maeve's confirmation. Patrick and John hadn't spoken since. Patrick hadn't been himself.

Nora had seen another article in the paper just yesterday, a slight agitation taking root in her chest, as it did whenever she saw Rory McClain's name in print.

There was a photograph of Rory looking every bit the politician, that face so familiar to her, all black hair and toothy smile. His wife stood by his side, and three teenage boys, lined up according to height. Nora wondered if beneath the collared shirts and school picture day haircuts they were as wicked as their father and grandfather had once been. It seemed

to her that a duplicitous nature must run in a family, like twins or weak knees.

She hadn't read the article. Though she knew John would call to make sure she had seen it, Nora turned the page.

She took in a deep breath now and told herself to put these thoughts aside. There wasn't much time left.

Patrick had had a horrible mustache for the last two years, despite her begging him to shave it off. She let her hand hover in the air just above it, so as to hide the proof, and then she looked at him. She looked and looked. He had always been handsome. The most beautiful of all her children.

After a while, the nurse knocked twice, then opened the door.

"It's time, I'm afraid," she said.

Nora pulled a small plastic hairbrush from her purse and smoothed his black curls. She checked his pulse, in case. She felt as if a swarm of bees were darting around inside her, but she managed to let Patrick go, as she had on other occasions when it felt impossible. When he was five and frightened about the first day of kindergarten, she slipped a seashell into his pocket as the yellow school bus came into view. *To get you through*, she said.

In the fluorescent-lit hallway, the priest placed a hand on her shoulder.

"You're in better shape than most, Mrs. Rafferty," he said. "You're a tough cookie, I can tell. No tears."

Nora didn't say anything. She had never been able to cry in front of other people. And anyway, tears never came right away at a moment like this. Not when her mother died when she was a child, and not when her husband died five years ago, and not when her sister went away. Which was not a death, but something close to it.

"Where in Ireland are you from?" he asked, and when she stared back blankly, he said, "Your accent."

"County Clare," she said.

"Ahh. My mother came from County Mayo." The priest paused. "He's in a better place."

Why did they send the clergy at times like this? By design, they could never understand. Her sister had been just the same. Nora pictured her, in full black habit—did they even wear those anymore? She would wake up this morning at that tranquil country abbey, free from all attachment,

free from heartache, even though she had been the one to set the thing in motion.

All the way home, unable to think of how she would tell the children, Nora thought of her sister. Her rage was like another person sitting beside her in the car.

When the children were young, Charlie was always telling stories about home. The one they liked best was about the Bone Setter.

"Did I ever tell you who came when you broke a bone in Miltown Malbay?" he would ask.

They would shake their heads, even though they'd heard it before.

"The Bone Setter!" he'd cry, clasping the closest child in his arms, the child squealing in delight.

"You didn't go to the doctor unless you were dying," he said. "No, if you broke something, like I did—my ankle—this fine man would come to your bedroom and snap you right back into place with his hands, as good as new." Charlie made a popping sound with his tongue. "No drugs. Didn't need them."

The children went green when he told it. But then they begged him to tell it again.

As usual when he spoke of home, Charlie left out the worst bits. The man had set his ankle slightly off. It led the rest of his body to be out of balance so that eventually, his knees bothered him, and later, his back.

The lies they had told were like this. The original, her sister's doing. All those that followed, an attempt on Nora's part to try to preserve what the first lie had done, each one putting Patrick ever more out of joint. She had accepted it as the price of keeping him safe.

John always complained that Nora favored Patrick. Bridget said that until she was five years old, she thought his name was *My Patrick*, since that's all Nora ever called him. She had thought that someday they would understand, they would know the whole story, though she could not imagine telling it. Patrick had asked, but she could never bring herself to answer.

She hadn't even told them that she had a sister.

Her mind wandered again to the abbey. Those women outside the world, capable of casting off everything, even their own names. Nora

had realized long ago that the walls the nuns used to keep others out could just as easily wall a person in, imprison her with her thoughts. Let her sit with this, then. The weight of it. It wasn't right that Nora should have to carry it on her own.

As soon as she reached the house, she went to the junk drawer and found her old address book. She called the abbey for the first time in more than thirty years. She told the young one who answered that her name was Nora Rafferty and she needed Mother Cecilia Flynn to know that her son Patrick had died late last night, in a car crash, alone.

Outside, she could hear the first of the commuters driving down the hill, headed for the highway that would take them to the city, or else to the ferry, where they'd drink a cup of coffee as the boat cut a course across the darkened harbor.

Nora took a notepad from the counter and made a list. She brewed a pot of tea in case company should arrive sooner than expected. She sat down and wept, her elbows on the table, her face cupped in the cool palms of her hands.

Girl on the Leeside

· A NOVEL ·

Kathleen Anne Kenney

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PART ONE

SIOBHAN

CHAPTER 1

Come away, O human child!
To the woods and waters wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.

—W. B. YEATS

Siobhan breathed in the cool lough mist, feeling the moistness fill her lungs and seep into her soul. It was her tonic. Sitting on the low stone wall that hugged the lee side of the lough, she was surrounded by the mist. In grammar school, when she had studied Saint Francis and learned how he had referred to other creatures as Brother Otter or Sister Dove, she started to think of the mist as Sister Mist.

The lough shore was Siobhan's favorite of all her special places. It was here that the poems came to her. She felt them emerge from the mist, or rise from the surface of the water, or descend from the surrounding mountains. They nestled in her mind because she welcomed them gently, nurturing and encouraging, so that when she put pen to paper she only had to write down what was already inside her.

But today she felt an unfamiliar longing, not the secure serenity she always associated with this place. It made her uneasy. Siobhan had always been content here, living with Uncle Keenan by the shores of her lough. Why today did she feel as if a strange new dimension had thrust its way into her life? A sense no longer of just living but of waiting. Waiting for something—or someone. Siobhan was wary of strangers.

. . .

For more than three hundred years imperceptible evolution, like water on a stone, had transformed the Leeside from an old coaching inn into a quiet neighborhood pub. In its early days it sheltered travelers between Clifden and Galway, and secretly harbored the occasional smuggler. But the nineteenth-century famine and poverty in the west, followed by the advent of motorized transport, had isolated it from all but the locals, who finally claimed it as their own. So for the people who had known it all their lives, the pub was the same now as it had always been. Siobhan loved that about the Leeside; it was her rock, her island. Uncle Kee had enisled them both upon it.

Siobhan was, at this moment, standing behind the bar, washing the interminable glasses. She looked around, as she often did, silently chanting her self-made mantra: "I love living here. I can't imagine living anywhere else. I love living here. I can't image living anywhere else. I love living here . . ." Each rendition was another granite pebble in her wall of isolation, another layer of protection.

Siobhan knew that oddness was the cornerstone of her identity. She felt strangers smell her apprehension. People who knew her tolerated her introversion, but to many it seemed out of place in someone who worked in a pub. Siobhan tolerated contact with people she knew for the simple reason that they

were unavoidable. Her interactions with friends of her uncle or regulars at the pub were mere ripples on the surface of her sea-chasm of isolation. She smiled vaguely at jokes, ignored banter, and often appeared to be of subnormal intelligence with her air of detached, blank pleasantness. She caught the fleeting looks of puzzlement or pity, and was unconcerned by them. Siobhan knew she was peculiar. How could it have been otherwise? She had no mother. For her, this explained everything. How could she be like the other children? *She had no mother.* For that matter, she had no father either, only Uncle Kee. She'd lived with him since a week before her second birthday, twenty-five years ago.

Siobhan couldn't remember that day. Uncle Kee never talked about it. On her seventh birthday—her "golden birthday," seven on the seventh of April—she'd nerved herself to ask him the question. What she wanted as a gift this year was information.

"Uncle Kee, why did Mamsy die?"

Holding hands, they were standing next to her mother's grave, which was next to her grandparents', in Saint Brendan's churchyard. They visited the graves each year on Siobhan's birthday, early in the morning. Looking down at her, he gave the bare bones of an explanation as to how her mother died, and why she had come to live with him. "Mamsy died in an IRA bombing . . . and also your da. So I came to fetch you to come live here with me."

He squeezed her hand and she regarded him with wide, grave eyes. "Why isn't my da buried here as well?"

Uncle Kee blinked and shifted his gaze to the headstone: HERE LIES MAUREEN NORA DOYLE. BELOVED DAUGHTER, SISTER, AND MOTHER. FLYING WITH THE ANGELS. After a moment or two he cleared his throat and shrugged slightly. "I never knew him, love." He squeezed her hand again and smiled

down at her. "So, there you are, then. Any questions?" *Only a thousand.* "Right. Off to school with you."

They turned and began walking toward the school. So that was that. He had explained matters—but not actually answered her question. As she let go of his hand to go inside, he suddenly squatted down.

"One more thing, love. You're seven now and I should be telling you this. I named you Siobhan. Your mamsy and her . . . your da called you Susan. But it didn't suit you at all. Not in my book. So I named you after Auntie Siobhan."

"Susan is an English name," she said.

"Aye."

Siobhan nodded and left him. She understood that Uncle Kee wouldn't want her to have an English name. *Susan.* She puzzled over the word. It sounded vaguely familiar but that was all. It held no value or singular meaning. It didn't sound like a real name, not the name of anyone she would know.

But she had gotten some answers because now she was seven and had been brave enough to ask. The reason she had no mother was because her mum had been killed. *Killed.* Not just died of cancer or in childbirth or something ordinary like that. She'd been killed—and not by getting hit by a bus crossing the road or in a car smash. By a bomb—*an IRA bomb*. Siobhan knew what the IRA was, of course. She always watched the evening news in the pub and read the newspapers. Uncle Kee never censored her reading material. The more she knew about the world outside, he said, the more she would appreciate living at the Leeside. In fact, he often pointed out news stories about young women being killed or hurt. Once he even told her about a former girlfriend of his who'd been murdered in Dublin. "Picked the wrong bastard to fall in love with, she did. Some people wear charm like a second skin and that kind are

always trouble, darlin'. Just another reason to give most folks a wide berth."

Soon after her birthday Siobhan started writing MMWKBAB in tiny letters in her school notebooks, which stood for My Mother Was Killed By A Bomb. Tiny, tiny letters they were, in the margins of all her notebooks. Finally, inevitably, she wrote it on her arm in indelible ink, like a brand. In her neatest printing, as if she were proud of it. But she kept it carefully hidden under the long starched sleeve of her white uniform blouse. After two weeks it was still there; she was careful to wash around it. Then one of the nuns noticed it.

"What's that writing on your arm? Are you cheating, Siobhan?"

No, no, Sister. Just doodling, I am.

Sister Mary Sebastian helped her wash it off in the girl's bathroom with strong yellow soap and righteous scrubbing, until her skin was butcher raw.

Thank you, Sister.

. . .

Siobhan finished drying the last of the glasses; they hung like jewels in their appointed places. She always did her work thoroughly and well, not for her own satisfaction but to ease Uncle Kee's burden and because of Time. Siobhan and Time were kindred spirits. It wound itself slowly around her, never varying its pace in her universe. Time stretched itself, unfolding and expanding, luxuriating in its freedom from its own boundaries. For Siobhan, Time was a friend and, in its turn, Time bestowed itself like a gift on her and never outpaced her, as she saw it do to so many others.

The glasses finished, Siobhan went through the swinging door into the kitchen to prepare the meat pies and sausage

rolls for tonight's customers. Because she could daydream, Siobhan preferred cleaning to cooking; the latter demanded her full attention. Once, when she was seventeen, she mortified herself and Uncle Kee by forgetting to add salt and suet to the meat pies—they were inedible. She had never forgotten his pained, humiliated expression, although he had murmured to her that it was all right. She had solemnly vowed never to let it happen again.

The back door banged and she heard Uncle Kee's voice coming from the mudroom.

"Siobhan! What are you doing?"

"I'm cutting the meat for the pies. Why?"

His ruddy face ducked into the doorway, wearing a pleased expression. "Because I've got news, darlin'. We're going to have a guest tomorrow. An overnight guest here at the pub. So we'll have to clean out that extra room."

"A guest?" Siobhan looked at him blankly, her bloodstained hands paused in her work. She felt the familiar tightening in her stomach. A stranger? Staying here at the Leeside?

"Is it someone we know?" Siobhan asked without hope.

Uncle Kee shook his big head. "No, but don't be afraid, now. It'll not be like that other time. It's someone we'll both enjoy meeting. An American professor of Irish studies. He wants to come here to meet me. Sean is sending him down."

"But we don't let rooms," she said tonelessly.

"I know," he said quickly. "But it's only for two nights, and Sean says he's great altogether. He's been staying in Clifden and eating at Sean's restaurant every night for a week. Sean told him about our study of Irish literature and he wants to come. It'll be grand, you'll see."

Siobhan looked at her uncle's flushed face, trying to push down the panic. He didn't get excited very often. Having

the man to stay would be all right. She wouldn't mind, she *wouldn't*. It would be all right—no need to have doubts. This professor and Uncle Kee would spend all their time together talking about his greatest hobby, the study of Irish literature. This was an interest she herself shared, especially poetry. She took a deep breath.

"It does sound grand, Uncle Kee. You'll have a brilliant time with the man. Are you knowing anything else about him?" She resumed her slicing carefully, her hands shaking a little. Not everyone was like that other man.

"I'll tell you later at tea. I'll just be clearing the junk out of that room from now until then. Then we can give it a good going-over together, so." He started pulling off his muddy boots.

"Right."

Uncle Kee started up the back stairs and Siobhan heard his head smack against a low beam.

"Ah, goddammit!" she heard him mutter.

Siobhan smiled in spite of herself at his outburst. She thought he must be very excited to forget to watch his head going up the stairs. Keenan Doyle had to be careful coming through the doorways of the Leeside, too, for he wasn't a thread under six foot six and the Leeside was built in the days when he would have been considered a giant. He always seemed to fill any room he was in, and told her many times how his mother lamented that she'd spawned a son who didn't fit the scale of their home. *We should have named you after the giant Finn MacCool*, she'd say. Uncle Kee himself often commented drily that he'd developed quite a thick skull from cracking his head on the low oak beams.

But Siobhan loved his bigness, his protective bulk. She vaguely remembered when she was very small, being awed by

his size and amazed by the gentleness of his touch. He acted as if he were afraid of breaking her, wondering at her little-girl fragility. She, in turn, had been circumspect in her physical approach to him, sensing his strength and power. He would never hurt her intentionally, this she knew, but his massive size was daunting and she was shy of it, though not of him. Her mother had been tiny, as Siobhan was, and Siobhan remembered her quicksilver touch, sometimes impatient, tugging her here and there, pulling or pushing on clothes and shoes, snatching Siobhan up to bestow quick hugs and kisses.

As she grew older, Siobhan was less intimidated by Uncle Kee's size and began to delight in his bulk, climbing around on him as if he were a living set of monkey bars. She felt like a feather in his strong hands. She sensed that he loved her smallness and she was glad she wasn't growing much taller. They were comfortable with each other's sizes. Then as her school years progressed, and Siobhan became prepubescent, she grew reticent about physical play with him after the nuns taught *proper behavior* for young ladies. Strange, mysterious feelings were eluded to with sinister ambiguity. This new physical shyness began her retreat within.

Siobhan brushed a stray wisp of her black hair from her face. She wore it pulled back most of the time to keep it out of her way. Her hair hung almost to her knees and when untethered, draped like a cloak around her. She was a tiny, pale woman with grave, clouded eyes and limbs like kindling. Her one friend, Maura Doherty, once told her that for a long time she'd thought Siobhan was a fairy or kelpie who would one day disappear back into her fairy mound to be lost forever. They had laughed at the silliness of it.

Years of helping Uncle Kee in the pub had developed Siobhan's stamina; she was much stronger than she looked. From a very early age she was determined to help him, to do her part,

to make his life easier. His grateful smiles were the sun in her world.

After the meat pies had baked, Siobhan escaped outside to sit in one of the old basket chairs. The Leeside was a plain, two-story pub, built of gray stone with a slate roof. It sat within an embrace of hills, at once soft and rugged, at the edge of a dark, narrow lough. The pale sky spread like a domed canopy over it all and sent breezes down to ripple the surface of the water and the surrounding tall grasses in concordant rhythm. The pub wasn't situated in the village of Carnloe itself but was almost two miles down the lough road, which was little more than a cart track. This enhanced its atmosphere of isolation.

SMOKE

A NOVEL

DAN VYLETA

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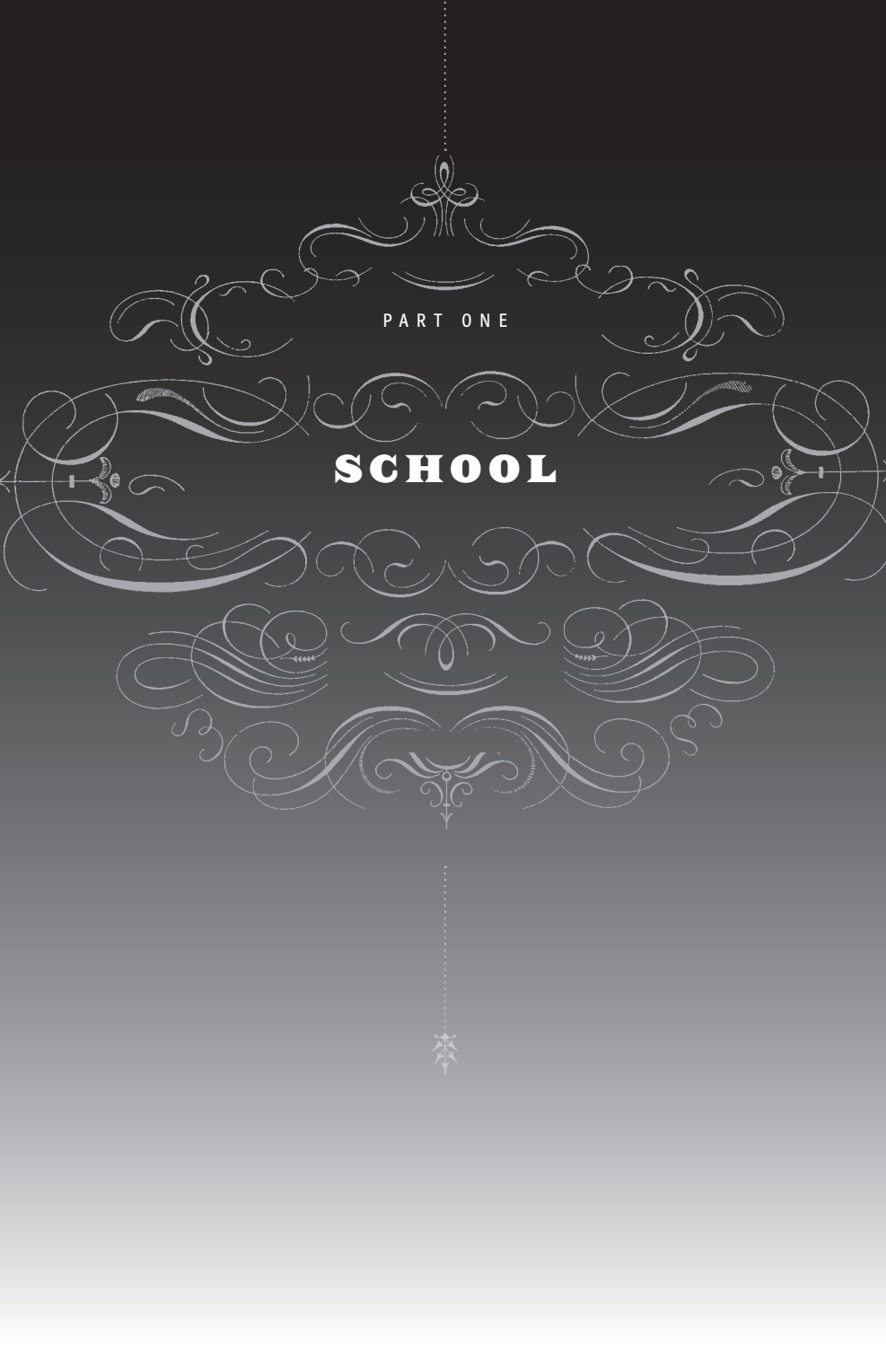

PART ONE

SCHOOL

THE TRIP

They make him wait for his punishment.

It's laundry day the next morning and, having no choice, Thomas throws the sodden, smelly shirt into the basket, along with the week's underwear and bedclothes. The Soot stain has faded but not disappeared.

It is no consolation to Thomas that many a schoolboy adds his own stained clothes to the growing pile. Each transgression leaves behind its own type of Soot, and those versed in such matters can determine the severity of your crime just by studying the stain's density and grit. This is why no classes in Smoke and Ethics are scheduled for laundry day: the master, Dr. Renfrew, spends his morning locked in his office, rooting through boys' underclothes. The list of those found guilty of "Unclean Thoughts and Actions" is displayed in a glass cabinet before lunch, so that each schoolboy may learn what punishment has been levied on him. Two days of dining-hall service; three pages that have to be copied from the *Second Book of Smoke*; a public apology at school assembly. These, for minor transgressions. More serious offences require individual investigation. The boy in question will be called to the master's study, to answer for his sins. There is a chair there, upholstered in leather, that is equipped with leather straps. The boys call it the

dentist's chair. No teeth are pulled, but the truth, Dr. Renfrew has been known to say, has to be dug up by the roots. For the most serious violations of Good Order even this procedure is seen to be insufficient. They require the calling of something referred to as a "tribunal." So Thomas has heard. There has been no such case in the weeks since he's been at school.

In class, Thomas sits distracted and is reprimanded when he cannot recite the four principles of Aristotle's theory of causation. Another boy recites them with glib relish. He is not asked what the four principles mean, how they are used, or what good they may do; nor who this Aristotle was whose marble bust stands in the school hallway, near the portrait of Lord Shrewsbury, the school's esteemed founder. And in general Thomas has found that the school is more interested in the outward form of things rather than their meaning; that learning is a matter of reciting names or dates or numbers: smartly, loudly, and with great conviction. He has proven, thus far, a very bad student.

At lunch, he hardly eats. He is sitting in the school refectory, which has the shape and general dimensions of a chapel and is dreadfully cold. December winds have pushed the snow into the windows. On the outside they are shrouded in dull white that saps the warmth from every ray of sun. On the inside, they bleed cold water from the edges of their metal frames. On the floor, the puddles refreeze and eat away at the unvarnished wood.

Lunch is a cut of hard gammon half hidden under a ladleful of lukewarm peas. Each bite tastes like mud to Thomas, and twice he bites down on the fork by accident, digging the prongs into his tongue. Halfway through the meal Charlie spots him and joins him at the table. One of the teachers held him up after class. Charlie waits until the skinny little boy on service duty has condemned him to his own piece of leathery gammon with its attendant pile of yellowing peas.

"Anything?" he asks.

Thomas shakes his head. "Nothing. Look at them, though.

They are all waiting for it. The pupils, and the teachers, too. All of them, impatient. Yearning for the bloody shoe to drop."

He speaks resentfully and even as the last word leaves his lips, a wisp of Smoke curls from his nostril, too light and thin to leave behind Soot. Charlie disperses it with a quick wave. He is not worried. Hardly anyone gets through the day without a minor transgression, and there have been days when a teacher could be seen flapping at a thread of Smoke pouring from his tongue. The students tend to like these teachers better. In their imperfection they are closer to their own states of grace.

"They can't send you home." Charlie sounds like he believes it. "You've only just got here."

"Maybe."

"He'll call you into his office, Renfrew will."

"I suppose so."

"You'll have to tell him how it was. No holding back."

And then Charlie says what's been on Thomas's mind all morning. What he hasn't dared spell out.

"Otherwise he mightn't let you join the Trip."

Thomas nods and finds his mouth too dry to speak.

The Trip is what everyone has been talking about from the minute he arrived at school. It's a unique event: there has been nothing like it in the school's history for close to three decades. Rumour has it that it was Renfrew who had insisted on the Trip's revival, and that he has faced fierce opposition, from the teachers, the parents, and from the Board of Governors itself. It's hardly surprising. Most decent folk have never been to London. To take a group of schoolboys there is considered extraordinary, almost outlandish. There have been voices suggesting that it will put the whole school in danger. That the boys who go might never return.

Thomas still has trouble finding spit for words. "I want to go" is all he manages before breaking into a dry cough. It does not quite capture what he feels. He *needs* to see it. The prospect of the Trip is the only thing that's kept him going these past few weeks.

The moment he heard about it was the moment he decided there might be a meaning to his coming to school, a higher purpose. He'd be hard-pressed to say exactly what he expects from their visit to London. A revelation, perhaps. Something that will explain the world to him.

The cough runs its course, exhausts itself in a curse.

"That bastard Julius. I could kill the bloody turd."

Charlie's face is so honest it hurts.

"If you can't go, Thomas, I won't—"

Thomas cuts him short because a group of teachers are passing them. They are speaking animatedly, but drop their voices to a whisper the moment they draw level with the boys. Resentment flickers through Thomas's features, and is followed by another exhalation of pale, thin Smoke. His tongue shows black for a second, but he swallows the Soot. You do that too often, your windpipe roughens and your tonsils start to darken, along with what's behind. There is a glass jar in the science classroom with a lung so black it looks dipped in tar.

"Look at them whispering. They are enjoying this! Making me stew in my own fat. Why don't they just get on with it? Put me in the bloody dock!"

But Charlie shakes his head, watches the teachers huddle near the door.

"I don't think they're talking about you, Thomas. There is something else going on. I noticed it earlier, when I went to the Porter's Lodge, to see if I had any mail. Master Foybles was there, talking to Cruikshank, the porter. Making inquiries. They are waiting for something, some sort of delivery. And it's important. Foybles sounded pretty desperate. He kept on saying, 'You'll let me know, won't you? The minute it arrives.' As though he were suspecting Cruikshank of hiding it away somewhere. Whatever *it* is."

Thomas considers this. "Something they need for the Trip?"

"I don't know," says Charlie, thoughtful. "If it is, it better come

today. If they have to postpone the Trip, they might end up cancelling it altogether."

He cuts a piece of gammon like it's wronged him somehow, spilling peas on all sides. Thomas curses and turns to his own lunch. Leaving food on your plate is against the rules and carries its own punishment, as though it is proof of some invisible type of Smoke.

ϕ

They send for him after vespers.

It's Julius who comes for him, smirking, Thomas can see him all the way down the corridor, an extra flourish to his step. Julius does not say anything. Indeed he does not need to, a gesture is enough, a sort of wave of the hand that starts at the chest and ends up pointing outward, down the length of the hall. Ironic, like he's a waiter, inviting Thomas to the table. And then Julius leads the way, walking very slowly now, his hands in his pockets, calling to some boys to open the door up ahead.

Making sure everyone knows.

Keeping pace with Julius, trapped behind that slow, slouching, no-haste-no-worry-in-the-world walk: it's enough to make Thomas's blood boil. He can taste Smoke on his breath and wonders if he's showing. A dark gown covers his shirt but he will soon be asked to remove it, no doubt, and expose his linens. He attempts to calm himself, picks Soot out of his teeth with the tip of his tongue. Its bitterness makes him gag.

Julius slows down even further as they approach Dr. Renfrew's door. The Master of Smoke and Ethics. It's a new post, that, no older than a year. It used to be the Master of Religion was in charge of all the moral education, or so Charlie's told him. When they arrive at the door, Julius pauses, smirks, and shakes his head. Then he walks on, faster now, gesturing for Thomas to keep pace.

It takes Thomas a minute to understand what's just happened. He is not going to see Dr. Renfrew. There will be no dentist's chair for him. It's worse than that. They are heading to the headmaster's quarters.

There's to be a tribunal.

The word alone makes him feel sick.

ϕ

Julius does not knock when they reach the headmaster's door. This confuses Thomas, until they've stepped through. It leads not to a room but to a sort of antechamber, like a waiting room at the doctor's, two long benches on each side, and an icy draft from the row of windows on the right. They are high up here, in one of the school's towers. Beneath them, the fields of Oxfordshire: a silver sea of frozen moonlight. Down by the brook, a tree rises from the snow-choked grounds, stripped of its leaves by winter. A willow, its drooping branches dipped into the river, their tips trapped in ice. Thomas turns away, shivering, and notices that the door back to the hallway is padded from the inside, to proof it against sound. To protect the headmaster from the school's noise, no doubt. And so nobody can hear you scream.

Julius stands at the other door, knocks on it gently, with his head boy's confidence and tact. It opens after only a moment: Renfrew's face, framed by blond hair and beard.

"You are here, Argyle. Good. Sit."

Then adds, as Julius turns to leave: "You too."

Renfrew closes the door before Julius can ask why.

ϕ

They sit on opposite sides, Thomas with his back to the windows, Julius facing them, and the moon. It affords Thomas the oppor-

tunity to study him. Something has gone out of the lad, at this "You too." Some of the swagger, the I-own-the-world certainty. He is chewing his cheek, it appears. A good-looking boy, Thomas is forced to admit, fair-skinned and dark-haired, his long thin whiskers more down than beard. Thomas waits until Julius's eyes fall on him, then leans forward.

"Does it hurt? The tooth, I mean."

Julius does not react at once, hides his emotions as he does so well.

"You are in trouble," he says at last. "I am here only as a witness."

Which is true in all likelihood, but nonetheless he looks a tad ruffled, Julius does, and Thomas cannot help gloating a little over his victory. They looked for the tooth late last night when Charlie and he were trying to clean his shirt, but it was gone. Julius must have picked it up himself. It would have made a nice souvenir. But that was then and now he is here, his hands all sweaty, casting around for bravado. Waiting. How much easier it would be to fight, even to lose: a fist in your face, a nosebleed, an ice bag on your aches. Thomas leans back, tries to unknot his shoulders. The moon is their only light source. When a cloud travels across it, the little waiting room is thrown into darkness. All he can see of Julius now is a shadow, black as Soot.

It must be a quarter of an hour before Renfrew calls them in. Rich, golden gaslight welcomes them; thick carpets that suck all sound from their steps. They are all there, all the masters. There are seven of them—Renfrew-Foybles-Harmon-Swinburne-Barlow-Winslow-Trout—but only three who count. Renfrew is tall and well-built, and still rather young. He wears his hair short, as well as his beard, and favours a dark, belted suit that seems to encase him from neck to ankle. A white silken scarf, worn tight at the throat, vouches for his virtue.

Trout is the headmaster. He is very fat and wears his trousers very high, so that the quantity of flesh between the top of his

thighs and the waistband dwarfs the short sunken chest, adorned though it is with fine lace and ruffles. What he lacks in hair, Trout makes up for in whiskers. His button nose seems lost between the swell of his red cheeks.

Swinburne, finally: the Master of Religion. Where Renfrew is tall, Swinburne is towering, if twisted by age. He wears the cap and smock of his office. The little one sees of his face is mottled with broken veins, the shape and colour of thistles. A beard covers the rest, long and stringy.

Renfrew, Swinburne, Trout: each of them, it is said, entangled in affairs that reach from school to Parliament and Crown. Thomas has often thought of painting them. He is good with a brush. A triptych. He has not decided yet who belongs at the centre.

It's Renfrew who bids them sit. He points to two chairs that have been pulled up into the middle of the room, making no distinction between them. Compared to the theatricality of Julius's examination last night, the gesture is almost casual. The masters are standing in clusters, wearing worsted winter suits. Some are holding teacups; Foybles is munching a biscuit. Thomas sits. After a moment's hesitation Julius follows suit.

"You know why you are here."

It is a statement, not a question, and Renfrew turns even as he makes it, reaches into a basket, retrieves something. It affords Thomas another moment to look around the room. He sees a leather settee and a brass chandelier; stained-glass windows with scenes from the Scriptures, Saint George with his lance through the dragon's throat; sees a painting of a fox hunt under a dappled sky; sees cabinets, and doors, and a sideboard with fine china; sees all this, but takes in little, his mind skittish, his skin tingling, nervous, afraid. When Renfrew turns back to them he is holding two shirts. He places one over the back of an unoccupied chair, spreads the other between his hands, displaying the Soot stain; runs his fingertips through it, tests its grit.

And launches into lecture.

"Smoke," he says, "can have many colours. Often it is light and grey, almost white, with no more odour than a struck match. Then there is yellow Smoke, dense and wet like fog. Blue Smoke that smells acrid, like spoiled milk, and seems to disperse almost as soon as it has formed. Once in a while we witness black Smoke, oily and viscous; it will cling to anything it touches. The variations of texture, density, and shade have all been carefully described in the *Four Books of Smoke:* a taxonomy of forty-three varieties. It is more difficult to establish the precise cause for each type of Smoke. It is a question not only of the offence but of the offender. The thoroughly corrupt breed darker, denser Smoke. Once a person's moral sickness is sufficiently advanced, all actions are coloured by its stain. Even the most innocent act will—"

"Sin, Master Renfrew." It's Swinburne who interrupts him. His voice, familiar from the thrice-weekly sermon, has a shrill intensity all its own. He sounds like the man who ate the boy who ran his fingernails down the blackboard. "It is sin that blackens the soul. Not *sickness*."

Renfrew looks up, annoyed, but a glance from the headmaster bids him swallow his reply.

"Sin, then. A difference of nomenclature." He pauses, collects his thought, digs his fingers into the shirt's linen. "Smoke, in any case, is easy to read. It is the living, material manifestation of degeneracy. Of *sin*. Soot, on the other hand, well, that is a different matter. Soot is dead, inert. A spent symptom, and as such inscrutable. Oh, any fool can see how much there is and whether it is fine like sea sand or coarse as a crushed brick. But these are crude measures. It requires a more scientific approach"—here Renfrew smooths down his jacket—"to produce a more sophisticated analysis. I spent my morning bent over a microscope, studying samples from both shirts. There are certain solvents that can cancel the inertness of the substance and, so to speak, temporarily bring it back to life. A concentrated solution of *Papaver fuliginosa richteria*, heated to eighty-six degrees and infused with—"

Renfrew interrupts himself, his calm self-possession momentarily strained by excitement. He resumes at a different point and in a different voice, gentler, more intimate, drawing a step closer to the boys and speaking as though only to them.

"I say I spent the morning analysing these two shirts and I found something unusual. Something disconcerting. A type of Soot I have seen only once before. In a prison."

He draws closer yet, wets his lips. His voice is not without compassion. "There is a cancer growing in one of you. A moral cancer. *Sin*"—a flicker of a glance here, over to Swinburne, hostile and ironic—"as black as Adam's. It requires drastic measures. If it takes hold—if it takes over the organism down to the last cell . . . well, there will be nothing anybody can do." He pauses, fixes both boys in his sight. "You will be lost."

ϕ

For a minute and more after this announcement, Thomas goes deaf. It's a funny sort of deaf: his ears work just fine but the words he hears do not reach his brain, not in the normal manner where they are sifted for significance and given a place in the hierarchy of meaning. Now they just accumulate.

It's Julius who is speaking. His tone is measured, if injured.

"Won't you even ask what happened, Master Renfrew?" he asks. "I thought I had earned some measure of trust at this school, but I see now that I was mistaken. Argyle attacked me. Like a rabid dog. I had no choice but to restrain him. He rubbed his filth into me. The Soot is his. I never smoke."

Renfrew lets him finish, watches not Julius but the other teachers, some of whom are muttering in support. Thomas, uncomprehending, follows his gaze and finds an accusation written in the masters' faces. He, Thomas, has done this to one of theirs, they seem to be saying. Has covered him in dirt. Their golden boy.

Thomas would like to refute the accusation, but his thoughts just won't latch on. All he can think is: what does it mean to be "lost"?

"I have had occasion," Renfrew replies at last, "to collect three separate statements concerning the incident you are referring to, Mr. Spencer. I believe I have a very accurate impression of how events unfolded. The facts of the matter are these. Both shirts are soiled—from the inside and out. The Soot is of variable quality. But I took samples of this"—he picks from his pocket a glass slide at the centre of which a few grains of Soot hang suspended in a drop of reddish liquid—"from *both* shirts. I could not determine the origin.

"Both shirts," he continues, now turning to the teachers, "also bear marks of being tampered with: one very crudely"—a nod to Thomas—"the other rather more sophisticatedly. Almost inexplicably, Mr. Spencer."

Julius swallows, jerks his head. A crack of panic now mars his voice.

"I wholly reject . . . You will have to answer to my family! It was this boy, this beast . . ."

He trails off, his voice raw with anger. Swinburne rescues him: rushes up, with a rustle of his dark gown, taps Julius on the shoulder, ordering him to shut up. Up close Swinburne smells unaired and musty, like a cellar. The smell helps Thomas recover his wits. It is the most real thing in the entire room. That and a knocking, like a hard fist on wood. Nobody reacts to it. It must be his heart.

"Mr. Spencer is innocent." Swinburne's voice brooks no dissent. He speaks as though delivering a verdict. "I too made inquiries about the incident last night. The situation is quite clear. It's that boy's fault. His Smoke is potent. It infected Spencer."

"*Infected?*" Renfrew smiles while the knocking grows louder. "A medical term, Master Swinburne. So unlike you. But you are quite right. Smoke *infects*. A point only imperfectly understood, I fear. Which is why I insist that both these boys join the Trip tomorrow."

Perhaps the most disconcerting thing about the roar of shouts and voices that answers this announcement is that Thomas's heart appears to stop: it gives a loud final rap and then falls silent. "It mustn't be," one of the teachers—Harmon? Winslow?—keeps repeating, high-pitched, squealing, as though giving voice to Thomas's dismay. A moment later the door is thrown open and the small, dishevelled figure of Cruikshank, the porter, stands on its threshold. He pokes his head into the sudden silence of the room.

"Beg pardon. Knocked till knuckles are raw. No answer. Message for Mast'r Foybles. Ur-jent, like. If yous please."

The person thus named is mortified.

"Not now, you fool!" Foybles cries, running across the room and dragging the porter out by the arm. Their whispered exchange in the antechamber is loud enough to focus all attention on the pair.

"You says, '*At once*,' you did," Cruikshank can be heard declaiming.

"But to burst in like that," Foybles berates him. "You fool, you fool."

All the same he seems elated when he closes the door on the porter and re-joins the company of his peers.

"The delivery has arrived," he declares, beaming, rubbing his hands in triumph before the room's atmosphere recalls him to the events that have just transpired there. Rather crushed, he withdraws into a corner and buries his face in a handkerchief for the purpose of clearing out his nasal passages. Like a compass needle momentarily distracted by a magnet, everybody's focus returns to Renfrew, who remains standing at the centre of the room. But the outrage at his announcement has spent itself, and Thomas's mind is clear at last.

He is *lost*.

But he will be going to London.

"There are objections?" Renfrew asks calmly.

Swinburne glares at him, then turns his back and addresses the headmaster.

"Master Trout. That boy is a sickness in our midst. He should be sent down at once."

Swinburne does not even condescend to point a finger at Thomas. But Trout shakes his head.

"Impossible. He has a powerful sponsor. I will hear no more of it."

Swinburne makes to speak again, but Trout has heaved his heavy figure out of his armchair.

"It is for the Master of Smoke and Ethics to determine the punishment. The government guidelines are quite clear. If Master Renfrew thinks these two boys will benefit from tomorrow's outing, so be it. Beyond that—" He glances questioningly at Renfrew.

"I will work with each of them upon our return, Headmaster. An intensive programme of reform." Renfrew's voice sounds notes of reconciliation. "And, if it will set your mind at rest, dear colleagues, I have a list of pages here from the *Book of Smoke* that I shall ask them to copy. From the third volume." He glances at Swinburne. "Passages whose findings have been confirmed by the latest research. Which is more than we can say for much of the book."

He distributes copies of the list to Thomas and Julius, then lingers at the head boy's side.

"One more thing, Mr. Spencer. These midnight examinations. They will stop. I alone have the authority to examine the pupils at this school."

Swinburne is too outraged to swallow his anger. "The school has its traditions. Only a fool meddles with—"

Renfrew cuts him off. His tone, now, is cold and brutal.

"A new era is dawning, Master Swinburne. You'd better get used to it."

He gestures the two boys up and all but pushes them out the door. Outside, in the hallway, Thomas and Julius stop for a moment, dazed. For an instant something like companionship flickers between them, the sense that they have shared a danger, and survived. Then Julius straightens.

"I hate you," he says, and walks away. Not the slightest trace of Smoke rises from his skin. It leaves Thomas wondering what it is about Julius's hate that is sanctified, and what is so dirty about his own.

ϕ

"There you are! I've been looking all over."

Charlie corners him just before lights-out. That's the thing about school: no matter how big it is, there is no place to hide. Each nook, each hour is supervised. Empty rooms are locked and the hallways swarm with boys; porters in the stairwells, and outside it's too bloody cold.

"They say there's been a tribunal. In Trout's office."

"Yes."

Charlie starts to say something, swallows it, looks him full in the face. His eyes are so full of care for him, it frightens Thomas.

"What did they do to you?"

"Nothing."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

Because how can Thomas tell him? That he's *infected*. That there is an evil growing in him, so dark and ugly it frightens Renfrew. That one day he will wake up and do something unspeakable. That crime runs in his family.

That he is a dangerous friend to have.

So he says, "They are letting me join the Trip." And also: "The delivery arrived. The thing they have been waiting for. Cruikshank came and told them."

Charlie hoots when he hears about the Trip, from relief and from happiness that they'll be going together. It's a joy so simple and pure, it makes Thomas ashamed before his friend. He might have apologised—confessed—had not Charlie put a hand on

his arm and said, "Let's go see him. Cruikshank. We have a few minutes."

He starts running, tugging Thomas along.

"He likes me, Cruikshank does. I chat to him from time to time. He'll tell me what it is."

And as they race down the stairs, their feet clattering, each matching the other's stride, Thomas forgets, almost, that he is a sick boy, a walking blight, the son of a man who has killed.

PORTER

Two boys. They come to me with questions. One who strips the truth off things like he's made of turpentine, and the other with eyes so frank, it inclines you to confession. I talk to the second, naturally, though I keep track of the first. He's the type you don't want sneaking up on you from behind.

"The deliv'ry?" I ask, like I don't quite recall. It's how you survive in this world. Play dumb, thicken your accent. Makes you invisible: one look and they dismiss you from their minds. The powers that be. But not these boys. Smarter than their teachers, they are. They simply wait me out.

"Oh, nothin' special," I say at last. "Sweets, you know. Tea. Biscuits. From someplace in London."

That's all I give them, that and the name, to see how they react.

"Nice big stamp on the crate. Beasley and Son. Impor' and Expor', Deliv'ries to the Crown."

They don't bat an eyelid, not one of them. Innocents, then. Though the quiet one looks like he was born with a knife in his fist. Like he had to cut his way out, and didn't much mind.

"You goin' on the Trip, t'morrow, lads?" I ask, though of course I already know.

"Yes, Mr. Cruikshank. Will you be joining us?"

Mr. Cruikshank my arse. Polite little bugger, laying it on nice and thick. Though he certainly looks like he means it. If he puts that sort of look on the right wench down in London, she'll clean his piping free of charge.

"Oh no. I daresen't. Too scary for the likes of me. Wouldn't for all the world. Rather fly to the moon. Safer that."

Like I haven't been to London. It's not fifty miles down the road. Two days' walk, when I was young. Now all you needs to do is sit yourself on a train. Bring a little roast chicken along. Enjoy the ride.

Still, it's an odd venture, this Trip of theirs. Times are a-changing. Renfrew's been receiving letters. Three or four a month. No name on the flap but I can tell it's the ministry writing from the postal stamp. Richmond upon Thames. You get your map out, you'll see what you find. New Westminster Palace. The centre of power. Though there's talk of Parliament moving once again. Farther from London: the walls are already going grey. Trout gets post from the same little post office, but the hand that writes out the address is different, round and feminine, where Renfrew's man writes like a spider dragging its black guts. Hold it up to the light and you will see the outlines of a rubber stamp. "Victoria Regina," a fussy signature underneath. A civil servant's, no doubt, acting for the Crown. Bureaucrats versus lawmakers then; different corridors of power. Makes you wonder what's inside the letters. And whether Trout and Renfrew ever care to show and tell.

I turn the boys away, in any case, ring the bell for lights-out. And in the morning the coaches arrive, all eleven of them, to carry fifty-eight upper-school boys to the train station. It's snowed again and the horses are steaming, and don't one of them shit just as old Swinburne goes walking past. Lovely smell that, fresh horse dung on snow. You want to bottle it and sell it to yer sweetheart.

I watch them go, wrapped in my old blanket. One of the boys looks back at me all the way to the end of the driveway. He don't wave.

Neither do I.

When they're gone, I go inside, shovel some coals into the stove, put on a bone for soup. By the time it's cooked they'll be pulling in at Oxford.

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