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The Lonely Empire

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THE LONELY EMPIRE

by

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Bachelor of Arts
Stanford University, 2010

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DEDICATION

For Ryan McIlvain.
ABSTRACT

This creative manuscript contains ten original short stories dealing with themes of alienation, imperialism, and cultural intersectionality. Though they are all influenced, in one way or another, by ideas of cultural and sociopolitical relevance, they are to be read and viewed primarily as stories, i.e., as self-contained exercises in character, plot, and language that can be appreciated for their artistic merits as well as their academic contributions. The diverse settings of the stories, ranging from Ancient Greece to Central California and from Asia to Latin America, are a reflection of the author’s own diverse cultural experiences. In one story, a young college dropout follows her aging partner to an Ernest Hemingway look-alike contest. In another, a disabled former serviceman becomes obsessed with the weather and the threat of climate change. The final story of the collection takes place in a speculative, futuristic version of the lost continent of Atlantis. Taken collectively, these ten stories offer unique and sometimes startling insights into the troubling legacies of culture and history, and into our increasingly globalized world.
PREFACE

“Nothing is built on stone; all is built on sand, but we must build as if the sand were stone.” —Jorge Luis Borges, In Praise of Darkness
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CHAPTER 1

THE LOOK-ALIKES

Becca loaded the bags into the car while Richard finished trimming his beard in front of the bathroom mirror. She left plenty of space in the trunk for whatever baggage his students planned to bring with them on the trip. For the second year in a row, she was following Richard to PapaCon, an annual celebration of all things Hemingway held each summer at a beachfront hotel in Key West. Two days of lectures, deep-sea fishing, and mojitos culminating in an Ernest Hemingway look-alike contest with a first prize of five thousand dollars. The year before, Richard had been invited to give a lecture on Death in the Afternoon and on the second day had won third place in the look-alike contest. The contest was the only reason they were going back this year.

With the car loaded up, Becca returned to the kitchen and started fixing sandwiches for the drive down. Richard emerged from the bedroom in his underwear carrying two slightly different styles of green turtleneck on clothes hangers.

“Which one of these looks more authentic?” he asked.

Becca titled her head to the side. “What do you mean by authentic?”

Richard motioned to the framed photo on the wall—Hemingway as an old man, full white beard, looking off to the side with eyes as intense as ever, the braided collar of a turtleneck puffed up under his chin. Even in the early morning, with his hair still wet, knobby white legs exposed, wearing only his cotton briefs, Richard’s resemblance to Papa was uncanny.
“Which one?” he pressed, switching the sweaters back and forth in front of his chest.

Becca examined the sweater in the photo and contrasted it against the ones Richard was holding. Between the two of them, she knew which one she preferred, but gauging their authenticity against the seven inches or so of colorless sweater that appeared in the photo was something she doubted she had the expertise to decide. She had left college in her senior year and hadn’t gotten around to going back yet. Finally, she chose the lighter of the two, but only because it brought out the color in Richard’s eyes.

Once Richard had finished assembling his outfit, they headed out on the road. But before leaving Miami, they had to swing by a motel near the airport and pick up Richard’s students, Silas and Nate, who were making their first-ever trip down to PapaCon. Richard had agreed to let them come along on the condition that they help pay for gas. Becca had never met them, but Richard once spoke of them as two of the brightest students he’d ever taught. Now they were among his few former students who had continued to correspond with him after he left the university.

Richard was in top form as he drove along the highway, his clean hair and clothes meticulously arranged, looking as robust and virile as he had in years. Becca sat in the passenger’s seat wearing dark sunglasses and a pair of cut-off jean shorts, letting the morning sun energize her body for the day ahead. Richard reached over and stroked her thigh.

“Five thousand dollars,” he said. “Do you have any idea how much research I can complete with that money?”

Becca patted his arm. “It would sure make things a lot easier.”
“I have a good feeling about this year, honey. You won’t be working at The Gap much longer.”

Becca leaned over and kissed the whiskerless part of his cheek.

They pulled into the motel parking lot and spotted Silas and Nate standing with their bags outside the front office. Becca took off her sunglasses and sat up in the seat. “My God,” she said. “What are they wearing?”

Indeed, as Silas and Nate hustled over to the car, they appeared as figures ripped out of time and place. Their outfits were identical—black pants, black gloves, black overcoats buttoned to their necks, topped off with black bowler hats like the kind Charlie Chaplin always wore. As they came closer, Becca noticed they were both dangling plastic toy shotguns down by their pant legs. There was some meaning they were going for, of that she was sure, but seeing them walking across the parking lot at that moment, it was like looking at a painting in a modern art museum with no explanation placarded on the wall beside it.

Richard just laughed. “Those crazy bastards,” he said. “They really did it!”

“Did what?” Becca asked.

“They said they were going to go all out on their costumes, but this is really something.”

One of the popular traditions of PapaCon was to show up wearing elaborate costumes inspired by Hemingway’s life and works. In laying their plans for the trip, Richard had even tried to persuade Catherine to go as Catherine from *A Farewell to Arms*, but she had refused. Putting on costumes was never her thing, not even on Halloween.
Richard threw back his thumb to signal Silas and Nate to put their bags in the trunk. Becca whispered in his ear, “Do you think they should wear those the whole way?” They had at least three hours of driving ahead of them.

“Why not?” Richard said, tugging at the green braided collar around his neck. “I’m wearing my costume.”

As soon as they were back on the road, Richard began drilling Silas and Nate about the dissertations they were writing for PhDs. Silas was doing an ambitious comparative analysis of Hemingway’s influence on several writers throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. But Nate was writing about Thomas Wolfe, and fell out of the conversation early on. Becca studied their faces through the rearview mirror. Silas had big ears, but his face was handsome in a serious sort of way. Nate’s face was much leaner and he had what Richard would have called a “very Robert Cohn look.” They sat squished together side by side with their coats still buttoned, the toy shotguns stretched across their laps. Becca was fascinated by them and decided to break the ice while Richard was trying to remember the name of a scholar he was citing.

“So who are you two supposed to be, anyway?” she asked.

“Al and Max,” Silas replied. “From ‘The Killers’.”

“I haven’t read that one yet.”

Richard turned so that his students could see his exaggerated grimace. “Don’t blame me, boys,” he said. “I’ve done everything I can to try and cure her of her ignorance.”
“If I tried to read all the books and stories you recommend,” Becca quipped, “I’d be your age before I finished them all.”

Richard pinched Becca’s leg and she let out a playful yip. All the excitement was bringing out his rowdy side. At least he’s in good spirits, Becca thought. She reached into the portable cooler between her feet.

“If you guys are hungry,” she said, “I brought some sandwiches for the trip.”

“Thanks,” Silas said, “but I ate breakfast before we left. I was worried it would be hard to find something I could eat once we were out of the city.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m a vegetarian.”

“Oh, okay,” Becca said, and she heard Richard laugh under his breath. “What about you, Nate? You want one?”

“What’s in it?”

“Just ham and cheese.”

“No thanks. I keep kosher.”

Richard stretched his mouth into a sarcastic grin. “We should put you in a kosher convent, Nate,” he said.

Richard laughed while Nate just smiled and shook his head. Becca felt bad for Nate—she could tell that he was shrugging off a deeper embarrassment than he would let on. But then she saw Silas reach up behind Nate’s neck and stroke the curls of black hair sticking out from under his hat. At once Nate’s smile turned from false to genuine and he seemed to thank Silas out the corners of his eyes.
“So, Becca,” Silas said. “Richard tells us you studied literature under him back in undergrad. Who’s your favorite writer?”

Richard slapped the steering wheel with glee. “Yeah, honey,” he said. “Tell them who your favorite writer of all time is.”

“William Faulkner,” Becca said, but Richard shot her a knowing glance.

“No, honey,” he said. “Don’t try to play that game. It wasn’t Faulkner who you originally wanted to write about for your senior thesis. Now go on and tell them.”

Becca scowled. She could have slapped Richard because she knew there was no way out now. Silas and Nate were both waiting for her answer. Finally she sighed and gave them all what they wanted—“Beatrix Potter.”

“Peter Rabbit!” Richard crowed. “One day she comes into my office after class and asks me to be her thesis advisor. ‘So what do you want to write about?’ I ask her. And she says Peter Rabbit! Says she wants to write a whole thesis on Peter Rabbit and the works of Beatrix Potter. Well, I can tell you one thing—it would have been the first time in history that a student’s thesis was longer than the books she had to read for it.”

Becca crossed her arms over her chest. “It could have been a serious study,” she said. “I was going to analyze the themes and characters of all the books in the context of Victorian society.”

“It does sound interesting,” Silas chimed in. “Very original.”

Richard went on. “I tell you, boys. If I had never gotten ahold of her, she would have never become serious about literature.”

“I wasn’t exactly illiterate before we met, Richard,” Becca said. “I had already read Ulysses before I even took your class.”
“But not *Finnegans Wake,*” Richard replied.

Becca sat quietly sulking. Richard was right—she hadn’t been a very serious student of literature when she met him. She hadn’t read *Finnegans Wake.* But she had read *The Tale of Peter Rabbit,* and *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny,* and of Mrs. Tiggly-Wink and of Mr. Tod, along with everything else that Beatrix Potter had ever written, and reread them. And though she had never been to England, or anywhere in Europe even, she had scrolled through webpage after webpage filled with Potter’s original illustrations in the same way Blake scholars poured over his paintings. She was mesmerized by it all, obsessed with it.

She slept for most of the remaining drive down, waking every now and then and seeing open ocean all around them and miles of bridge left to go. In her sleep she could still hear Richard talking, and all the recurring names and phrases—Hemingway, expatriate, Lost Generation—seemed to give shape to her dreams, though she couldn’t remember any of them after Richard grabbed her shoulder and shook her awake.

“We’re almost there,” he said. “Better get your blood circulating.”

Becca stretched out her back and looked down from the highway at the approaching city. She could see the hotel a few hundred yards in the distance, close enough to make out the enormous PapaCon banner draped across the front entrance. Already the parking lot was packed with cars and buses from all the people who had come down for the convention. Close to three thousand Hemingway aficionados from all over the world were converging on this one spot for a weekend of culture sweetened with fantasy. For the next forty-eight hours, the atmosphere in Key West would be so nostalgic
that one might even gaze far out into the Gulf of Mexico and imagine German U-Boats lying in wait just below the surface of the water.

She had been through it all the year before, and as they pulled into the parking lot and saw several other Hemingways flocking into the lobby, she remembered just how fierce the competition had been among the look-alikes the last time around, and that Richard had felt so fortunate just to place third. There would be more than a hundred of them vying for the top spot, but only one would come away with the crown, and the money.

“You’ll do great,” she said, squeezing Richard’s hand. “Just remember what you said—this is your year.”

“My year.” Richard’s eyes were glossy and his chest rose high with each breath. “It’s about time.”

They retrieved the bags from the trunk and followed the rest of the geeks inside.

After checking into their rooms, they reconvened downstairs in the convention hall. Everywhere middle-aged and young men meandered past display booths dressed as matadors, Spanish guerillas, and World War I ambulance drivers while young black waiters clad in white carried trays of mojitos and pretended to be Cuban. Behind the booths, men in blue blazers handed out pamphlets for chartered fishing tours and canned wild boar hunts. Silas and Nate stood over the bar panting and drinking one glass of water after another. Even in the air conditioned hotel, their heavy overcoats must have been stifling.
“If I ever come back here,” Nate said, “I’m going as a cabana boy. This is unbearable.”

Becca had left Richard standing in line with the other look-alikes to register for the contest the next day. The line was already stretching out the doors and she knew it would be a while before she saw him again. She flipped through the brochure the concierge had given her. The back cover showed Hemingway as a young man in full military dress, his face clean-shaven and still boyish. It said that PapaCon had begun as the Ernest Hemingway Literary Arts Festival, a small gathering of scholars who had come together to celebrate the centenary of Hemingway’s birth. But as it grew more popular, a major rum company signed on as its official sponsor, changed the name to PapaCon, and got the word out. Now in its eleventh year, it was expected to draw the largest crowd ever. Becca put the brochure in her purse and turned her attention back to Silas and Nate.

“You guys feel like having lunch?”

They made their way to the restaurant at the front end of the lobby. The menu had been rewritten for the convention with dishes like the African Safari Burger and the Grilled Chicken Caesar Salad with Iceberg Theory Lettuce. Silas ordered a Garden of Eden Veggie Burger while Nate and Becca both tried the Old Man and the Blackened Sea Bass.

“I’m excited to see how Richard’s book turns out,” Silas said after the food had arrived. “He must be close to finishing it by now.”
“It’s coming along,” Becca said. “He still needs to make another trip to Havana to complete his research. It’s not easy with the travel embargo. Last time he went down he had to fly through Montreal first.”

“When was that?”

Becca thought for a moment. “I guess it was over a year ago. Maybe earlier.”

Silas held a french fry between his fingers like a pencil and tapped it against the edge of his plate. “I know he’s busy with the book,” he said. “But do you know if he’s gotten around to the letter of recommendation I asked him to write for the fellowship I’m applying for?”

Becca took a sip of water. “He hasn’t said anything to me,” she replied. “But I’m sure he’s working on it.”

“Oh, I know. I’m not worried.” Silas made a nervous smile and looked down at his plate. Becca could read his face like a poem.

“When is the application due?” she asked.

“In about three weeks.”

“Then I’m sure he’s on top of it. He might have already sent it in and forgotten to tell you.”

“I was just worried he might have changed his mind.”

“Why would he do that?”

“I don’t know. When I emailed him to say that I was going in a new direction with my dissertation, I got the impression that I had offended him. I wasn’t trying to disregard his advice, but the way I was writing it just wasn’t working. Now I’m afraid he took it personally.”
Nate smiled and shook his head. “You should have heard him when I told him I was writing about Wolfe,” he said. “I was afraid he was going to pull out the dueling glove.”

Becca smirked. “Richard’s always taken literature a bit too seriously,” she said. “But then, of course, literature is a very serious thing.”

A young man walked by their table dressed in a full-body foam marlin costume, his rubber diving flippers smacking against the tiled floor, the enormous bill on his head pointing straight up, as if deliberately meant to suggest a phallus.

After lunch, they examined the booths and attractions in the convention hall. A handful of wives and girlfriends were intermixed with the mass of costumed men, meandering absentmindedly, as if waiting for their guys to finish trying on pants in a department store. Silas suggested that they go out and look at the water, but once outside they fell in among a large crowd that had gathered under the shade of some transplanted palm trees. They edged their way to the front, where a big man in a tan safari jacket was standing on a raised platform and calling out to the audience like a carnival barker.

“My name is Christopher D. Hammond,” he said, “and what I have to show you today is the real thing—the Holy Grail of Hemingway artifacts—the actual shotgun the man himself used to commit suicide in Ketchum, Idaho on the second of July 1961.”

Becca pressed forward for a better look at the display case set up in front of the platform. Behind the glass, an oak-handled, single-barrel shotgun hung suspended on a rack of imitation ivory. All around it men gazed on with parted lips, a reverential gleam in their eyes. Peering closer, Becca noticed that the very tip of the barrel was tarnished red—a grim suggestion of dried blood.
“That’s right, folks,” Hammond continued. “For just fifty dollars, you can put on an authentic replica World War I infantry uniform and have your picture taken holding this priceless piece of literary history.” He gestured to a cloth backdrop of the Italian countryside. Below the curtain of a changing booth, a man’s hairy legs were visible as he changed into costume. “For just fifty dollars more, you can fire three shells at a mannequin dressed as an Austrian cavalryman. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity!”

Hammond walked to the edge of the platform and saw Becca and Silas standing below him. “How about you, young man?” he said, pointing Silas out. “Like to get a picture of you and your girlfriend with a real shotgun? Or do you prefer to stick with toy ones?”

Silas gripped the plastic handle and glared at the man. “I may not know much about guns,” he said, “but I do know that the one Hemingway used had two barrels.”

Hammond’s smile vanished. He whispered at Silas through gritted teeth, “Then how bout moving on and letting someone else have a look.”

Becca helped get them moving by wondering aloud whether Richard was finished with registration. They found him by the bar sitting at a circular table with two other look-alikes, both bulky middle-aged with white beards like his. Richard introduced them as Fred and Bert. Fred wore a green turtleneck in the same style as Richard’s, Bert a white shirt with thin red stripes and a red ascot. A bucket of ice and a bottle of silver rum rested in the center of the table, and they all held their glasses in front of them with condensation dripping over their fingers. When Richard noticed Becca standing over him, he smiled and pulled her down onto his lap. Fred drew back the corners of his mouth and nodded at him.
“Good lookin gal you got there,” he said.

“Get this, honey,” Richard said. “I was just telling my new friends about the deep sea fishing scenes in Islands in the Stream. If you can believe it, they haven’t read it.”

Becca glanced sideways at Richard. She recognized his angle from the year before. He was talking up Hemingway’s less popular works as a way of weeding out the dilettantes. He had been to several PapaCons, and every year, as he said, more and more dilettantes came out of the woodwork. Fred invited Silas and Nate to pull a couple of chairs up to their table. He explained that he was a real estate developer from Tampa and a “Hemingway nut” in his spare time. His cousin Bert spoke with a slight stutter and let Fred take charge of the conversation, contributing an occasional concurring grin from time to time.

“Let’s get a couple more glasses,” Fred said. “Rum on the rocks okay for you fellas?”

“Thanks,” Silas said, “but I don’t drink hard liquor anymore.”

Fred and Bert both gave off short, hissing laughs, and then Fred blurted out, “You queer or something?”

Silas blinked rapidly, but otherwise his expression didn’t change. When he didn’t say anything after a while, Fred and Bert looked at each other and burst into a hearty guffaw. Becca felt Richard fidgeting in embarrassment. She saw that Nate was embarrassed too, but in a very different way. He sat with his eyes lowered holding his hat between his legs, tracing the brim with his fingers. Becca recognized in him a need for someone older and wiser to stand by him when it really mattered, but at that moment Richard might as well have been another chair at the table for all he did to help.
“I won’t judge you myself,” Fred said. “But I will refer you to what Papa himself said about your type. He made his position very clear in A Moveable Feast, though I doubt you’ve ever read it.”

Silas’s face twitched. “I keep a copy of it in my room.”

Bert’s eyes lit up with delight as he arrived at a short yet clever retort—“In the closet, no d-d-doubt.”

Fred laughed and patted his cousin’s shoulder. “If you ask me,” he said, “some things oughta stay in the closet.”

Silas picked his gun up from the floor and stormed off toward the elevators, Fred laughing and calling after him. “C’mon, son, we were only kidding!” Nate followed, still holding his hat with both hands. Becca slid off Richard’s lap and into Silas’s empty seat. She looked across the table at Fred and Bert and wanted to rip their beards right off their fat red faces. Richard simply gave them an awkward smile and waved his students off as inconsequential.

“They begged me to drive them down here,” he said.

Becca hoped that Richard would excuse them from the table so they could go find Silas. But instead he ordered another bucket of ice and the conversation turned to other topics—the aesthetics of bullfighting, beard grooming tips, who would win in a fistfight between Hemingway and Mailer (Papa, hands-down). The more he drank, the more Richard struggled to dominate the discussion, slurring words even as he recited passages from memory, and Becca could see the ugly moment fast approaching, when his exterior confidence finally gave way to overwhelming anxiety.
That night, while most of the guests attended a special dinner in the banquet hall, Richard paced the floor of their room rehearsing his reading for the contest. He had been mixing rum and Coke from the minibar all evening, and it reflected in his voice as a slight waver at the end of the longer sentences. Still, he tried to get the pauses and inflections down tight, holding the marked-up script in front of him and measuring his speech patterns against the recording of Hemingway’s actual voice that he had saved on his iPod.

“He lay then and was quiet for a while…and looked across the heat shimmer of the plain to the edge of the bush. There were a few Tommies that showed minute and white against the yellow…and, far off, he saw a herd of zebra…white against the green of the bush.”

Becca sat on the edge of the bed watching him and fighting the sense of dread that had come over her. Richard had been nervous before the contest last year, but not this bad. In her silent imaginings, she found herself blaming him as the source of all their problems, not because he hadn’t won first place, but because he had let them get to a point where it mattered so much. Yet it felt useless to blame him because, no matter how she tried to spin it, she couldn’t get around the thought that she was to blame as well.

“I’m going to get some more ice,” she said.

Richard didn’t acknowledge her exit. He didn’t even break from the recitation. Becca walked down the hallway toward Silas and Nate’s room. She found Silas in an alcove giving serious thought to the contents of the vending machine. She startled him by touching his arm.

“You doing all right?” she asked. “I’m sorry about what happened earlier. Guys like that shouldn’t even be allowed in here.”
Silas shrugged. His eyes were bloodshot, but not in a way that suggested tears. “Do you smoke pot, Becca?” he asked.

Inside their room, Silas and Nate had opened all the windows to let the smoke drift out. They sat side by side on the carpet with their jackets off and their backs against the foot of the bed. Silas hung his arm over Nate’s shoulder as they passed the joint back and forth. Becca had taken only two hits and then resigned herself to a chair in the corner. She glanced outside every now and then to see the waves breaking against the dark of the beach.

“Who do you think is the ugliest writer in American history?” Silas asked.


Silas shook his head. “You ever see any of the old pictures of Sinclair Lewis? The man looked like a little kid with progeria whose mom tried to hide his bald spot with a bad comb-over.”

“I think I should tell you, Silas,” Becca said. “I haven’t asked Richard about your letter of recommendation yet. I meant to ask him earlier, but he’s practicing hard for tomorrow and I didn’t think I should bring it up.”

“It’s all right,” Silas said. “I’m not getting my hopes up about it at this point.”

“What do you mean?”

“I wrote him about a month ago to see if he had sent it out yet. I had asked him for it a while back, and so I figured he would have it done by then.” Silas held the smoke in his lungs before letting it out slowly. “He told me he was having trouble deciding what to write.”
“That usually means he hasn’t started writing it yet.” Becca had spoken without thinking and immediately regretted what she said. Silas responded with a long sigh and took another hit off the joint. “I’m sorry, Silas. Is it a really good fellowship?”

“It would have paid for me to do research in Paris for a year. Richard’s not the only one with hopes of publishing a book.”

“Well, you should still apply for it, then, even without Richard’s help.”

“Sometimes I think I’ve made a mistake,” Silas said sleepily. “My friends all told me I was making a mistake focusing on Hemingway. ‘He’s so macho, he’s so old school, everything’s always been written about him. There are plenty of other writers to study.’ But I didn’t care. I didn’t want to study another writer. I love his work. I have since I was a teenager. I didn’t want to give years of my life to anyone else.”

“I felt the same way myself once.”

“About Beatrix Potter?” Nate asked.

Becca sat up straight and breathed the humid air coming in through the window. She was beginning to feel those two hits and was getting things mixed up inside her head.

“I know she’s not a really important writer,” she said. “At least not in the way most people think about it. Don’t get me wrong—I love Faulkner, and Hemingway, and all the other great writers I’ve read since then. But Potter was my first. She was the first writer I cared about, and I wouldn’t have discovered any of the others if it weren’t for her.”

Silas smiled cynically. “Was that also why you fell in love with Richard? Because he was your first?”
Becca was taken off-guard and had to consider the question for a moment. “He opened my eyes to a new world,” she said finally. “And I thought one day he could help me become a part of it.”

Silas stared at Becca, letting the dim glow of the joint peter out. Becca was afraid that he was pitying her and decided to leave before she could say anything else she would regret. As she was standing, her purse slipped through her hands, spilling the contents out onto the floor. Silas handed the joint off to Nate and crawled over to help her. He spotted the PapaCon brochure and froze still on his hands and knees, staring at the cover.

“You mind if I keep this?” he asked. Becca, only half aware of the question, nodded quickly before pulling herself to her feet and heading out the door.

Richard was gone when she returned to the room. After two calls that went straight to voicemail, she took the elevator down to the lobby. Sure enough, she found him sitting at the bar with a glass of rum and a plate of untouched lime wedges. She took a seat beside him. If he was aware of her presence, he didn’t respond.

“You shouldn’t drink any more,” she said. “You don’t want a hangover for the contest.”

Richard took another sip. “I don’t get hangovers,” he said. “Besides, that’s the least of my concerns for tomorrow.”

“What are you talking about?”

Richard brushed his pinky finger against his cheek. Becca looked closely and noticed a small cut above the whisker line that was already beginning to scab over.

“What happened?”
Richard shook his head morosely. “I thought I saw a few uneven hairs. So I tried to get them with the clippers and ended up grazing myself. The bleeding’s stopped, but now I’ll have a mutilated face for the contest.”

“It’s not that noticeable,” Becca said. “It kind of adds to the mystique, like Hemingway just came back from a boxing match or something.”

Richard slammed the glass down on the bar. “Don’t patronize me!”

The bartender came over and Becca ordered a red wine. She waited until the glass was in her hand before speaking to Richard again.

“Silas says that he asked you to write him a letter of recommendation,” she said. “Why haven’t you written it?”

“What am I supposed to write?” he asked. “Of all my former students, Silas is the most gifted in terms of disregarding advice. When it comes to writing trite academic drivel, he’s wise beyond his years.”

They both drank. “That’s not right, Richard,” Becca said. “Silas and Nate have a lot of respect for you.”

“They respected me when I was in a position to help them professionally,” he said. “Now that I’m unemployed, I don’t have any value for them. If Silas didn’t need something from me now, you can bet they never would have come here.”

“I wish we had never come here. You’ve been cruel to them all day.” She took another drink and added, “You’ve been cruel to me too.”

“Cruelty, my dear, is the natural response of a condemned man to the inevitability of his own demise. You would know that if you ever finished reading ‘The Snows of Kilimanjaro.’”
Becca slapped Richard across the arm, but so lightly that he only jerked back in surprise before letting out a mocking laugh.

“You’re not dying of gangrene,” she said. “You’re just out of money and you can’t finish your book. That doesn’t make you a condemned man.”

Richard slid the empty glass forward and stood up from his seat. “What have I been brought to, then, if not condemnation? I mean, goddamn it, look around you!”

Becca turned and examined the occupants of the bar. Everywhere young and old men were getting way too much fun out of their rum-based drinks. Out in the lobby, two stumbling drunk grad school types were pretending to bullfight, one holding a red tablecloth off his arm and the other charging at it with pointed fingers held at the side of his head like horns.

“Do you think I actually enjoy coming here every year and taking part in this farce? This is what I’ve been reduced to. This is the world I inhabit now. I gave up what I loved most when I left the university.” Richard took a chunk of lime between his fingers and tore out the juicy flesh with his front teeth. He glared at Becca as he chewed. “I gave it up to be with you.”

“I gave up something too,” Becca said. Richard ignored the tears welling in her eyes and smiled unmercifully.

“What? The chance to become the preeminent Peter Rabbit scholar in North America?” He arched his eyebrows as if posing for a photo. “You followed me because you thought I could bring you into my world, but you never wanted to be a real part of my world. You were just looking for someone to escort you through it like a tour guide on a safari. You’re just another dilettante like the rest.”
Coming back through the lobby, her hand at her forehead, Becca spotted Silas through the tinted glass. He was standing outside on the front lawn talking with Christopher D. Hammond. Hammond kept his hands at his waist while Silas shuffled through the bills in his wallet. Becca gave them only a passing glance—she was in a hurry to get back to the room. She was afraid she might break down crying before she could get there.

In the morning, Richard awoke with severe nausea and a fragmented memory of what had happened the night before. After a silent breakfast across from Becca, he borrowed some of her makeup to dab on the cut before heading to the conference room for the start of the contest. Registration had finished up an hour earlier as all the look-alikes who hadn’t bothered with the rest of the convention finally trickled in. Now they were coming and going from the microphone in an unbroken rotation, one after another every two minutes, with the average look-alike able to read about a page and a half of text before his time was up. Spectators came and went from the crowded room, but Becca stayed seated next to Nate. Where Silas had gone, neither one of them knew. In their sleepiness, they leaned against each other and tried to keep from nodding off. Becca’s entire body felt heavy and the readings were lulling her into lethargic complacency. She heard the passage from “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” read so many times that by the time Richard took to the stage she could have mouthed the words right along with him without a script.

Every detail of his performance, from his gait as he approached the microphone to the way he held the script, had been carefully rehearsed. Still, Richard struggled with the reading, mispronouncing the names of places like “Karagatch” and “Gauertal” and then
pausing to correct himself. The timer ate away at his remaining time. He tried to hold himself to the same stoic expression, but the quiver in his voice undercut the confident impression he was trying to give. Her personal bias aside, Becca could only regard Richard’s performance as a decent continuation of the same theme that had been plugging along steadily for the past hour and a half. He got about three-quarters of the way through the script before time ran out and he was forced to take his seat amidst the same smattering of applause to which all the other look-alikes had been treated.

“You did fine,” Becca said as he sat down next to her.

He showed her a weak smile and tried to catch his breath. They watched the rest of the look-alikes go up to the front as their numbers were called. Richard made no acknowledgement of them and their performances aside from an occasional comment like “Too fat” or “Too old” or “You call that a beard?” They were nearing the end when Silas’s number was called. He had arrived late and had been standing at the far back where no one would see him.

“My God,” Becca said, rising in her seat. “Look at what he’s wearing.”

Silas approached the microphone clad in a World War I-era Army costume, his hair combed back and slicked so that he now resembled the younger Hemingway as much as any of the other look-alikes resembled the older. A few laughs rose up from the audience in response to the novelty of him. Becca and Nate smiled at each other, but Richard only gripped the armrests of his chair and sat breathing through his nose. Silas opened a worn paperback to a dog-eared page and began to read.
“At the lake shore there was another rowboat drawn up. The two Indians stood waiting. Nick and his father got in the stern of the boat and the Indians shoved it off and one of them got in to row.”

Silas read well, giving emphasis to the right words and bringing a particular dramatic energy to the narrative. He seemed to capture the voice of the young Nick better than that of his father, but his effect on the listeners was profound. It wasn’t that his reading voice was especially strong or that he sounded the way they imagined a young Hemingway would sound. It may have been simply that he stood in such contrast to all the other look-alikes. Whatever the case, his words and the way he delivered them had the same effect on the audience as the first drink of water on a dehydrated man’s throat: once they got past the initial shock, they relished it as something invigorating and essential. The one woman on the judges’ panel made dreamy eyes at him from across the room.

For Becca, watching Silas deliver his reading stirred up memories of a time when she had sat in a crowded lecture hall and watched with unbroken attention as Richard talked about the works of the great authors, a time when her greatest wish had been that she could feel as passionately about something, anything, as Richard felt about books. But then came scandal and departmental hearings and Richard’s indignant resignation, and then the move south, followed by years of struggle and hardship, until at some point Richard had started acting like Hemingway even when he wasn’t preparing for the contest. She thought of the times she had caught him standing shirtless in front of the bathroom room, trading jabs with his reflection as if locked in a sparring match with the man on the other side of the glass.
A standing applause greeted Silas as he marched from the stage to take a seat next to Nate. The last few look-alikes gave their readings and, after a brief deliberation, the judges went up to announce the results. Richard squeezed Becca’s hand as Silas and the other winners were called, and when his name wasn’t read he let go of her and left the conference room without saying a thing. Becca stayed long enough to see Silas presented with a first-place check for five thousand dollars. She kissed his cheek tearfully and left him hugging Nate as the other look-alikes circled in to congratulate him.

Richard was sitting on the floor when she came into the room. The sheets had been torn off the bed and half a dozen empty bottles from the mini-bar lay scattered on the carpet in front of him. He looked up at her with watery eyes. His breathing was strained.

“We can’t keep going like this.”

Richard seemed to take no notice of her words. His lips moved noiselessly, as if he were either offering up a prayer or already rehearsing his lines for next year.

“The bastards screwed me over,” he said weakly.

“Who?”

“All of ’em. All the bastards. The judges, the students, the departmental committee…one bunch of bastards after another.”

Becca picked the little bottles up off the floor and began straightening the room. Richard pressed his palms against the carpet as if to push himself up. “Maybe I should go back down,” he said. “Show the sons of bitches I don’t give a damn. Tell em all what they can do with their prize money.” He ran a hand through his hair and stared up at Becca. “How do I look?”
Becca looked at him. His oily hair was sticking out at all sides. The sweat from his face had made the makeup run down into his beard. The collar of the turtleneck had begun to sag, revealing the tuft of curly white hair that covered his flabby chest. This was a man who Becca had loved more than anything back when he was worth loving, and whatever he was bound to do now, he seemed prepared for it. So was she.

“You look authentic,” she said, and left him alone on the floor with himself.
CHAPTER 2

THE PLACES YOU’LL GO

They sat at the kitchen table and wrote out a list of their expenses. She drew circles around the essential items—gas, mortgage, groceries, bills—and then started looking for things they could cross out. They agreed to have the cable disconnected and that the boy could start eating lunch in the cafeteria instead of buying. Eating out would be more difficult to give up, but they would limit themselves to once a week and only at places where the boy could order off the kids’ menu. Things would be tough for a while, but if they were careful then by summer time they would have enough saved up to take a real vacation. Nothing extravagant but, at the very least, four nights at a hotel in San Francisco or L.A.

“It’s easy to make a budget,” the mother said. “The hard part is sticking to it.”

“We can do it,” the boy said, smiling through his fresh set of permanent teeth. He was an easy-going kid and didn’t whine or pout about having to cut back. About going on vacation, he wasn’t sure how he felt. He had never given it much thought before.

“The problem is you’ve never been anywhere,” she said. “So you don’t know what you’re missing. But once you see how much there is to do in a big city, you’ll wonder why your mom didn’t take you sooner.”

She had been wondering the same thing before she decided to rectify the situation.
“It’ll be hard living on a budget,” she added. “You won’t like having to go without. But any time you start to feel upset about it, just think of all the fun we’ll have when we’re away.”

The boy smiled and came around to hug her from behind. Later that night she posted the budget to the refrigerator door under one of the glittery magnets her son had made for her when he was in preschool. And afterward she lay awake in bed scolding herself for overlooking such an important part of his development. She was afraid that he would grow up to resent her for it, would accuse her of holding him back by keeping him sheltered from the real world. She had made similar accusations against her own mother before she died, and now the thought that she was making the same mistakes threatened to cast a blemish on all the personal growth she had made over the years.

“He’s no better off than if he was living with Okies,” she whispered to the darkness.

The incident that put it all into perspective had occurred earlier that day while she and the boy were out buying him a new pair of tennis shoes. She had driven thirty miles to Tulare because she heard there was a sale out the outlet mall there. When they were finished shopping, she asked the boy where he wanted to go for lunch, but he said he didn’t know what was around. He pointed to the reflection of the outlet mall slowly shrinking in the side mirror.

“That’s the farthest I’ve been this way.”

She stared at him a long time before turning her eyes back to the road. Later, sitting under a patio umbrella at Burger King, she tried to imagine the course of their lives together as a stranger might see it from the window of a low-flying plane—two little
figures tracing and retracing the same patterns year after year. Now and then she asked him a question to jog her memory or confirm a suspicion. Finally she shook her head and looked across the table as if seeing him for the first time.

“You’re almost eleven years old,” she said, “and you’ve never been away from home.”

The boy shrugged and slurped his soda. It was true. He had never been anywhere. He had never stayed overnight in a hotel. He had never seen a city where over a million people lived. His longest journey to date had been a school fieldtrip to the mountains, the bus leaving and returning in the same afternoon. She considered the smallness of his world, the unvarying pattern of the same old stores and movie theaters with only a few different types of people to meet.

“I don’t know how I let it happen,” she said. “Even your grandpa managed to take us on long car trips before he died. That’s how I saw the Grand Canyon when I was a little girl.”

“That sounds cool,” the boy said.

“I must have really missed the mark somewhere,” she said. “Or maybe I just didn’t want to think about it.”

The boy perceived a change in her voice and touched her arm tenderly. “It’s okay, Mom,” he said. “We still have a lot of fun around here. I love you.”

“I love you.” Her eyes drifted upward and traced the trajectory of a jetliner descending into Fresno. “Your mom isn’t from here originally, you know. I grew up in a small town in the foothills with only about two hundred people.”
“I remember you said.” The boy’s fingers reached out and snatched a fry off his mother’s wrapper. The boy, not even thinking about what his hand was doing, popped it into his mouth and continued listening to her. She shook the carton so the rest of the fries fell out onto the napkin between them.

She said, “If you always stay in the same place when you’re young, you grow up thinking that everyone is the same everywhere you go. I don’t mean how they look or what they believe—I mean the way they act toward people. You don’t expect people to be much nicer or meaner than the ones you grew up with. But it takes all kinds to make the world turn, and if you don’t have an idea of how people will be, you won’t know how you’ll be when you’re around them.”

“Won’t I be the same?” he asked.

“You’ll surprise yourself. There were only twenty-six kids in my class all through elementary and high school. I thought I knew who I was when I was with them. But after I left home, it didn’t take long for me to become somebody else.”

She took a bite of her sandwich and thought about just how little time it had taken in reality. It was early fall when she arrived on the college campus an eighteen-year-old virgin who had never tasted beer. By winter she was making weekly trips to town with her new friends to stock up on vodka, beer, and plastic cups. In the spring she slipped off campus alone and rode the bus to a clinic to receive treatment for an STD. She had dropped out before summer.

“I lost control of myself,” she admitted to a therapist years later.

It had taken a long time to pull herself back together, much longer than it took for her to go to pieces. She looked back on the years in between as so much time out the
door, time she could have spent doing better things. And now that she was through the
tunnel, she could trace the root of her self-destruction back to the time following her
father’s death when her mother decided to keep her sheltered behind family and
community until she was old enough, but not wise enough, to be sent off into the
unknown world. She wanted her son to start seeing the world now so that when he got
older he would be able to control himself no matter where he went.

“Maybe I’ll see if we can get out of town one of these days,” she said.

Hours later they were already drawing up the budget. She wrote “VACATION
FUND” on an empty mayonnaise jar and dumped all her loose change inside. She added
more change the next night and again the night after. And so, little by little, they started
saving up for the trip. But at the same time, their shared lives began to change in ways
she couldn’t have anticipated.

They were about as close to best friends as mother and son could be. She had her friends
from work and he his buddies at school, but their private world of mornings and
evenings, holidays and weekends, was inhabited solely by them. For ten years she had
raised him alone with help from no one but a series of transient babysitters and friendly
neighbor women. In that time she went out on dates on average once a year, with each
attempt bolstering her opinion that all the single men her age were losers and that she
didn’t need anyone else to complete their family. They got along fine on their own. They
went everywhere together and frittered her excess income away on whatever amusements
they liked best. The movies were a favorite. They typically went four times a month,
every Saturday afternoon. They weren’t rich, but they were comfortable. They had a
comfortable life. She made sure he was well-dressed. She didn’t send him off to school with raggedy clothes and an empty stomach. They were no Okies. She didn’t max out credit cards or get drunk like they did. It was a life without many luxuries, but she did everything in her power to make them comfortable, and no one could fault her for that.

Going on a budget threw their whole routine out the window. At first the change was tolerable, refreshing even. They stayed at home all Saturday and most of Sunday, going out only to buy groceries for the week and then coming right back. She stretched out on the couch under a blanket and read her magazine while he lay on the carpet watching TV or reading his comic book. The sky was overcast and the rain collected in small puddles along the street, but inside the house it was warm and dry. “See,” she said. “This isn’t so bad.”

No, it wasn’t so bad. It was actually kind of nice being lazy around the house for a change. They agreed—it was a nice change of pace. But the next two weekends were unseasonably warm, and by the third week the novelty had worn off. The stuffiness of the living room left them feeling achy and lethargic. They sat on opposite sides of the couch with a bag of pretzels between them, the image on the TV clouded by the glare of sunlight peeking through the curtains.

“Can’t we go somewhere for a little while?” the boy begged. “We don’t have to spend any money. I just want to get out.”

“I guess we could go to the library,” she said. “That won’t cost us anything.”

At the public library across town, she perused the magazine racks while he roamed the stacks trying to decide what books to pick out. Up to that point he had mainly read comic books, the funny pages, and R.L. Stine. Now he returned to her holding two
worn hardbacks with clear plastic taped over their covers—Steinbeck’s *Travels with Charlie* and an abridged, for-kids edition of *Huckleberry Finn* with illustrations on every other page.

“This are both about travelling,” he said. “This one’s even got a boy in it.”

She smiled and led him to the checkout stand with her arm around his shoulder.

The next day she took him to the park and sat on a bench with her new magazine while he ran up and down the field chasing the toy airplane she had bought him when he was eight. Some boys his age were playing kickball on a baseball diamond nearby, and before long one of them hustled over and asked if he wanted to join in. He left his old toy on the bench beside his mother and jogged over to centerfield.

“How much longer is it going to be?” she asked, trying not to sound too demanding.

“Josh said his mom doesn’t mind driving us home later,” he said. His face was already darker from this short time in the sun. “Is that okay?”

“Who’s Josh?”

He pointed through the fence to first base, to a tall boy with spiked hair who wore a pair of black athletic sneakers. The cleats left nickel-sized holes in the ground.

“He’s in my same grade at school but a different class. Is it okay?”
She had been prepared to wait for him, until sunset if he had asked her to. What she hadn’t prepared for was the possibility that she would have to go away alone and wait for him to be returned to her. She saw the eagerness in his eyes, counted the number of times he had been invited to hang out with other boys outside of school. Not very many.

“I guess it’s all right,” she said. “Just make sure to call if you’re going to be late.”

She returned home and looked for ways to busy herself. She cleaned out the refrigerator, did laundry, cleaned the bathrooms, and prepared a vegetable lasagna for dinner. She was just setting the dish on the counter to cool when the boy came through the front door sucking soda from a plastic cup.

“Where did you get that?” she asked.

“Josh’s mom took us out for burgers after we were through playing.”

“You mean you already ate?”

The boy’s face went blank as the smell of pasta drifted in from the kitchen.

“Sorry,” he said. “I meant to call. I just forgot. Sorry.”

“Where did you get the money?”

“Josh’s mom paid. She said she didn’t mind.”

He went to his room to read while she spread aluminum foil over the still bubbling lasagna. She figured it would last a long time in the freezer and they could have it another time. What didn’t last long was her assumption that he would see his new friends mostly at school and every once in a while on weekends. Because before long he was hanging out at Josh’s house after school one or two days a week. By spring, it was up to three or four. His days as a latchkey kid were over as quickly as they had begun. “It’s good that you have such close friends now,” she told him occasionally when he had
returned home. But on nights when he was away at sleepovers, she found herself missing him more deeply than she would admit, and she looked forward to the summer, and to the memories they would make when they were on vacation.

The last memory she had of her own mother had left her with so much residual guilt and anger that not even the therapist had been able to get it all out. It was right after the divorce, when she had moved back home to try to get her life back together for the second time in ten years. Ever since her disastrous one year of college, her mother had regarded her as a family embarrassment akin to the second cousin who divided her time between topless dancing and various drug rehab facilities. Now, even with the cancer embedded in her lymph nodes, her mother kept her at arms-length, alternating between cold indifference and claims that she should have known better than to let her baby run off and get married to some smooth-talking pervert from the valley.

“Problem is you always thought you knew better than ever’body else!” her mother shouted from up high on the porch. Her weakened legs couldn’t manage the steps anymore, and so she stood outside the front door, leaning on the oxygen tank for support, screeching hoarsely at the gravel driveway as her daughter finished packing up the car. “If you ever bothered to listen to anybody else, maybe you’d a wound up better off.”

She strapped the baby into the car seat and slammed the door to soften his cries. She had endured her mother’s judgment all she could. She was through being blamed for mistakes she had never been taught to avoid. Even if it meant doing it on her own, she was going to raise her son without the burden of shame weighing him down.
“You say I never listened to you,” she said. “But you never had anything to say to me that was worth listening to! All you ever told me was a lot of b.s. about acting like a lady and finding a gentleman to marry. Well, I listened to you, Mom, and I thought I found a gentleman, and now I’m shit broke and on my own. That’s what comes from listening to ignorant trash who don’t know a thing about the real world.”

Her mother’s face shook with rage. She twisted her cigarette into the porch ashtray, her diminished legs teetering under her weight.

“Go on and get out then!” she cried. “Just don’t expect any more help from me. I done all I can, and I don’t wanna be there when the shit hits the fan. Cause the way you’re headin’, girl, you’re bound to wind up on the street or in the poorhouse before long!”

She continued hollering until she couldn’t hold back the coughs any longer. That was the final image she had of her mother—a sick and angry woman in a dirty nightgown, still fighting for the last word even as she was hacking up a lung. From that day on, she worked doubly hard to keep them both as far from the poorhouse as possible. During the really tough times, she wouldn’t even accept food stamps. She remade herself according to what she thought a good mother should be. She saw a therapist, finished her bookkeeping course, got an accounting job, and qualified for a mortgage. By the time the boy was old enough to understand what poverty was, she had eliminated every trace of her Okie upbringing along with any sign that they had been one step from homelessness. She changed the way she talked around him. She even changed the way she dreamed. Whereas her own mother had failed to prepare her for a life much different than her own, she made sure he had everything he needed to become whatever he wanted to be. She had
given him a respectable home life, but where she had failed, she realized now after ten years, was in making him see there was a world outside of Central California.

The vacation was her own inadequate way of trying to broaden his perspective before he got too old to let her guide him. It was the best she could do, and she was determined to make it an unforgettable experience, a sort of capstone to childhood that he would remember for the rest of his life. She still wasn’t sure where they were going or what she expected him to see. It was enough to know that she had helped open his eyes to the world so he wouldn’t be afraid when he got old enough to experience it for himself. Then hopefully he wouldn’t be overwhelmed when he went away to college, wouldn’t give in to peer pressure, wouldn’t find himself changing into someone neither one of them would recognize. And then he would have everything—a happy childhood, a good education, a loving mother, and, most importantly, pride in himself and his decisions.

But every day that brought them closer to summer also brought more and more pressure for her to spend money. First the car engine light came on and she was forced to shell out two hundred dollars for repairs. Then, in the middle of May, the boy’s birthday arrived and she was forced to choose which happy memory she would be able to give him.

She blamed his new group of friends for putting her in that position. Up to now he had only ever had two really good friends from school—Pete, the overweight son of the vice principal, and Thomas, whose Filipino parents grew nuts and tree fruit on the other side of town. They were both geeky sweethearts who talked a lot about comic books and were happy just to be invited along for burgers and a movie every couple of months. But his new friends were used to more and expected more. When Josh’s birthday came along
in April, the boy found himself invited for an afternoon of miniature golf and go-karts followed by dinner at a pizzeria in Fresno. Josh’s parents paid for everything, food and entertainment for thirteen growing boys. She felt guilty about letting someone else pay for her son. But then she realized that her turn to pay would come soon enough.

“It’s called Laser Dome,” the boy explained with his birthday a week away. “They have laser tag and video games and everything. They’ll even give us a cake and set up tables and food for the party.”

She looked over the list of prices on the flier he had given her. The boy leaned forward in his chair, waiting for her response. His enthusiasm disappeared as she set the flier on the table and locked eyes with him. One hour of laser tag would cost nearly ten dollars per boy, and then there was the price of pizza, soda, and cake on top of it. And he would still need presents to open after blowing out the candles.

“When we decided to plan a vacation,” she said, “we knew we would have to cut back around here so we could have fun on the trip. That means birthdays too.”

The boy lowered his head and whimpered softly. “But it’s my eleventh birthday,” he said. “It’s special. It’s like I’m not a kid anymore.”

“If that’s true,” she said, “then you should understand why we can’t afford this.”

He wiped his runny nose on his sleeve. She hadn’t meant to sound as heartless as she heard herself being. “If we start dipping into the vacation fund now,” she said, “then the next time we want something we’ll end up dipping into it again. Then come July we won’t have anything left to dip into.”
As she listened to the words coming out of her mouth, she realized that she was lecturing herself as much as him. When he looked up at her again, she was startled by the bitterness in his normally placid eyes.

“None of my friends’ families have to save up so much just to go on vacation. Josh has been to four other states and his mom and dad still take him places all the time.”

“That’s because Josh has two parents to pay for it.”

They shared a moment of silence in which they both seemed to regret what had been said.

“He made fun of me the other day. He made fun of me for never having any money for food at the snack bar.”

“What did he say?”

“He said only beaners eat lunch in the cafeteria, and then he asked me if I was one.”

“And what did you do?”

“I told him to shut up.”

“You should have told the teacher!”

“He’s my friend,” he said. “I didn’t want to get him in trouble.”

She sighed and took another look at the flier. Eventually her eyes drifted down from the paper toward nothing in particular. He waited literally on the edge of his seat, watching her.

“I can’t do Laser Dome,” she said, “but maybe I can still make your birthday special. I’ll have to look at the cost, but for now here’s what I think I can do—you can invite five or six friends to the house for cake and presents. We’ll even get a couple
pizzas and some chips. Afterwards you can all watch videos in the living room or go to the park and play. It’s more than we usually do for your birthday, and it won’t cost us an arm and a leg. How does that sound?”

The boy thought over the proposition, turning his head from side to side and working through the disappointment of having to accept any deviation from the ideal birthday he had already built up in his head. “It sounds like a little kid’s party,” he said finally. “If that’s all we can do, I’d just as soon go out to a movie or something and not invite anyone.”

“Well,” she said, “that works too.”

She had accepted that there was no way to avoid disappointing him on this one. Better he should feel it now than on the trip. She would have other chances to give him a good birthday. But after all they had been through the past few months, who knew when they would summon the willpower to save up for another vacation?

His birthday came and went with no more fanfare than any other year. If anything, the day felt less special because they knew it wasn’t what either of them wanted. It was the first movie they had been to in months, and yet he seemed to sit through it by obligation, barely smiling even during the funniest parts. At the ice cream place she ordered him the biggest sundae on the menu, and gradually his mood began to improve.

“When we’re on vacation,” she said, “we’re really going to celebrate. We’ve earned it for sacrificing so much for this long.”

The boy smiled. Smeared fudge was beginning to dry across his upper lip, giving him the dark outline of a mustache. “I wish we knew where we were going,” he said.

“Soon. I’m planning on booking the trip right after school lets out.”
When summer finally arrived, the boy finished out the fourth grade with all A’s on his report card and high hopes for what the season would bring. He had shot up two inches since the start of the year and all the sports he had been playing had made him leaner and more agile. Instead of enrolling him in a summer school program as in summers past, she left him alone in the house and let him fill out his days reading or watching TV unsupervised. Meanwhile, she started to plan the trip.

What she found after totaling up their savings astounded her. They had done everything right, they had scrimped and sacrificed for nearly six months, and yet after adding the vacation fund and the rest of their money together, she realized the best they would be able to afford was three nights at a beach town motel somewhere on the coast. She felt cheated, and in desperation turned to the credit card she kept for emergencies and had never used for anything big until now. Money would be tight when they returned home, but it would be worth it to give him a vacation to remember. And so it was without regret that she surprised him with the brightly-wrapped package that contained his belated birthday present—the itinerary for their twelve-day trip from L.A. to San Francisco with stops along the way.

It was more than money that had kept her a homebody all these years. For the longest time she had an aversion to highways and long trips in the car. AAA membership was expensive and she was afraid of being stranded out on the road, dependent on the generosity of strangers driving by. It had happened more than once in her experience. The first time she was just a child, on vacation with her family, she and her sister half-asleep in the backseat, woozy from second-hand smoke, her mother and father seated up front,
flicking cigarette ashes out opposite windows. Suddenly they felt a bump and the sedan swerved toward the shoulder. Her father swore loudly and pulled over to the side of the road. They had passed a service station a few miles back, and with no spare in the trunk he had to leave them with the car while he walked to get help.

As soon as he was gone, her mother locked the doors and sealed the windows up tight. Her sister complained about the heat and smoke, but her mother told her to zip it and continued chain-smoking and eyeing approaching vehicles in the rearview. When a strange truck pulled up behind them, her face portrayed fears that her daughters weren’t old enough to understand.

“You girls stay in here and keep the doors locked,” she told them. “I’m just gonna step out and see what this fella wants.”

Fortunately, the stranger only wanted to be a Good Samaritan. He gave them all a ride to the service station, stopping halfway to pick up the girls’ father, who tried to show his gratitude to the stranger, first with money and then by offering to buy him lunch. The Good Samaritan refused flat-out.

“No trouble to help somebody,” he said. “Would hope for the same if it were me.”

Her mother found the Good Samaritan all sorts of charming despite his bad teeth and gangly physique. Once he was gone, she smiled and threw her chin up in the direction of his disappearing taillights. “That’s a real gentleman there, girls,” she said. “You’d be lucky to find a man like that when yer older. Cause one day you’ll find out that the best thing in life is having a solid roof over your head an a real gentleman to call yer husband.”
A few years after she dropped out of college, along a different stretch of road, she came face to face with what she thought was a real gentleman on the day she met the boy’s father. It was raining hard and her waitress uniform was soaked through, exposing her damp bra for all the world to see. He gave her an old beach blanket to wrap around her shoulders.

“I’m running late for work myself,” he said. “But I can never just keep driving when I see a lady stranded out in the rain. That’s just the kind of guy I am.”

“You’re a real gentleman, then,” she said, and smiled at him. Later, when she was seven months pregnant and he was arrested for statutory rape, she heard that he had picked up the other girl in the same way—on the side of the road with the rain coming down in buckets.

Now, after eleven years, she put her reservations about the open road aside and focused on making the vacation an unforgettable experience for her son. And as the trip unfolded, it seemed that even her highest hopes were being surpassed. The first three days were so perfect she came close to tears observing the wonderment with which he greeted nearly everything he encountered. In L.A. she led him down the Hollywood Walk of Fame and pointed out the names of their favorite movie stars as they passed over them. He seemed to be having trouble registering how Los Angeles, a city which up to that point had existed only as a backdrop for buddy comedies and disaster movies, could somehow be all around him as part of his waking reality. On the beach at Santa Barbara, he swam in the ocean for the first time, paddling out as far as she would allow and then letting the tide sweep him back to shore. She watched him from behind the edge of the surf. She said to herself, “It’s all been worth it to see him like this.”
They spent the fourth day at a motel in Isla Vista before heading north to Pismo the following morning. In the late afternoon, she put on a one-piece bathing suit and read her magazine in a patio chair while the boy splashed and dove through the pool like a happy seal. After an hour or so, she began to feel the first stings of sunburn on her shoulders.

“I think it’s time to get cleaned up for dinner,” she said.

The boy doggy-paddled over to the side of the pool. “Can I keep swimming a little longer? Please?”

“All right. But don’t wander off.”

“I won’t, I promise,” he said, and plunged back down under the water.

He swam alone until the chlorine started to sting his eyes. He climbed out, dried off with the towel his mother had left for him, and sat down in the patio chair to wait for the water to drip out of his trunks. In the meantime, he picked his book up from the table and began to read. He had become a much faster reader these past months. He could feel it every time he finished one book and moved on the next. Soon he would be done with Bilbo and the dwarves, and then he planned to start reading the full trilogy. They excited him, these books and stories. They made him wonder about places beyond home, places where people worried about things besides money and school and where to go on vacation. Maybe it was because his mother only read magazines, or maybe because his friends were slow readers, but something about the books made him feel like someone was sharing a secret with him that only a few people knew.

On the other side of the pool area, a ginger-haired boy sat eating dried peas out of a bag. He was wearing a pair of plaid board shorts fastened tight around his waist. As he
chewed, his attention drifted across the water to the only other kid in the vicinity. After a while, he wiped his hands on his shorts and wandered over.

“Sup,” he said. “What’re you reading?”

“The Hobbit.”

“Never heard of it. Is it good?”

“Yeah. I like it so far.”

“That’s cool.”

The ginger took a seat in the chair next to him. The boy noticed his board shorts—identical to the kind Josh and his friends wore to school in the spring—and felt self-conscious about his own plain, oversized trunks. He folded the corner of a page and put the book away.

“How long you been here?” the ginger asked.

“We got here this morning. My mom and I are on vacation.”

“Vacation.” He drew the word out while scanning the rows of small, compartmentalized rooms that encircled the pool area. “How old are you?”

“Eleven.”

“I’m twelve. Been here about a week. My dad set fire to the kitchen trying to get the bread-maker to work, and we’re stuck in this shithole until the builders are finished.”

He extended the bag to him. “You want some peas?”

The boy stared skeptically into the bag before reaching in and clamping a few of the breaded peas between his fingertips. He chewed them very slowly, evaluating the strange flavor as it expanded over his tongue.

“They’re hot,” he said with a note of surprise.
“That’s the wasabi,” the ginger said. “Where you from anyway?”
“Around Fresno.”
“Fresno.” Again he drew the word out. “What state is it in?”
“California.”

The ginger laughed. “Well, it must be a shithole if you came here to get away.”

He shook the rest of the peas into his mouth and stuffed the empty bag under the seat cushion. “Let’s go down the street and get some ice cream.”
“I don’t have any money.”
“I’ll lend you a couple bucks.”

The ginger stood up to leave, waited for him to follow.
“I don’t think I should. I promised my mom I’d stay here.”
“It’s only two blocks.”
“I don’t know. My mom might get worried.”

He watched the ginger boy exit through the gate and disappear down an alcove.

Afterward he felt embarrassed. This strange boy was only a year ahead of him, but he seemed so much older. He thought about running to catch up with him, but then he remembered the promise he made to his mother and felt hemmed in by it. Sitting alone by the pool, he looked around at the tiny enclosed area and considered the limits of his movement. His trunks were dry before he was finished, but he stood up anyway and headed back to the room.

“Hi, baby,” his mother said. “How was the rest of your swim?”
“Fine.” He dropped the towel on the floor and plopped down on the bed.
“You better start getting ready,” she said, and continued fixing her hair without giving thought to his silence. Twenty minutes later, as she steered them through the streets of Isla Vista, he was still quiet. Tuckered out from swimming, she figured.

“The motel manager said there’s a good burger place down this way. You can even have a milkshake if you want.”

He kept his head down and didn’t look at her. “You always decide everything,” he said.

“What, baby?” She looked away from the road and finally noticed his eyes. There was something unusual about them, a solemn, dissatisfied quality. “What’s wrong? Tell me.”

“You always get to decide everything we do,” he said. “You planned this trip without asking me about it, and before that I couldn’t do anything for months so you could pay for it. And now that we’re here, you want me to eat burgers off the kids’ menu like I always have to.”

Her mouth fell open and stayed that way until she almost ran a stop sign.

He went on, “You never let me do anything I want to do. Never.”

“Love,” she said. “You know that’s not true.”

“Feels like it.”

“What do you want, baby? Where do you want to go?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Someplace different.”

She drove past the burger place the manager had recommended, and then onward past a dozen other places the boy found unsatisfactory. Finally they landed at an outdoor
bistro in west Santa Barbara that had cloth napkins and no kids’ menu. “You order whatever you want,” she told him. “Don’t even worry about the price.”

He read over the foreign-sounding names on the menu before settling for a burger made of rich Kobe beef with fries coated in garlic and sea salt. She ordered the same. They waited for the food to come, the boy sipping on his soda and saying very little even as she explained all the fun things there would be for him to do when they got to Pismo. When the food arrived, he had to hold his burger with both hands.

“See,” she said. “Your mom lets you have what you want sometimes.” She pushed her plate to the center of the table. “Want some of my fries?”

“No thanks,” he said. “I’ve got enough of my own.”

She said nothing and pulled the rejected fries back to her side of the table. They chewed their food in silence as the sun began its slow descent to the other side of the world. Every now and then she looked up from her plate and studied his face, trying to pinpoint the exact nature of the change she detected there, but finding only the inscrutable wall of his newfound sullenness.
CHAPTER 3

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE Scribe

Long before the scholars came with trowel and brush to recover the words in the clay, there was a time when writing was considered a dangerous new technology. The Phoenicians had returned the alphabet to Greece in around 800 BCE after four centuries of illiteracy, but three hundred years later writing was still used mainly by artisans for economic purposes. Everything worth preserving in Greek culture was transmitted orally by specially trained experts called rhapsodes. It was said that even a mediocre rhapsode could recite from memory the full texts of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and that a skilled one might also know some Hesiod and Sappho.

The rhapsodes were notorious drunkards and pederasts. Wandering from town to town reciting verse, they collected orphaned and impoverished young boys to train as apprentices who, in accordance with Greek custom, were obliged to satisfy their masters’ needs without question. The time required for the masters to impart the great epics coincided nicely with the time it took the boys to come of age, and the average rhapsode might go through six or seven apprentices in the course of his lifetime. It’s likely that the survival of Homeric verse through the Archaic period owed as much to the rhapsodes’ continual need for new apprentices as to the cultural importance of the works.

Early in the fifth century, not long after the Persian defeat at Marathon, a Theban merchant’s slave was separated from his master when their ship capsized during a sudden storm off the coast of Attica. The slave, called Theas by his master’s family, swam to
shore and immediately renamed himself Tiresias because of the storm in his dream the night before.

He was thirteen, thin and gangly, prone to ringworm and patches of inflamed acne. He had been beaten by his master so often that he could not stand in one place very long without trembling, and when permitted to sit he could not help but fidget with his hands or make soft croaking noises with his throat. He had learned to form letters by observing the tutors who came to instruct his master’s sons. From time to time the tutors also treated them to a few passages of Homer, from which he learned that the gods play favorites with men and that all living men are their playthings. He saw their auspices in the patterns of rainfall, in the way the wind cut across a field of grain. He believed the storm that had carried his master and forty other men to their deaths had been sent specifically to set him free.

After sacrificing three fat gulls to Poseidon, Tiresias left the sea behind him and made his way on foot into the mainland. On his third night of freedom, a band of Athenian rhapsodes fell upon him and demanded to warm themselves by his campfire. As they grew drunk with wine, they became conflicted about what to do with him. He was a little old for their tastes, unattractive, and a son of Thebes, their hated rival. But the silent deference he showed them as they invaded his camp suggested he might have the makings of a good apprentice.

“Do you know any poetry, Theban?” the elder rhapsode asked. “Come! Recite for us!”

Tiresias managed to bring himself to his feet despite the violent tremble running through him from shoulders to toes. He cleared his throat and began a recitation of
Priam’s appeal to Achilles, but before he reached the end of the first line the rhapsodes became enraged and rose up to silence him. It was the first time they had heard him speak more than one word at a time, and so they had no way of knowing about the severe stutter that affected him every time he tried to say a complete sentence.

“You’ll learn not to disgrace the words of the master,” the elder promised him.

He pressed Tiresias’s face into the mud while the others held down his arms and legs. They took turns with him throughout the night, breaking only to urinate and clean the sweat from their faces and thighs. Tiresias fought against them in intermittent bursts of writhing and screaming, nearly choking on mud as they drove his face deeper into the earth. He was barely conscious by the end of it, just enough to make out the elder rhapsode’s flawless recitation of Odysseus’s speech to Laertes, the rhythm altered to match the pace of his thrusts.

In the morning they gathered what was left of the wine and prepared to depart the camp, leaving Tiresias unconscious in the muddy depression he had dug for himself with his struggling. As a final punishment, and to ensure he never repeated his desecration of the sacred verse, they cut out his tongue and tossed it into the smoldering remains of the campfire. In an oral society, it was about the same as killing him.

He stayed at the camp two more nights, quivering in agony and much too weak to stand. He had lost so much blood that death seemed inevitable if not imminent. But on the morning of the third day, an Athenian farmer passing by took notice of his filth and injuries and surmised that his master had left him like that as punishment for some misdeed. The farmer, never one to refuse an extra set of hands to work his fields, hoisted Tiresias’s limp body into the back of his wagon and took him home to convalesce. He did
not inspect the wounds closely and took his inability to speak as a sign of mental softness.

“We had a dumb idiot on the farm when I was a boy,” the farmer said. “Think his name was Talos. I guess that’s what we’ll call you.”

The farmer meant to send Talos into the fields as soon as he was healthy enough to work. Tiresias, still mystified by the course the gods had set for him with their invisible guiding winds, accepted his return to slavery as well as his speechlessness as part of their great overarching plan. He knew from Homer that the hero of a story is often sidetracked from his destiny by various threats and temptations, and if he was indeed the hero of his story then he could not expect to be spared from deviations.

As Tiresias’s strength returned, the farmer set about training him for the work of the farm. He started him out with the comparatively easy task of shepherding in the pasture, but Tiresias was not well suited for the job. He daydreamed constantly and appeared more concerned with the shapes of clouds than with the state of the flock. What he was really searching for was some sign from the gods that it was time for him to escape the farm and continue his journey to find the elusive purpose of his existence. In his most hopeless moments, he considered that perhaps this was his purpose, that the deviations from the journey really were the journey, and that he was fooling himself by aspiring for anything greater.

These were the thoughts that weighed on him the morning the farmer found him sitting alone at the far end of the pasture. The flock was dispersed across the land and his master’s prized pregnant ewe was nowhere in sight.

“Talos!” the master cried. “Where is the ewe?”
Tiresias pointed in the general direction of the farmhouse.

“If you let her get into the root garden, you’re going to pay for it with your hide. Now, damn it, where is she?”

Tiresias tried to explain himself with gestures and pantomime, but the master’s patience was wearing thin. He hadn’t planned on receiving a whipping when his old wounds weren’t even fully healed. As the master began to huff irritably, Tiresias noticed a long switch lying on the ground and took it up before it could be used on him. He carved the letters into the soft black earth until the message was spelled out clearly—AT THE STABLE WITH AGENOR.

The master stared at the shapes in the mud and blinked in disbelief.

“Do that again,” he said.

Tiresias moved to a fresh spot of dirt and wrote out the full alphabet plus a line from Achilles’s reply to Agamemnon. The master set his hands at his sides.

“ Took you for an idiot too early,” he said. “Looks like you’re good for something.”

Owing to the pregnant ewe and his hidden talent, Tiresias was spared a life of hard labor on the farm. The master figured a slave that could write but couldn’t talk would be worth more at auction than in the fields. He was going to Athens. Again Tiresias saw the hands of the gods at work. Whereas Odysseus had incurred the wrath of Poseidon in his escape from the Cyclopes, he imagined that he would regain his freedom by earning favor with the gods through his piety and devotion.

In the meantime, he was sold to a pottery maker for six minae. At auction he had been advertised as a learned young virgin with a defect of speech. The potter could care
less about his virginity or defectiveness so long as he could be trained to join his workshop. He was set to work with twelve other slaves in a moist, balmy room packed wall to wall with tables supporting every size and shape of pot imaginable. Their job was to etch words and pictures into the wet clay. The ones who etched words sat on the opposite side of the room from those who etched pictures and a boy in a clay-splattered tunic dashed back and forth between them supplying fresh water and sharpened styli.

He etched words into the clay. It was his trade. He worked at it for ten years.

He etched words into clay and the world went on around him. It was a dangerous time. Foreign armies marched over the lands of Athens, first the Persians and then the Spartans after them. The Spartans, more than anyone in Greece, were proud of their illiteracy. They saw the alphabet as a foreign novelty that distracted from the business of state. On the warpath, Spartan soldiers left entire libraries of parchment and priceless vellum in flames as readily as they left behind murdered husbands and raped wives and children.

Tiresias’s life under the potter was monotonous, painstaking, and seemingly endless. There were always more pots, always more words to etch, and never any sense of finality. What did it matter if he finished etching the word VINEGAR before any of his colleagues? It would only mean that he could move on to the next pot and then the next before they could, and at the end of the day the total number of vinegar pots might surpass their daily average. It wasn’t like in the great epics. They weren’t building to anything. There was no journey. They were sitting in the same place repeating the same motions day after day year after year. The pottery wheel was the hydra and the stylus was the sword.
He looked forward all day to his nightly ration of wine. He would make himself sick from drinking too much. The other slaves thought he was funny and shared part of their rations to help make him drunker. Sometimes he would dance for them and other times he would try to sing, his mangled stump of a tongue batting at the words like a cat chasing flies. His master beat him until he realized it wasn’t doing any good. The promise of wine was the only thing keeping him glued to his workbench, and without it he likely wouldn’t have bothered to get up in the morning at all. The potter became nervous about him. Suicides were costly and bad for morale. He decided to try to lift Tiresias’s spirits, and so as a reward for ten years’ service he granted him permission to visit a brothel.

“Thank the gods for a tongueless customer,” the fat Ionian girl said. “I’d rather take a load of spunk in the eye than have to listen to men talk.”

It was the first time he had been with a woman, and even after it was over and she had slipped back into her simple sweat-stained robe he wondered if it was supposed to be like that. He hadn’t expected so much wetness and odor, the noise and discomfort of her thighs slapping against him. He always imagined sex with a woman as something gentle and clean, not a grunting exercise that left you dizzy and in need of a long bath. He came away from it thinking that poetry made love beautiful and not the other way around.

Just as he was beginning to resign himself to his fate as a potter’s slave, the gods intervened in his story once more. It was a cold autumn morning when he roused himself from bed with a hangover so bad he could barely manage the thirty-three steps to the latrine. When he had finished, he came back out into the courtyard and noticed the potter’s wife standing alone, clutching her breast. An unrolled sheet of parchment lay on the brick beside her feet. She had never cared for him much and had often goaded the
potter into whipping him for his drinking binges. But now she turned to him with all the blood drained from her face and softly gasped.

“Temenos!” she cried. “The master is dead!”

As the message at her feet revealed, the potter had been travelling by wagon on the road to Thessaly when a band of Spartans on horseback appeared up the road. He was transporting a load of heavy clay wine basins and had no way of getting off the road in time. The Spartans closed in on the wagon, and when he tried to flee on foot they caught him in the back with a spear. One of the slaves accompanying him managed to slip away, but the wagon and the wine basins were lost.

The death of the master put Tiresias in a precarious position. Between the loss of the wine basins and the loss of the potter, the workshop would no longer be able to sustain a full staff. It was true that Tiresias had been with the family longer than most of the other etchers, but the potter’s widow had her own favorites, as well as an enduring dislike for him and his drunken Theban ways. And so he was sold to a writing instructor for the low price of three and a half minae.

“Listen up, Timon,” the teacher Arastos told him. “There are two reasons why I’ve chosen you as my scribe—because you were cheap and because you can’t speak. It’s the latter reason that is most important to me, because if any word of what I say to you in the course of our dictations is overheard by the wrong ears, both of our lives will be blotted out like wax on a writing tablet. Don’t even think that I’m joking.”

As well as being a teacher and sometime poet, the Cretan Arastos considered himself a philosopher, orator, architect, and mathematician. Nearly every moment he was spared from the drudgery of the classroom he dedicated to the contemplation of his great
work, a massive epistemological dialogue entitled *On Natural Logic* that he believed would revolutionize Greek philosophy and usher in a new golden age of the arts and sciences.

“Make no mistake, Timon,” he said. “There will be those in this city who would have me put to death when my work is released. Because, you see, I’ve discovered the truth about the natural world. There are no gods, Timon. It is a great and illegal heresy for me to say so, but it is essential for future generations of Greeks to understand. And another thing, Timon—the Earth moves in a circle around the sun.”

Tiresias silently bemoaned the fact that his new master was a lunatic. He wondered what purpose the gods had in killing his old master, who had always honored them with appropriated sacrifices, only to bind him to a dangerous heretic who intended to make him an accomplice to his blasphemies. Still, he had faith that one day they would lead him to better shores, provided he didn’t allow himself to be drawn once more into despair as the Sirens drew Odysseus’s crewmen to the rocks.

Arastos divided each day into four-part fractions with two parts set aside for teaching, one part for personal reflection, and one for working on the book. *On Natural Logic* was to be written as an interconnected series of discussions between Arastos himself and his former mentor, the Cretan philosopher Masmondes. He had worked at it alone for over eight years before incinerating all of his notes in a fit of drunken paranoia. Now, at the age of fifty-three, he resolved to redraft the work from start to finish with the aid of a scribe so that no piece of the text would appear in his own handwriting until it was ready to be published.
“These Athenian dogs will have me swallow poison when the work is completed,” he said one night near the end of a sack of wine. “But I do not care about reprisals. I’m going to finish the work and release it under my own name. Then we’ll see how the local sophists stack up against the great minds of Crete. By the way, Timon, did you know that it’s possible to demonstrate that a rock and a feather fall at the same rate?”

Tiresias did everything he could to please his master, but the demands of philosophical dictation were often too much for him. Their sessions always began late in the evening just as the light was beginning to dim and usually lasted well into the night. His master only permitted one lamp to be kept burning at a time, and often Tiresias had to look away from the tablet as he wrote to keep his eyes from hurting. In the mornings he was forced to rise with the kitchen slaves so that he could transfer the previous night’s work to parchment and submit it for review. Arastos was never satisfied with the finished copy, and even a minor misspelling would provoke him to strike Tiresias’s wrist with a length of braided leather he kept fastened inside his tunic.

For every finished sheet of parchment Arastos added to the text, there were a hundred deletions, revisions, and alterations that found their way into the kitchen stove between the time Tiresias finished with the copy and when his master left to conduct his lessons. Despite his best efforts to remain faithful and keep a pliant demeanor, Tiresias still succumbed to hopelessness. He saw himself as Sisyphus and the book as the stone. He crawled into bed each night with the master’s voice echoing in his skull, his hands slick with tablet wax. It would have been one thing if he could have had some wine during the sessions, but as the master only allowed his slaves one glass at a time and only during meals, it was a relief he could never hope to attain. He ached with nostalgia for the
good old days of the pottery workshop, the nights spent filling his throat with wine and listening to the pleasant chatter of the other etchers.

There were times when he considered fleeing Athens, perhaps to return home to Thebes or to start a new life as a freeman in some far off country. But even at his most despondent he could not bring himself to defy the will of the gods. Even as he transcribed the logical arguments by which Arastos proved the materialistic ordering of the universe, he knew there was more substance to creation than the words conveyed. All of this, the natural world that his master accepted as the total sum, was only the pretext, the wax onto which the greater story had been written. He could not bring himself to deny the presence of the author when his own life still held the possibility of revision.

He stayed in the master’s house. He copied the words onto wax. By the time the work was possibly halfway finished, he had grown into middle age and Arastos was seventy years old.

“I feel the words slipping away from me,” the master admitted one night during a particularly difficult session. “My mind has softened as I’ve grown older. It is only natural, and inevitable, I am afraid. You know, Timon, what we call the soul is nothing more than the mechanical processes of the brain interacting with one another. I suspect it all ends when the body dies and nothing remains but fragments of whatever substance the brain uses to form thoughts.”

It was an early morning in spring when one of the house slaves ran into the kitchen to announce that Arastos had died. Tiresias had just finished transferring the copy from the night before, and as the household erupted into collective mourning he remained frozen at the table, paralyzed by the realization that the work would never be finished and
that a small part of him had actually hoped it would. If he had believed in his dead 
master’s philosophy, he would have gone further and admitted that even the idea of the 
work was now gone, lost somewhere in the already putrefying cranial liquid that might 
have also held the master’s soul.

Arastos’s will left the status of Tiresias’s slavery uncertain. The largest section of 
the text concerned what was to be done with the finished sheets for *On Natural Logic.* 
Arastos had left very specific instructions that varied according to the political climate of 
Athens at the time of his death. Under the present circumstances, the incomplete 
manuscript and all other notes and papers were to be immediately burned and no one in 
the household was ever to speak of their existence. The will was very clear where that 
was concerned. But there was a contradiction toward the end of the text that made it 
impossible to determine whether or not Tiresias was to be freed. In one line, Arastos 
granted him his liberty along with a stipend of thirty minae for his services as a scribe. 
But just three sentences later he was bequeathed to Arastos’s widow as one of a half 
dozen slaves mentioned specifically by name. The lawyer devised a solution by which the 
price of Tiresias would be deducted from his stipend in exchange for his freedom, but as 
Arastos’s unpaid debts had left his estate on the verge of ruin, even the reduced stipend 
would be a burden on the family. In the end, Tiresias was forced to accept a compromise 
whereby he would be set free on the condition that he waived the right to any 
compensation.

Banished to the streets and free for the second time in his life, Tiresias saw 
renewed cause for hope. He had weathered his years of servitude as Odysseus had 
weathered his ordeals at sea, but now that he was his own man he imagined a new stage
of happiness and domestic tranquility awaited him. It couldn’t be that hard to find a wife among the free women of Athens. Some women might even appreciate a husband who couldn’t shout at them or insult them to their faces. Granted, he didn’t have much to offer in the way of appearance. The ringworm of his youth had eaten away most of the hair on his scalp, and his pockmarked face had never inspired any desire among his masters’ female slaves. But he figured if he could get a little money together then then he could at least secure a homely free woman of childbearing age.

What he failed to take into account was how much Athens had changed since he first arrived on the auction block thirty years before. The city had never been the same since the wars. Lower parchment costs and an influx of foreign teachers had made writing a common skill. Even the rhapsodes, who had fought tooth and nail for so long to preserve the oral tradition, now used the wax tablet and stylus as aids for memorization. The old guard decried the mental laziness of the younger generation, prophesized the death of Greek literature within fifty years.

For a former slave who had been taking dictation for the better part of two decades, this new Athens provided few opportunities to amass wealth easily. From the beginning, he was at a disadvantage because of his tongue. He thought about giving lessons, but finding pupils who would look past his affliction proved too much to hope for. Writing, after all, was designed to aid in speaking, and a writing tutor who couldn’t speak was about as useless as a one-legged horse. With teaching out of the question, he fell back on traditional scribe work simply to keep from going hungry. He produced a set of clay tablets with the inscription *Tiresias of Athens, Professional Scribe* as a means of announcing his services to the public. But the irony of a scribe named Tiresias who could
see but not speak attracted too many laughs from potential customers. To get them to take him seriously, he was forced to change the tablets, and from then on was known in Athens simply as Tiro the scribe.

In any given week, he might be employed as a note-taker, treasury clerk, secretary, or speech recorder. For his services he was treated practically the same as the slaves who did most of the work in these fields, and was compensated only slightly better. At times when there was no other way for him to get by, he resorted to copying out long passages of Homer and selling them for an obol a page on the street. Whenever he could manage to hold on to a piece of parchment for himself, he practiced his own simple forms of composition. He took to writing down his thoughts in prose and saving them for future reflection.

When I was a slave, I served one master at a time for years on end. But now that I am free, I serve a hundred different masters each month for an hour or so at a time. How strange they are, the lives of freemen.

As the years passed, he gradually gave up hope of ever saving up enough to start a family. Despite working every day until his calloused fingers were numb, he never managed to hold on to money for long.

Wine had become a problem. When he didn’t have it, his hands shook so much that he couldn’t write. And if he didn’t write, he couldn’t afford wine. He spent most of his time in a sleepy middle place between sobriety and sickness.

He became an old man. Sharp pains shot up his right arm each time he held a stylus. He finally had to train himself to write with his left hand just so he could continue
working. During the especially lean years, he wore the same plain brown tunic every day, replacing it only after the holes at his back had expanded beyond the width of his thumb.

Occasionally he was employed by learned men to take dictation during their public speeches or lectures. The rhetorician Isidoros hired him to record one of his lessons after hearing about the devotion he had shown the late Arastos before his death. Isidoros was a philosopher and an early colleague of Socrates, but he disagreed with his friend about the nature of human virtue. He didn’t think goodness was something objective that could be distilled down through rational inquiry. Rather, he believed that good and evil were inseparable from custom and entirely dependent on society to determine which was which.

“It’s a great shame, Tiro,” Isidoros said after reviewing the lesson notes, “to think that the loss of such a minor organ as the tongue should cripple a man and bar him from taking part in public discourse. I myself never learned how to read without saying the words aloud, and I cannot imagine earning my bread as a scribbler without the benefit of a voice.”

By then Tiresias had lived for so long without a voice that he rarely thought of himself as crippled. He could still work, after all. Through the patronage of Isidoros and others, he was able to keep himself in wine and bread. Now and then if he was a little low on coin he would jot down a passage or two from the *Odyssey* and sell it for a pittance outside a gymnasium or oratory school. He never had so much silver in his purse as in the weeks following the theater festival of Dionysus. When the actors took to the stage, he would crouch down among the beggars in the brush behind the amphitheater and furiously write out the dialogue in shorthand. He later sold the texts of the plays to
students and amateur troupes. He stalked nearsighted old rhapsodes, transcribing their verses under a cloak without them noticing.

He kept himself in wine. He copied the verses onto parchment. By the time the peace treaty with Sparta collapsed, he was making more money selling poems than as a scribe.

The smell was a problem, and so was the drunkenness. Since turning sixty he had stopped cutting his hair, and now he only splurged on new clothes when the tatters of his old tunic could no longer be held together. His learned patrons deserted him. Even Isidoros accosted him for immoderation and slovenliness.

“Society sets the standards by which a man is to be judged according to his value,” he said one day when Tiresias came looking for work. “Though I might personally believe you have been treated unfairly, I cannot change the currency to suit one man’s needs.”

There were days when he didn’t leave his room at all. He kept to his bed, fighting against the painful fits that now shook his entire body whenever he couldn’t afford wine. Between episodes he bled his thoughts onto his remaining scraps of parchment, the letters so small he was rarely able to make them out after they were written.

I have seen myself as a character in the story of my life. The authorship of the world remains a mystery to me even now. I cannot see the hand, but I can feel the meter.

Near the end of his life he became master to an adolescent rhapsode named Arixtis who brought him his wine and meals and took care of him during his violent attacks. Arixtis had a soft, healthy voice but a poor memory. Tiresias would copy out lines of Homer for him to recite on the street and they would split the money between
them. He was always afraid of losing Arixtis, and to keep him from committing the verses to memory he hid them from him during the night and made him alternate between passages each day. Arixtis tolerated his paranoia because he never laid a hand on him in anger or in lust.

“How do you feel, Tiro, not being able to speak?” the boy asked him one night.

The master scratched the letters into wax with a shard of quartz.

_The same as everybody._

“Wouldn’t you like to be able to say what you want?”

_Most people never get to say what they want. Why should I be any different from them?_

He had grown disillusioned with life, embarrassed by his boyish delusions of heroism and prophecy. He had finally come to accept the view of Arastos that there are no gods. And even if there are, he would have said, it’s unlikely they concern themselves with the affairs of mortals.

The plague came to Athens without warning or mercy. Tiresias awoke one morning in the winter and felt that his leg was on fire. The glands in his groin had swollen to the size of his fist. As he realized that he was dying, he reached for the wax tablet and summoned Arixtis to his room. He told him to go to the writing cupboard, take out all the clay he could find, sharpen the remaining styli, and set it all on a tray by the foot of his bed. Then he sent him away.

It wasn’t the first time he sat down to write his own epitaph. Of the three clay tablets recovered from the archeological site, two seem to have been used as drafts for
what his grave marker would later read. The variations on these artifacts range from Tiro, Scribe of Athens to Here lies Theas of Thebes, died a slave but born a freeman.

No actual grave has ever been linked to the scribe. If he died of the plague, then his body would have been burned. No evidence exists to determine what plays he copied in his lifetime, and even if they survived the Roman occupation they were probably destroyed in the fire that swept the great library of Alexandria. As for the third tablet, which is believed to have been used as a learning aid for Arixtis, researchers have uncovered only the name, Tiresias of Athens, and three hundred and thirty-three repetitions of the same phrase—*I AM – I AM – I AM*...
CHAPTER 4

SPANISH FORT

The Sierra Fin hostel was in its tenth year of operation when Shep arrived one morning to apply for the assistant manager job. The town of Fortaleza Española sat on the coast like a flattened squid with at least ten unpaved roads jutting out from the city proper, winding their way through the stony hills and preserved forests that ran along the shore. Shep drove his newly acquired ’89 Dodge pickup down one of the longer and more challenging stretches of road until, less than a hundred yards from the beach, he came upon a cluster of squat tan buildings with the look of a run-down Motel 6 or Travel Lodge. The words on the marquee—SIERRA FIN HOSTEL VACANCIES YEAR ROUND—didn’t impress him very much. Neither did the hostel’s owner, Roy, a pot-bellied British pensioner who conducted Shep’s interview over the hood of the Dodge with a beer in one hand and a lit cigarillo in the other.

“You bring a copy of your résumé?” Roy asked, scratching at a mosquito bite on his freckled forearm.

“I attached it to the email I sent before I came down,” Shep said. “Didn’t you get it?”

“Oh, I got it,” Roy said. “But my printer’s been out of ink since last summer. Hard to come by this far from town.”

Shep felt his leg muscles tense up. “Well, I can give you a quick summary if you want.”
“No need.” Roy licked the beer from his mustache and stared off into the low green canopy above the roadside. Some unseen forest bird unleashed a shrill squawk every few seconds. Beyond that, only the soft patter of leaf water disturbed the quiet of their surroundings. “Only have a few questions for you. First and foremost is whether you have any experience working in a place like this.”

Shep leaned away from the truck and wiped the warm sweat from the back of his neck. “The only experience I’ve got is as a journalist,” he said. “Nine years of it. I’m a sports reporter.”

“FIFA?”

“NCAA. American college football.”

“Well, that’s interesting,” Roy said. He puffed on the cigarillo. “How’s your Spanish?”

“I studied a little in college,” Shep said. “But it’s been a while.”

“Is that your way of saying you don’t know any?”

“Would that be a deal-breaker?”

“Not necessarily. A little Spanish would be good, certainly. A little Chinese would be even better. But in any case, most of our guests manage to make themselves understood in English. So it shouldn’t be too much of a problem.”

“Thank God.”

Shep brushed his fingers through his hair, which in the late morning humidity was resting flat against his scalp. Dark stains appeared under the arms of his Fresno State sweatshirt, under which his plain white tank top was soaked completely through. He
knew he didn’t look very professional. But after a week on the road, it was the cleanest outfit he had left.

“I suppose my second question,” Roy said, “is how a young man like you came to find yourself in a spot such as this. I take it you only just arrived in the country, correct?”

“Flew in from California about ten days ago.”

“Right. So what’s the story with that?” Roy took a final puff from the cigarillo and dropped the smoldering stump into a puddle of muddy rainwater. “You in trouble of some sort? With the American authorities?”

“I’ve never broken the law in my life,” Shep said. “An old friend talked me into coming down here on a wild goose chase. Said he had a job lined up for me at an English-language newspaper up in Panama City. So I uprooted my whole life and flew down here on short notice. But when I arrived, the paper had already folded up, and my friend was nowhere to be found.”

Roy groaned sympathetically. “That’s like something out of a bad dream,” he said. “Surprised you didn’t turn around and fly back home.”

“I would have if I could.”

Shep didn’t know what to make of the look Roy gave him then. In general, he seemed like the type of guy who was hard to read at any given moment. The section of face that stuck out between his graying beard and matted bangs appeared almost Indian it was so stoic and tan. He had heard about the “stiff upper lip” emotionlessness of the British, but then Roy hardly seemed representative of any particular group of people.

“Listen,” Shep said. “I’m going to be straight with you, mainly because I can’t afford to play it cool right now. The truth is that I’m broke. I spent almost everything I
had on my ticket down here, and what little I had left got eaten away trying to figure out my next step. I picked this truck up for next to nothing, and I found a cheap hostel where I could connect to the internet. But yours was the only job listing in the entire country that won me so much as an interview.”

He waited for Roy to offer some sign of condolence, and when it didn’t come he lowered his head and scraped the loose earth with the heel of his shoe.

“What I’m trying to say is, I don’t have anywhere else to turn. If I had any living relatives back home, I’d be hitting them up for help. But I don’t. Fact is, I’m all alone in the world. My credit score’s a mess, and even before I got laid off I was struggling just to get by. Coming down here was supposed to be a way for me to start over. It was my last resort.”

That’s when Shep saw Roy smile for the first time. His teeth were in good condition despite the smoking and the Britishness. Ten days abroad and already Shep was learning to abandon preconceived notions.

“So what you’re really saying,” Roy said, “is that the Sierra Fin is your last last resort.”

A low sinking feeling began to swell up inside Shep’s stomach as he envisioned himself sleeping in the front cabin of the Dodge for weeks on end, struggling to get by as a transient immigrant in a country whose language he couldn’t speak and whose dangers he could only imagine. But then Roy pulled the lid off the plastic cooler that was resting on the ground. He dug two more cans of beer out of the ice and handed one to Shep.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “This place was my last last resort too.” He popped open the can and drank deeply as Shep continued to look at him with bated breath. “These
towns along the coast were made for starting over. The waves wash away everything that
doesn’t matter.”

Roy waited for Shep to open his beer, then raised his own can to eye level.

“Cheers,” he said. “And welcome aboard.”

Shep followed Roy up a set of short concrete steps that led to the door of the main office. Though he managed the climb without difficulty, there was no hiding the unnatural
stiffness of his right leg as he swung it from one step to the next, keeping the ankle
locked and knee unbent. Roy stood inside the doorway waiting for Shep to go ahead of
him. He watched Shep’s awkward gait and hummed softly through his nose.

“That’s quite a limp you’ve got there,” he said. “Were you in the service?”

Shep reached the top step and seized both sides of the doorframe. “Not me,” he
said. “Used to play quarterback for my high school team. Injury senior year screwed up
my knee. Had to have three surgeries just so I could move at regular speed.”

Indeed, the moment he was through the door, Shep resumed his normal pace and
the limp regressed to where it was barely noticeable.

“Was that how you came to be a sports journalist?” Roy asked. “Because you
couldn’t play football anymore?”

Shep shrugged. “I love football,” he said. “If I couldn’t play, then writing about it
seemed like the next best thing.”

The office was little more than a refurbished camper trailer with an imposed wall
separating the reception area from the spare rooms in the back. Several seasons’ worth of
scuba and snorkeling fliers were thumbtacked across two bulletin boards situated on
opposite walls of the lobby. Roy went behind the counter and removed a tin cashbox from one of the bottom drawers. He flipped it open and took out a small tray loaded with twenty and fifty dollar bills.

“During the tourist season, I can usually afford to take on a few locals as temporary hires,” he said. “But it’s just been me on my own since September. Used to have my youngest boy around to help out, but he moved back to England to continue with his studies. The place is a bit much for one person to manage, even in the off season.”

“The job posting said something about public relations,” Shep said. “I did some advertising work as a college intern.”

“We have a website that’s about all the PR we’ll ever need,” Roy said. “You’re welcome to play with it if you like, but most of the work that needs doing around here is pretty menial, I’m afraid.” He glanced again at Shep’s leg. “I hope that won’t be a problem.”

Shep straightened his stance and drove his fists through the front pouch of his sweatshirt. Four years of college, nine years’ work experience, and all the dues-paying along the way had led him to this. He drew the rough corner of his cheek between his teeth and began to chew on it compulsively.

“I can’t afford to be picky,” he said. “It’s all honest work.”

“That’s a good attitude to have,” Roy said. He pulled a stack of twenties from the tray and dealt three of them onto the counter. “This is to help you get settled. Tonight you can head into town and pick up some toothpaste and crisps anything else you need to tie yourself over.”
“I really appreciate that,” Shep said, folding the bills into his wallet.

“The regular pay is eight hundred a month. If you’d like to lodge in one of the extra rooms, I’ll have to deduct a little something for it. Say five dollars a night.”

Shep did the math in his head. “That’s a lot less than I was hoping for,” he said.

“More than the seasonal hires make.” Roy closed the cashbox and stowed it back under the counter. “And anyway, the prices are much lower down here than in the States. If you’re frugal, I’d expect you should be able to tuck away a little bit each month.”

“Just so we’re clear,” Shep said, “I don’t plan to be around for very long. As soon as I’ve got enough saved up, I’m flying back to California.”

“No one’s going to try to stop you,” Roy said, smiling for the second time since they met. “Even so, you may be surprised. You might just fall in love with the place.”

Roy led him out through the back and behind a series of conjoined square bedroom units whose bronze numbers were the only means of differentiating one door from another. The room he was given had two twin beds separated by a gap of only a couple feet, apart from which there wasn’t much space to move around. Calico patterns of mold speckled the bathroom tiles, and though there were two faucets for hot and cold, Roy warned him that the water heater was built for about the same capacity as an average-sized tea kettle. There was no shower curtain.

“I know it isn’t much,” Roy said, running a finger over the dusty floral wallpaper. “Thinking we might get some painters in, maybe knock up a new patio for the front.”

Shep swung his backpack onto one of the beds. “That’d be a good start,” he said.

“Anyway, I’ll let you get settled. Lunch in the bar at one o’clock. Hope you like fish.”
“Thanks,” Shep said. “But don’t you mean ‘the pub?’”

Roy laughed. “No, it’s just a bar. No use pretending it’s something it isn’t.”

He lingered by the door a moment longer as Shep started to unpack. He looked around the bedroom, as though seeing it differently somehow now that it was occupied.

“Well,” he said. “Glad to have you on board.”

He shuffled out into the yard, closing the door behind him.

Shep waited until he was sure that Roy was gone, then dropped the dirty clothes he was holding and plopped down onto the bed. He leaned forward and ran his fingers through his greasy hair. Of the pint bottle of rum he had bought in Panama City, only a shot and a half or so remained. He cut it with some warm Coke and finished the mixture in two large gulps. As he stretched his unwashed body over the bed spread, the knuckles of his clenched fists started to turn white.

“God damn son of a bitch,” he said. “You’re a dead man, Tim Moss, if I ever find you again.”

He had stayed with the newspaper as long as he could, after the first round of layoffs gutted the staff, after his hours were cut to part-time, even after Tim Moss got pulled off the sports desk in his second year as editor. “All of journalism is in a slump right now,” Tim told him, gripping the cardboard box that contained his personal effects.

“But it can’t last forever. Keep your head up and I’ll send word once I get reestablished somewhere else. San Diego probably, maybe Phoenix.”

He and Tim had been friends since high school, since the afternoon Tim came up to him after JV practice and asked if he could do a profile on him for journalism class.
After Shep’s father died, Tim’s parents tried to look after him by giving him a place to go in the evenings. Secretly, Shep always felt that Tim idolized him—being too short and asthmatic to play sports himself, Tim covered football for the school paper and obsessed about it in his free time. Saturday afternoons, Sunday evenings, and some Monday nights, Shep could be found in Tim’s living room, bag of chips on the coffee table, game on the TV, cheering on the Bulldogs and the 49ers, cursing the shotgun arm of Brett Favre.

Senior year, when Shep was out on injury and the whole world had fallen apart, it was Tim who encouraged him to go to college anyway, to study journalism as a fallback.

“We’re coming up in the world together, Shep,” Tim said after graduation, when they both landed jobs at the same paper. “Let’s make sure to always watch each other’s back and not let competition get in the way.”

Shep had been unemployed four months when the email from Panama came. He knew Tim hadn’t had any luck with the San Diego papers, but he had never expected him to move four thousand miles away just to land a job. Even so, the fresh start Tim promised was extremely tempting at that point in his life, as tempting as the promise Tim had made him when they were both seventeen, that being a sports reporter would be almost as good as playing on the field.

Get your butt down here pronto, Tim wrote. I’ve got it all worked out for you start as a senior staff writer. You’ll have to see it yourself to believe it, but this city is so choice you’ll never want to work at an American paper again.

To give Shep an idea of what he was missing, Tim attached a JPEG of a voluptuous Latina in a red g-string striking an alluring pose with crystal waves crashing against the beach behind her. But the photo was overdoing it. After twelve weeks on
unemployment, Shep didn’t need any motivation beyond the guarantee of a job. Tim had never steered him wrong before, and the way he described Panama was enough to convince him to break the lease on his apartment and head south to start his life anew.

But when he arrived at the hotel in Panama City, all he found was a hand-written note that Tim had left with the concierge.

_The publisher was a crook. Lied to us from day one. Left the whole staff hanging with two weeks unpaid salary and nothing left to cover the printing costs. You don’t know how sorry I am, friend. I thought this was the real deal. You know I hate to leave you in the lurch like this but, to be honest, I was too ashamed to face you._

A knock at the door jolted Shep from his brooding thoughts. He hid the empty bottle under a pillow and sat up straight on the bed. “Come in,” he said.

Roy pushed the door open a crack and peeked his head inside. “Lunch is served,” he said. “Hope you’re hungry. The sierra I caught this morning grilled up nicely.”

Shep hadn’t expected much from Roy’s cooking, certainly nothing like the bountiful spread that was waiting for him inside the bar. At the center of a round mahogany table, the blackened filet of a slender ocean fish was cooling on an oval platter surrounded by hot tortillas, Spanish rice, black beans, grilled peppers, and several types of salsa. After a week of potato chips and drive-through meals, Shep could hardly restrain himself in front of so much real food. Roy seemed pleased when he loaded his plate with a second and then third helping of everything.

“Being on my own this long, I’ve learned to get most of my entertainment from the sea,” Roy said. “When the weather permits, I get up early each morning to go fishing.
And every evening I walk down to the beach to relax in the surf. The salt water has therapeutic properties.”

Shep nodded with a mouth full of beans. “Sounds cool,” he said.

“The point I’m trying to make is that there’s a good deal to like about this coastline. There are far worse places to be stranded.”

“That’s true,” Shep said, and glanced up from his plate. “All the same, I’m not one to let myself get stuck in a bind for too long. And I’m way too young to be thinking about retirement.”

Roy laughed. “Well,” he said. “It’s still nice to have some company around the place.”

When the meal was finished, Shep returned to his room and slept until after sundown. Then he went outside and paced around the soggy dirt lot, tossing cigarette butts into the mud and listening for the threatening hum of mosquitos in his ears. A few minutes past eight o’clock, he spotted Roy walking down the road with a towel over his shoulder, muddied flip-flops slapping against his heels. Shep tried to picture him out there in the pitch dark with the waves crashing over his head, his freckled body engulfed by the surf. With all the aspirations he still had for his life, he prayed he would never live to see the day when all his needs could be satisfied by a stretch of wet sand.

The days that followed Shep’s arrival saw the Sierra Fin in a constant state of renovation as he and Roy set about making the place clean and comfortable for their guests. Even with his weakened leg, Shep was still in better shape than Roy, who seemed to have spent every day since the end of tourist season growing fatter and slower in solitude. Still, Roy
refused to treat Shep like a pack mule. Any job that needed doing, whether laying down gravel in the driveway or replacing tiles on the roof, Roy insisted on doing his part. Now that he wasn’t alone all the time, he seemed committed to taking better care of himself as well as the Sierra Fin. By the end of the first week, he had stopped drinking beer during the day, and soon after he gave up smoking all together.

“The Sweetwater and the El Dorado try to filch my customers with free Wi-Fi and margarita machines,” he said once during Shep’s smoke break. “But they’ll never be able to offer the location we have here at the Sierra Fin. Thirty meters to the beach, two kilometers to the ruins, and all the beauty of the rain forest right outside our door. I saw the potential of this spot the first time I laid eyes on it ten years ago.”

“Good foresight,” Shep replied. More and more, he started to get fearful whenever Roy used the word “our” in reference to the Sierra Fin. As hell bent as he seemed to be on selling him on the wonderfulness of the place, Shep still wasn’t sure what his angle was. Roy didn’t strike him as queer exactly. More like some of the old ladies he had known as a kid, the ones who would drop a dollar in his hand just for sitting a while and listening to them. When they were finished scooping leaves out of the rain gutters, Shep decided to test his advantage.

“You ever think of getting a satellite dish for the bar?”

Roy stood panting and wiping sweat from the rim of his hairline. “Never saw much use for it,” he said. “Most of the guests don’t come down here to spend their time lounging in front of the telly.”

“That may be because there’s never anything for them to watch,” Shep said. He stuck his hands in his jean pockets and tried to look glum without overdoing it. “This is
the first fall I can remember where I haven’t had Sunday football. Might help to make the place more welcoming for the American tourists, all I’m saying.”

“Don’t get too many Americans this time of year,” Roy said. “But I suppose you have a good point. With as much as it rains this time of year, it couldn’t hurt to have some proper entertainment for when the lads are stuck in the bar.”

“That sounds swell,” Shep said. He couldn’t believe it was that easy. And though Ray said he would continue to think on the idea, before the end of the week a cholo in a blue jumpsuit drove out from the city to install a thirty-six-inch dish atop the roof. Shep started to wonder what other steps he could take to make the Sierra Fin feel more like home. If Roy was as open to persuasion as he suspected, then he might be able to get a Wi-Fi adapter and Bud Light tap for the bar before the month was out.

Even with all the work he and Roy were putting in to make the Sierra Fin attractive to customers, Shep could never bring himself to imagine what the place would be like when the guests started arriving. So when the first rush of winter tourists appeared, speaking Asian dialects and dragging grungy duffle bags over the freshly mopped floors, he struggled to put on a hospitable face. Some years earlier, a travel guide writer had called the Spanish ruins in the hills “a picturesque cultural wonder,” and now every winter entire droves of vacationing Chinese and Koreans went out of their way to see them. Shep didn’t know how to handle them, with their strange customs and unintelligible English, the high-pitched wailing of their native speech. It wouldn’t have been so bad except that he was expected to be subservient to them, to turn a blind eye to their faults.
“The guests are stealing towels from the rooms,” he told Roy one night while counting up receipts from the bar. “They might not know any better, but still, we need to put a stop to it.”

Roy nodded slowly as he transferred the larger bills from the register to the cashbox. “How do you suppose we should do that?” he asked.

“Put up a sign,” Shep answered. “Get somebody to write it in English and Chinese. ‘Please don’t take towels from the rooms. Violators will be fined.’”

“That’s not a very welcoming advertisement,” Roy said. “Might offend some people.”

“But think of all the money we’re losing because of theft.”

“It’s not very much,” Roy said. “Better to sacrifice a hundred dollars in towels than lose a thousand dollars in business.”

“Well, yeah, but there’s still the matter of principle.”

Roy looked up from the money and laughed. “Work ten years in this business,” he said. “Then you’ll understand that some principles are more important than others.”

Shep stared at him a moment before storming away. Roy knew damn well he didn’t plan to work there that long.

Over the next several weeks, Shep tried to ignore the various annoyances that came with service work, but the invading tourists kept finding new ways to piss him off. Tending bar was supposed to be a reprieve from the more strenuous parts of the job, but even there they managed to make things difficult for him. On nights when it was raining hard outside, the young backpackers took it as an opportunity to get hammered indoors. They would sit sometimes ten or eleven to a table, shrieking with laughter and downing
one-dollar beers by the pallet, and by the early morning they were so far gone they would try ordering drinks in Chinese, as if Shep was supposed to understand their language just because he worked there.

The worst moments came when they discovered the jukebox. Sometimes they would misunderstand the machine and launch into group sessions of karaoke, singing all the louder for lack of a microphone. A few times Shep came close to taking a swing at one of the kids. It was always when their attentions finally turned to him, when they would start playing a Garth Brooks or Randy Travis song and try to get him to dance for them. He would smile and wave their money away politely. But meanwhile he would be chewing his cheek so raw that in the morning he would awake with a blood blister on the inside of his mouth. And then he would wonder why he had let them get on his nerves so bad, and what it was that he hated so much about being treated like a cowboy.

One Sunday he woke up in such a lousy mood that he skipped his shower and opened the bar an hour earlier than usual. He put the game on the flat screen and finished three bottles of Panamanian beer before kickoff. Near the end of the first quarter, a few of the guests came down to take a hair of the dog. And as they settled into watching the game, Shep lost interest in the score. Roy appeared with seven minutes left in the first half.

“I can’t figure these guys out,” Shep said. “They keep cheering, but not at the right times. They didn’t make a sound at the last touchdown pass, but just now they were jumping out of their seats.”

Roy poured a glass of orange juice and studied the Chinese boys. They screamed wildly at the next snap, but seemed disappointed when the ball found the receiver.
“I don’t think they care much about the game,” Roy said. “ Seems like they’re mostly interested in seeing the bloke with the ball get taken down.”

Shep turned and looked at the boys with restrained outrage. “You mean they just want to see the quarterback get sacked?”

“Seems to be the case.”

Sure enough, as soon as the Browns’ quarterback went back for the pass and the offensive line started to fold, the backpackers rose from their chairs and commenced to egging on the Baltimore Ravens’ defenders, waving their arms through the air, signaling for them to grind their opponent into the ground. The muscles in Shep’s leg seemed to grow tighter the longer he watched. In all his years of following professional football, he had never cared one way or another about the AFC North. But now, as the backpackers continued to cheer for the quarterback’s annihilation, he felt a strange connection with the scrambling passer in the orange helmet, as if the enclosing wave of black giants was threatening to pummel him as well.

“This is sick,” he said. “I’m putting a stop to it right now.”

He picked up the remote and aimed it at the screen. But before he could change the channel, Roy stepped between him and the TV.

“I think you should relax,” Roy said. “They’re just having a bit of fun. So what if they aren’t following the game the regular way?”

“There’s no other way to follow it,” Shep said. “How would you feel if I behaved like this during a World Cup game?”

Roy adjusted his footing so that he was facing Shep sideways. “All those years covering American sports,” he said. “You’re saying you never once made fun of soccer?”
Roy had a point, but Shep wasn’t about to admit it. Instead he raised the remote higher and changed the channel to CNN right as the Browns’ offense was setting up for the punt. The backpackers groaned in protest. One of them even approached the bar.

“Excuse me,” he said. “Please to change back station?”

Shep showed him a spiteful grin. “So sorry,” he said. “It time for favorite news program.”

The boy stared at him apologetically for a second before returning to the table. Roy shook his head, but didn’t try to intervene. He just turned away and walked out of the bar, leaving Shep and the backpackers to sit in silence as the week’s events were recapped onscreen. A story about troop movements in Afghanistan was coming through in HD, and the boys stayed to finish their round before deciding to take their chances in the rain.

“Good riddance,” Shep said.

But he still didn’t switch back to the game.

The atmosphere of the Sierra Fin turned sour after that. As if resigning his own treasured space, Shep spent less and less time in the bar, busying himself outdoors with grounds keeping work that he stretched out as long as he could. And as if fearing that he might quit at any moment, Roy overlooked Shep’s willfulness, said nothing even as he started sleeping in past ten each morning. At the end of his second month, Shep counted up all the money he had managed to save, but his bitterness only grew worse. Despite pinching every penny he could, he was nowhere close to the kind of cash he needed to go home. At
this rate, it would be a full year before he was ready to take his chances again in California.

It was around that time that Shep stopped blaming Tim Moss for getting him into this fix. Sure, Tim had talked him into coming down, just as he had talked him into becoming a reporter, but it wasn’t like Shep had ever required much convincing. Where he was now, in life and in Panama, was his own doing, and if it was his own doing then he was going to make the most of it, whatever that meant. For two months he had lived like a hermit at the Sierra Fin, leaving his room only to work and begrudgingly accept Roy’s meals. But as the rains gave way to unseasonable dryness, he started going out two or three nights a week, to spend money in the campy, overpriced bars of Roy’s rivals. On the patios of the Sweetwater and the El Dorado, he would sit for hours chatting with fellow gringos, claiming to be a car salesman and former college star, someone who could rest comfortably on his laurels and afford to travel the world.

Then the night came when he accepted a drink from a young Swedish tourist and wound up following her back to her room. She fucked like one of the bull riders he had seen on ESPN 3, straddling him wildly from on top, applying pressure with her hips like she was afraid of falling off. Afterward they separated to opposite sides of the bed, trying desperately to cool down in the stagnant heat of the room. She looked at him and seemed amused by how hard he was breathing.

“I think you’re probably the oldest guy I’ve been with,” she said.

Shep patted her thigh and tried to remember how to make words. “I’m only thirty-two,” he said. “Not even thirty-two and a half.”

“Oh.”
He watched her face out the corner of his eye, saw the disappointment and boredom that had replaced her naughty smile.

“I would have figured thirty-nine, at least,” she said. “My dad’s only thirty-eight.”

Shep stopped breathing and sat up against the bedrail. “So you thought I was some dirty old man?” he asked.

“Not exactly,” she said. “But the limp is a little misleading.”

She laughed and moved her head onto his chest. It was too hot to sleep, but Shep closed his eyes anyway and lay there until sunrise. As he was getting dressed, she took a twenty dollar bill from her purse and stuffed it into the pocket of his jeans. “For gas,” she said, and even though he only had a short ways to drive, Shep smiled gratefully and told her thanks. But on the way back to the shore, he started feeling ashamed of himself for reasons he couldn’t comprehend and didn’t want to think about longer than he had to. With less than a mile to go before he reached the Sierra Fin, he cracked the window of the Dodge and tossed the twenty outside. He watched it spin in the rearview before settling upon the deeply carved tire tracks in the mud.

Back in his room, hungover and starved for sleep, Shep heard a knocking that drove him to cover his face with the blanket. Only after the knocking turned into a rattling pound did he finally throw off his covers and drag his feet to the door. He opened it with enough force that, had Roy been standing any closer, it could have caused him some serious harm.

“Morning,” Roy said. “Get dressed and come outside.”
Shep’s mind jumped to the Asian tourists and the shoddy electrical appliances they brought with them. “Is the hostel on fire?” he asked, displaying no emotion beyond curiosity.

“It’s time you and I took a hike up the hill to see the Spanish ruins,” Roy said. “To be honest, we should have made this trip some time ago.”

“I’m in no shape for a walking tour this morning,” Shep said. “Maybe some other time.”

Roy stopped the door with his foot. “I’ve got coffee for the both of us,” he said, raising the thermos at his side. “Put on some comfortable clothes and meet me on the road in five.”

Realizing that he didn’t have a choice, Shep scrounged the floor for sweatpants and an old t-shirt. Minutes later, he stood by the road watching Roy suck coffee from the plastic lid of the thermos.

“I thought all English people drank tea,” he said.

Roy finished his coffee and screwed the lid back into place. “You should know by now,” he said. “I make my own customs.”

They set off into the hills at a leisurely pace, following an unpaved hiking trail whose outline had been etched by the sandals and sneakers of countless travellers before them. Though the incline was a struggle for Shep, he refused to let Roy outpace him. Neither of them spoke for the first mile or so. Gradually the canopy leaves closed in above them, shading everything in sight with the yellowed hue of old photographs.

“You know it’s none of my business where you wander off to at night,” Roy said. “That is, I’ve got no right to try and stop you.”
Shep kept his head down and focused on his feet. “Good to know,” he said.

“Although,” Roy said, “it’s important to keep in mind that what you do on your own reflects on the Sierra Fin as a whole. It’s a small group of us who cater to tourists around here. You develop a bad reputation in town and it could come back to hurt us later on.”

“Don’t worry,” Shep said. “I won’t be around very long.”

“Yes. You’ve mentioned that before.”

As the slope leveled off, the trail opened onto a plateau where several acres of rain-drenched sawgrass grew in overlapping waves, bent over from the weight of the moisture. Shep felt something buzzing around his face and ankles, small black insects like gnats or fruit flies. He was about to ask how much farther it was when Roy popped a squat beside a decayed tree stump.

“Most people wouldn’t have taken a chance on an unshaven stranger living out of run-down lorry,” Roy said. “But I recognized something in you and figured you needed all the help you could get. I decided it was worth the risk.”

Shep looked away in awkward silence, his lips curling inward like a frog’s.

“You ever hear of the Falklands?” Roy asked.

“I don’t know,” Shep said. “Sounds sort of familiar.”

A weary sadness came into Roy’s eyes, something tender that Roy hadn’t seen before. “We work so hard to keep our worlds intact that we wind up closing ourselves off to new experiences,” he said. “When I got out of the service, I tried everything I could think of to live a normal life. Got a job, bought a home, voted Conservative. But the whole time I was rotting away from the inside. It took my wife dying for me to finally
start asking myself the important questions. Like who was I, and what did I really need to be happy.”

“I know what I need to be happy,” Shep said.

“Do you?” Shep noticed as one of the buzzing insects settled on the crown of Roy’s head. It was bigger than he had expected, and even as Roy started to pull himself to his feet, the fly lingered a moment before moving on. “Come on,” Roy said. “Not far now.”

They were quiet as they descended the other side of the hill, Roy straining less noticeably than on the upward stretch, Shep too preoccupied to care about the widening gap between them. As the sound of the ocean grew clearer, Shep sped up to close the distance.

“How did your wife die?” he asked.

Roy turned his head slightly, but kept moving. “Breast cancer,” he said. “We caught it too late.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Shep said. “My dad died of cancer.”

“Condolences.”

“Thanks. You too.”

At last they came out of the forest and onto a small clearing on a cliff overlooking the sea. Jagged slabs of masonry stuck out from the ground like ancient stalagmites, their edges fuzzy green and blotted with fungi. Other sections of stone lay half-buried in the earth, indistinguishable from regular boulders but for their perfect geometry. Shep walked out toward the cliff and rested his hand on the massive salt-rusted bowl of a mortar whose projectile balls were still arranged neatly in a pyramid beside it.
“There’s not much left of the place, is there?”

Roy shook his head and knelt by Shep’s side. Dandelions grew in patches around the base of the mortar. He grabbed a handful and watched their seeds disperse in the ocean breeze.

“The Spaniards who built this fort were skilled men,” he said. “But they were also proud and stubborn. They built their walls as they always had, modeled off of the Old World castles. But they built them here, on the edge of a cliff, surrounded by forest and sand. So when the English pirates came, they spotted the fort from miles out. Their cannons tore the walls to pieces before the first ship touched land.”

Roy wiped the dirt from his hands and stared out at the far breaking waves. Shep studied the mortar a second time, running his fingers along the side of the barrel until his nails were brown with rust. By the time the rains swept in, they were backtracking the way they had come. The splashing of heavy droplets filled the void of their silence.

Shep had never gotten around to unpacking his bags. For months he had been living out of his carry-ons the same as the tourists who filled the other rooms for two nights at a time and were never seen again. But after the visit to the ruins, he shut himself up inside his room and, with the rain beating hard against the window, started moving his clothes into the closet. It was tedious work, and before he was halfway done he jumped in the Dodge and headed up the mud-slick road to the Sweetwater. The bar wasn’t open yet, and so he sat under the patio awning making small talk with a couple of hungover German tourists. When he got tired of that, he snuck into the computer cluster to kill some time online. The instant his Yahoo account was loaded, Tim’s email jumped out at him.
First of all, I think I owe you an apology, Tim wrote. You know I hated to leave you holding the bag in Panama, but I was in a bad place then and didn’t feel like talking to anybody, let alone admitting that I had screwed up. But that’s all behind me now, because I’ve got a new opportunity that’s going to have us both sitting pretty before long.

Tim explained how one of his coworkers from Panama City had gotten him an interview with the sports editor at his old paper in Louisville, Kentucky. Between the Bengals, the state college, and the SEC, there was a big demand for sports coverage, and sports reporters.

This is the real deal this time, friend. I know I dropped the ball in Panama, and I want to make it up to you. Right now there’s a position open on staff that you’d be perfect for. My editor won’t keep it open forever, but he promised he’d hold off hiring someone for the time being. So if you can make it out here in the next week or so, I figure the job’s as good as yours.

Shep stared at the computer screen for several minutes before he stood up. He walked back to the patio and found the bartender setting up for the start of his shift, refilling the garnish trays with sliced limes and lemon twists, wiping down the counter in preparation for the rush of young foreigners demanding shots. Shep laid his palms down flat on the bar and called out for a glass of rum on the rocks. As he poured the liquor over the ice, the bartender glanced up and examined Shep’s expressionless face.

“Seen you here before,” he said, turning the bottle upright. “You live in town?”

Shep held the glass in front of his lips. “Not me,” he said. “Just passing through.”

The road’s topsoil was a brown slurry all the way down to the shore, but still he kept the Dodge at fifty-five and didn’t let up even on the sharper turns. When he reached
the Sierra Fin, he parked behind the outside building and took the long way round to his bedroom. He pulled his shirts and jeans off the hangers and stuffed them back inside his bags. Then he lay down on his bed and rested with his eyes open until after sundown.

Dreamy thoughts contented him in his waiting, and come evening he felt like a tourist himself, with one adventure drawing to a close and another right in front of him, about to begin.

At five minutes to eight, he left his room and walked over to the side of the main office. He stood with his back pressed flat against the wall so he couldn’t be spotted from the road. Before long, he heard Roy’s flip-flops squishing in and out of the hardening mud. Roy hummed and talk-sang an old punk rock tune, unaware that anyone was listening.

“Don’t be told what you want…don’t be told what you need…there’s no future, no future…no future for you…”

When the sound of his voice died away, Shep peered from behind the wall and went around front to mount the infernal steps one last time. The cashbox was in the bottom drawer where Roy always kept it, the tray overloaded with large bills from the most recent batch of guests. All together, the till was twice what Shep needed for a plane ticket north, but he emptied it anyway and stowed the money in his pocket behind his passport. Severance pay, he decided. Not to mention overtime, for making him hike in the rain on his day off.

He loaded his bags into the truck cabin and set off up the road with his taillights blazing red behind him. He knew that when he got to the crest of the hill, the glow would be visible from the beach. But it didn’t matter. Once he was past the first peak, there was
no way for Roy to find him again, no artillery he could use to tear him down, no words of wisdom that could reach him at that height.
CHAPTER 5

OLD PRO

By the time Joel landed at Incheon, his sickness had gone from bad to worse. As the plane taxied up to the gate, Joel sat hacking into a soiled airline pillow, his lungs wheezing between coughs with a high and airy rasp that seemed to confirm that he wasn’t dealing with a simple chest cold. If he could have anticipated getting sick, he would have paid the extra money for a direct flight to Taipei. Instead, he had another short flight across the East China Sea to look forward to, and that was on top of the three-hour layover in Korea. He had hoped to spend that time revising the short story he had been working on for the better part of a month. But as was often the case in his life, unexpected setbacks conspired to keep him from focusing on his writing.

Once inside the terminal, Joel staggered off to find the nearest currency exchange kiosk. His Sudafed had been confiscated in San Francisco, and rather than try to make sense of the Korean labels in the gift shop, he took his stack of blue thousand won notes and went looking for a reasonably priced bar. The stand at the mezzanine food court was running a special on Hoegaarden—buy one 800 milliliter stein and get a second free. Joel carried his two beers to the dining counter and drank them both very quickly. The alcohol had an immediate effect on his cough, and by the time he finished the second stein even his chill had subsided. He tried to get through a few pages of Salter’s *A Sport and a Pastime*, but he was still too groggy to focus on the plot. Since the jet bloat was giving
him recurring side pains, he decided to skip lunch and headed out to find his connecting flight.

With only a few gates left to go, the aches in Joel’s legs finally became too much to bear. He tore off his backpack and collapsed into an open seat across from a Lufthansa desk. Though his lungs had cleared up for the time being, the scratchiness at the back of his throat persisted despite his repeated attempts to clear it. Using his backpack as a pillow, Joel stretched out across the row of hard plastic chairs and fell asleep as soon as he closed his eyes. The nap felt like a short one, but when he awoke the Lufthansa flight had departed and the gate was empty except for an elderly westerner sitting cross-legged three chairs down from him.

“I do hope I didn’t disturb you,” the old man said. “Judging from your congestion, I surmised that you needed a good long rest. Even so, the lighting in these terminals is always so poor, I’m forced to sit on the outer end of the gate to ensure the longevity of my eyesight.”

The westerner stuck a leather bookmark between the pages of a thin hardback, then slipped the book into the leather satchel resting at his feet. Joel sat up and rubbed the corners of his eyes. His sinus pressure was so bad it was hard for him to get a clear look at the old man. He might have been pushing ninety as easily as sixty, but there was an alert and introspective quality about him that made his age seem inconsequential. He certainly wasn’t ageless, in that sense. Timeless, more like, but also imbued with more character of a bygone time than anyone Joel had ever seen. From his cream-colored suit to his practiced demeanor, there was nothing about him to indicate that he hadn’t emerged recently from a wilting photo of colonial Burma circa 1933. He was less
anachronism than artifact, and what he was doing here now at the Incheon airport, Joel couldn’t begin to imagine.

“I hope you’ll forgive me for sidling up beside you while you were en repose,” he said. “Once I recognized who you were, I felt I simply had to make your acquaintance.”

“Recognized me? What do you mean?”

“You’re Mr. Joel Frank, are you not? Joel Frank the writer?”

Joel shifted his jaw from side to side, but his ears failed to pop. “How do you know me?” he asked. “Have we met before?”

“Not that I can recall,” the old man said. “I recognized you from the photo accompanying your story in the latest issue of Blue Ocelot.”

“My story?” Joel cleared his throat and tried to work his fevered mind into a more complete understanding. “You recognized me from reading my story?”

“Quite so. It was a very impressive piece.” The old man nodded quickly, stretching his thin arm over the backs of the empty chairs. “You have a fine eye for detail, an almost Sophoclean sense of irony.”

“Thank you.”

Joel couldn’t believe it. It was true that Blue Ocelot had featured one of his stories online a few months back, but the thought that anyone would see it as something worth remembering, or that he would be recognized in person because of it, had never crossed his mind.

“Sorry if I seem stunned,” he said. “It’s just that I’m not used to receiving this kind of attention for my writing.”
“Then it would seem that you’ve been running in the wrong circles,” the old man replied. He moved two seats closer and extended his hand to Joel. “McAllister. Bartram McAllister.”

“Nice to meet you,” Joel said. McAllister’s hand was somehow boney and soft at once, as if the skin was only a glove to keep his skeletal fingers warm. “What brings you to Asia?”

“Business,” he said. “But as we speak I’m returning home. You should look me up the next time you’re in Tangier. I’m something of a patron of the arts, and my door is always open to English and American writers passing through.”

McAllister pulled a business card from his coat pocket and handed it to Joel. It read, “Bartram McAllister, Esq.” followed by a caption in Arabic.

“That’s the address of my bungalow in the upper Medina,” he said. “Show it to any driver and he’ll know where to take you. The place is something of a landmark among us exiles.”

Joel stuck the card inside his wallet. “I’ve never been to Africa,” he said. “But if I ever make it out that way, I’ll be sure to take you up on your offer.”

“Alas, it’s true Tangier isn’t what it once was.” A wistful sadness appeared in McAllister’s eyes. He took a red handkerchief from his sleeve and patted the sweat from his forehead. “I remember a time when writers and artists would come flocking to the city,” he said. “So many luminaries used to seek me out in those days. Why, Allen and Truman once slept off a four-day binge in my guest bedroom. Did you know Allen and Truman?”

Joel laughed weakly. “They were before my time,” he said.
“Pity. They were such fine fellows.”

Joel was about to say something else when he felt an irrepressible tingling at the back of his throat. He turned and sneezed loudly into his hands. Without hesitation, McAllister offered up his handkerchief.

“Thanks,” Joel said.

While Joel sat wiping his swollen nose, an Arab teenager appeared from behind the nearest support column. He was thin and frail with a soft, delicate face, and beneath the frayed cuffs of his denim shorts his slender legs were completely hairless. He served McAllister a fizzing cocktail in a rounded highball glass, bowing at the waist as he placed the drink directly in his hand.

“Thank you, Kiki,” McAllister said. “Bring Mr. Frank hot rum punch.”

“Yessa, Missa McAllista,” Kiki said, and trotted off down the terminal.

McAllister turned back to Joel. “It will help your throat,” he said.

“I don’t think I should have any more to drink.”

“Nonsense. It’s the oldest and best medicine there is.”

Joel watched as McAllister slurped his cocktail down, the lump in his neck pulsating between the taut cords of muscle. When only the thinnest layer of liquid remained, McAllister licked his white lips and moved over a seat so that he and Joel were sitting side by side.

“If I may speak with you for a moment sans indiscrétion,” he said, “I’m interested to know where you’re going and what business you have when you get there.”

“I’m moving to Taiwan,” Joel said. “Starting a new job as a teacher there.”

“So you’re earning your bread giving English lessons, is that it?”
“Pretty much. I have a one-year contract at a cram school.”

“And last year? What did you do for money then?”

“Same thing. Teaching at a cram school.”

“In Taiwan?”

“No. Here in Korea.”

“Well. It would seem that you’ve been at this for quite a while, then.”

“Six years. Since I graduated college.”

“Interesting. Then I suppose I have another question for you.” McAllister set the glass on an armrest and leaned in closer. Joel hadn’t noticed until then that there was something unwholesome about his body odor, an almost chemical presence that brought to mind high school biology class and preserved animals floating in jars. “In all this time you’ve been teaching, has your writing developed the way you wanted it to?”

“What do you mean?”

“Your writing. Are you satisfied with it?”

Joel stared at the short gray carpet under his feet. “I don’t know,” he said. “It’s difficult. Sometimes it feels like I’m struggling alone in the dark.”

“Alone?” McAllister shook his head, tsk-ing softly with his tongue between his teeth. “My dear boy, what are you saying? Don’t you have a community of peers to help you?”

“Not really,” Joel said. “You’re the first literary person I’ve met since I came to Asia.”

“How dreadful.”
Another round of tsk-ing ensued, and this time Joel paid close attention to McAllister’s mouth. He noticed the dark flesh of his tongue pressing through the thin gap in his front teeth. It seemed that any moment the roots would give way and the full tongue would come bursting forth, a hundred feet long yet still articulate.

“It sounds to me like you’re due for a change,” McAllister said. “I recommend a drastic relocation.”

“I’m not sure what that means.”

McAllister laid a curled hand on Joel’s shoulder. “Come with me to Tangier,” he said. “You need to be with your own kind. There’s nothing left for you here in the Orient.”

“It’s not that simple,” Joel said. “Flights don’t come cheap for me.”

“Never mind about that,” McAllister said. “I can get tickets anywhere in the world.”

“But what kind of job could I find in Tangier?”

“You already have a job, my dear boy. You’re a writer. Everything else is incidental.”

“I don’t have enough money saved up to live on for very long.”

“A real writer doesn’t need money. That’s what friends are for.”

“I don’t know. It sounds pretty risky.”

Though it was hard to read any feeling from McAllister’s face, Joel began to sense that he was growing impatient. He threw back the last of his cocktail and, as if summoned by telepathy, Kiki reappeared from around the corner. He set a napkin on Joel’s armrest and served him a silver chalice in the shape of a small grinning monkey.
The rum punch steamed with the smell of cinnamon. Joel could feel a difference in his throat after the first sip.

“Kiki, bring more medicine,” McAllister said, rattling the glass of ice.

Kiki winced nervously and waved his arms across his chest. “No, pleasa, Missa McAllista! You drink too much, they no let us on the plane.”

“Insolent bastard,” McAllister snapped. He jumped to his feet and grabbed a tuft of Kiki’s dark hair in his fist. Kiki screeched sharply as McAllister pulled him aside and all but hurled him down the terminal toward the alcohol. “Get going, you spoiled cur!” McAllister cried. He ran his hands down the front of his suit and took a deep breath. He sat back down.

“Now,” he said. “Where were we?”

Joel draped the handkerchief over the seatback and coughed into his hand.

“You’ve been very kind to me, and I appreciate that,” he said. “But Tangier doesn’t seem like it’s in the cards for me right now. And I should really get going. To catch my flight.”

“No, stay.” McAllister touched Joel’s knee and stopped him from rising. “Look at you. You know you can’t keep going on like this. You need a patron, a true friend, to help you reach your full potential.”

“There’s got to be another way.”

McAllister smiled and pulled the satchel up onto his lap. “Your illness is affecting your judgment,” he said. “But I have medicine that will make everything clear again. I suggest you follow me to the lavatory so we can get you back into tiptop shape.”
Joel looked down at the small piece of luggage. Faint wisps of green smoke seemed to be rising up from between the clasps. McAllister kept a firm hold on the sides, his fingers leaving bright streaks of sweat on the leather.

“What kind of medicine do you have for me?” Joel asked.

“What it is doesn’t matter,” McAllister said. “The important thing is that it works. Take it from an old pro—there’s not one of us who doesn’t need a little medicine from time to time.”

McAllister stood up from his seat. He began walking slowly away, the satchel swinging at his hip, and as he merged with the dizzying flow of foot traffic in the terminal, Joel felt inexplicably compelled to follow. By the time he reached the restroom, the smoke was so thick he could barely see himself in the mirror. McAllister stood in front of a stall door, eyes glowing yellow through the shroud.

“There are many types of medicine,” he said, his voice reverberating off the tile walls. “Now if only someone could figure out the name of the disease.”

…

When Joel awoke, he found himself in a cream-colored room with sunlight streaming in through the blinds of a nearby window. He was too weak to sit up, but from his bed he could hear the steady beeping of a heart monitor whose gray and white cords were attached to his chest and fingertip. An Asian doctor stood over him holding a pen and clipboard. He was on the older side of middle age, with a deeply receded hairline and square eyeglasses.

“Good morning,” he said. “You speak English, yes?”

“Where am I?”
“You’re at a hospital in Seoul,” the doctor said. He spoke in a low monotone with only a slight trace of accent. “You were in pretty bad shape when they brought you in. But with some rest and antibiotics, you should be well soon.”

“What…what happened? How did I get here?”

“You passed out at the airport. When the ambulance arrived, you had a fever of one hundred and five.” The doctor shook a finger at Joel and unleashed a series of disapproving tsks from the front of his mouth. “Not good. You should never risk travelling when you’re sick.”

Joel managed to crane his neck to see the clock on the wall. “My flight to Taiwan. I missed it.” He gripped the bedrail and tried to pull himself up. But his head started spinning and he fell back with a soft grunt. “Please. I need to get online. My boss is expecting me to arrive in Taipei any minute.”

“You can worry about that later. For now, try to focus on getting better.”

“You don’t understand. I’m supposed to take over my new classes on Monday.”

The doctor frowned severely and slapped the clipboard against his leg. “Your immune system is very weak right now,” he said. “That’s why the fever progressed so rapidly.”

“Why is it so weak? What’s wrong with me?”

“You’re exhausted.” The doctor shook his finger one more time and started walking toward the door. “You’ve got to take better care of yourself, or you’ll wind up getting sick like this more often.”

“I don’t get it. I’m only twenty-eight.”

“If you keep going like this, you’ll be an old man before your time.”
The doctor walked out into the hallway, leaving Joel to sweat out the last of his fever under the thin brown blanket of his hospital bed. A little while later, a nurse came in to check his vitals. Joel asked her to bring him his wallet from the closet. He wasn’t surprised that the card was gone, but he also wasn’t sure how to feel about it.
CHAPTER 6

All Those Bars and All That Metal

The trainers crouch outside the circle with their scarred hands gripping their knees, hard men with ropey sinews of muscle and faces sharper than those of the birds they breed. Speechless and nervous they move back and forth between the cages and the pit. Win or lose, most of their birds will be ruined by the end of the night, their meat contaminated and thrown to the dogs, or else discarded and left for flies. Each exhibition is but a small drop in the net loss or gain. Hear the gamblers comparing strategies in the stands between sips of rum. “To spot a winner, pay no attention to the size of the bird. Just count the trainers’ gold teeth.”

There was something about the view from the terrace courtyard that always made Eddie feel trapped. Maybe it was because the affluent Panamanian neighborhood where he was staying, with its private security guards and red Spanish tiles, was so similar to his own gated community back home that at any moment he could imagine his mother coming up the road in a nylon track suit, swinging a five-pound dumbbell in each hand. Or perhaps it had something to do with the fact that, far beyond the white stucco of Punta Paitilla, just above the waterline of the shore, the sheet metal roofs of slum shanties shone blindingly with the glare of the sun, reminding him that even now, after five months abroad, he was still clueless about most parts of the city.

“How would you rate Panama City against the other places you’ve been?”
Justin turned his head ambivalently while adding more Abuelo to his rum and Coke. At the age of twenty-four, he had already travelled across three continents, and Eddie looked to him as an authority on comparative cultures.

“You couldn’t ask for much better as far as the Third World goes,” Justin said. “Sure, you see garbage in the streets just like in Manila, but the amenities beat out pretty much everywhere else I’ve lived. Nice apartment buildings, casinos, air-conditioned shopping malls. Somehow they really got their shit together in this place. Just look at where we’re staying.”

Eddie panned his sights across the spacious poolside area with its limestone tiles and tables with wood patio umbrellas sticking up like exaggerated cocktail parasols. He did it more as a rhetorical gesture than anything. He was already familiar with every square foot of the building’s social level, from the farthest sunbed to the matted green turf of the putting green.

“I guess I was looking for something a little different when I came down,” he said. “For my first trip abroad, I was hoping for something more exotic. More dangerous, even.”

Justin arched an eyebrow. “Why dangerous?”

“I don’t know. Coming to Central America, I thought it would be more like stepping into a different world. I wasn’t expecting to find the same comforts of home waiting for me when I got off the plane.”

“What’s wrong with comforts?” Justin asked. He stretched his lean frame out over the deckchair and gulped down the rest of his drink. “What? Were you planning to write a book about all your wild adventures down here?”
“I’m not a writer,” Eddie said. “Not really, anyway.”

No sooner had he said “not really” than he began to feel embarrassed by his own pretentions. Fact was, before he had even arrived in the country, he had started a blog with the hopes of chronicling his time in Panama for his friends back home. But in the short time since its creation, the blog had degenerated into an online photo collage of various exotic-sounding foods. (Hey, guys! These are fried plantains. Muy delicioso!) There had been a time when Eddie saw travel, and the experiences that came with it, as the antidote to the anxiety and self-doubt that had overtaken him in school. And yet, after living abroad for almost half a year, he had gained twelve pounds and imbibed more rum than he ever thought possible, but he still had zero stories worth sharing with those who had known him before he went away.

“It’s different for you,” he said. “You’ve already been all over the world and then some. You’ve got a million stories to show for your time abroad.”

“Yeah,” Justin said. “And I’ve got the old wounds to prove it.”

Justin hooked a finger under his shirt sleeve and pulled it up to reveal a rough and pale scar stretching at least six inches across the underside of his arm, a permanent souvenir from his near-fatal river rafting accident in Belize. Eddie looked at the scar, but didn’t really see it. He was thinking back to the first time Justin told him the story of the accident, the look of pained relief in his eyes, and how much his admiration for him had grown simply from the fact that he had gone through such an ordeal and lived to tell about it.

“I’m not afraid of what might happen,” Eddie said. “Frankly, I’m getting sick and tired of avoiding life just because something bad might happen.”
Justin watched him for a moment, then set his glass down and sat up straight in his seat. “All right,” he said. “What kind of adventure do you have in mind?”

“I have no idea,” Eddie said. “That’s part of the problem.”

“Well, shit. You’ve got a birthday coming up, right?”

“Next weekend. I’m turning twenty-one.”

“See, there you go. You’re gonna be a real man soon, bud. If you could do anything you want for your birthday, what would it be?”

“I’m not sure.”

One of the biggest drawbacks about being inexperienced was never knowing what was really feasible. Eddie had his fantasies, for sure, and he assumed he would know the feeling of real experience when he encountered it. But what kind of adventure was actually possible for them to have remained unclear.

“If I knew what I wanted to do,” he said, “I probably would have done it already.”

“You don’t have any ideas?”

Eddie sipped from his can of Atlas. “I want a birthday that’s worth talking about later,” he said. “Like the ones you’ve told me about. Didn’t you say you celebrated a birthday in Bangkok one year?”

A nostalgic grin spread over Justin’s face. “My twenty-second,” he said. “And yeah, that was a pretty awesome time.”

“What did you and your friends do?”

Justin shrugged. “We went to a club and got our dicks sucked by little brown women.”
Eddie turned his head from side to side, mulling over the idea of such an experience. “They have strip clubs in Atherton,” he said. “What else did you do that night?”

“Well,” Justin said. “We started out at a cockfight at one of the local arenas.”

Eddie’s eyes widened with sudden resolve. “Let’s do that, then,” he said.

“Do what?”

“Go see a cockfight. They have them down there, right?”

“Yeah, I guess they do.” Justin sat forward, his expression growing less relaxed the more specific the plan became. “But I wouldn’t know where to begin looking for one.”

“You found one in Bangkok easily enough.”

“That was different. We had a Thai friend with us who knew where to look and how to keep us outta trouble.”

“Then we’ll find somebody around here to do the same for us.”

“Who?”

Eddie threw his hands out in frustration. “I’ll talk to Juan Pedro,” he said. “He knows how to get around the city.”

The tension on Justin’s face lifted, replaced this time by an incredulous and almost condescending smile. “Juan Pedro doesn’t like it when we go out to bars by ourselves,” he said. “He would never agree to help us find a cockfight.”

“Let me worry about Juan Pedro,” Eddie said. “I’ve had to talk my way past bigger obstacles than him.”
Before he ever laid eyes on the tropical opulence of Punta Paitilla, Eddie had first sat
across the dining room table from his parents, facing down their shared disapproval of his
plan to take a year off to teach English in Panama. His mother could barely contain her
terror at the thought of him venturing any farther south than San Diego for an extended
length of time. She sat with her firm arms folded over the table, a fiercely cautious
woman who had never been out of the country and saw no reason to ever take such a risk.

“What I don’t understand,” she said, “is why it has to be Panama. It would be one
thing if you wanted to go to Europe to study abroad. That I could understand. But you’re
saying you’d rather spend a year in the middle of a drug war?”

“That cartels are in Mexico,” Eddie said. “Panama has nothing to do with what’s
going on across the border.”

His mother brushed her hand through the air dismissively. “It’s all unsafe down
there,” she said. “You remember Natalie Holloway? You think just because you’re a boy
the same thing couldn’t happen to you?”

Eddie exhaled slowly, averting his eyes from their unyielding stares. He flinched
at the sudden crash of silverware that sounded from the kitchen. The housekeeper,
Yolanda, was almost done with the dishes and would be heading home soon to her side of
the peninsula.

“Half the people in my class are going to Europe this year,” Eddie said. “I want to
do something different. I want to go somewhere off the beaten path.”

His father nodded, but only slightly, layers of loose skin creasing above his shirt
collar. “What confuses me,” he said, “is why you have to go away for so long. I would
imagine that most of your classmates are only going abroad for a semester, not a full
year.”

“Won’t you miss your friends while you’re gone?” his mother asked.

“My friends and I can keep in touch online. I’ve even been thinking about starting
a blog while I’m down there.”

Here his mother uncrossed her arms and slid her open hand across the varnished
tabletop. “Is there something you’re not telling us?” he asked. “Did something happen at
school?”

“Are you feeling all right?” his father countered.

Eddie laughed under his breath, amazed that his parents were suddenly concerned
with how he felt. Despite living for two years on campus at one of the most prestigious
colleges in the state, he was never more than an hour’s drive out of their reach. He
recalled the awkwardness of his freshman year when they were still in the habit of
popping in on him at the dorm, and how his roommate had taken to studying in the
library on weekends just to avoid their impromptu reunions.

“I don’t enjoy anything anymore,” he said. “I feel like a shell a lot of the
time…like there’s nothing real inside of me.”

His parents exchanged their usual looks of concern, tempered this time by a
startling and very recent sense of helplessness.

“Are you still taking your medication?” his mother asked.

“It doesn’t have much of an effect. Not like I hoped, anyway.”

“Your grades this past semester,” his father said. “Do you think this is part of why
you’re having trouble concentrating?”
In the face of so much unexpected straight talk, Eddie was having trouble maintain eye contact for very long. He opted instead for a sideways view of the street outside the dining room window. Long shadows had already fallen over the asphalt, and any minute now the last of the evening joggers and dog-walkers would be making their way indoors, a regular procession of middle-aged and elderly neighbors whose names Eddie could never remember but whose routines he knew quite intimately.

“I need to take a year off to figure things out,” he said. “And I think it would be better for me to spend that year traveling and gaining work experience than hanging around here with nothing to do.”

In the end, Eddie believed it was his decisiveness, the seeming inevitability of his gap year, that had swayed his parents to go along with his plan. That, and the idea that he needed to take a step this drastic to remedy whatever pain was gnawing at him from the inside. Now, as he prepared to approach Juan Pedro, he tried to recapture that same balance between determination and vulnerability. Without seeming too aggressive, he needed to make it clear that nothing was going to stop him from watching two game birds peck and spur each other to death.

He caught Juan Pedro in his office between classes and took a seat in front of his desk. Juan Pedro sat on the opposite side next to a hibernating computer screen, thick rolls of fat expanding out between the arms of his swivel chair. His flushed cheeks rose and tightened as he smiled to acknowledge Eddie’s presence. Juan Pedro was the heaviest guy Eddie had met in Panama, but he knew he could be a pushover if pressed hard enough.
“Good to see you, my friend,” Juan Pedro said, heaving his giant elbows onto the desk. “How are your classes going today?”

“Fine, fine.” Eddie held eye contact as long as he could before his attention drifted to one of the framed photos on the wall. Juan Pedro’s father, Eddie’s boss, stood between a pair of teenage Panamanian boys in soccer uniforms. He was almost as fat as his son, but also taller, and each of the scholar athletes in the photo was dwarfed by comparison.

“I wasn’t sure if you knew,” Eddie said, “but I have a birthday coming up this Sunday. I’m turning twenty-one.”

The red cheeks above Juan Pedro’s smile swelled to the point of bursting “Congratulations,” he said. “That is a pretty big deal in your country, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Eddie said. “It’s like I’m a real adult now.”

“Fantastic. We should make a real celebration of it, then. I’ll talk to Daddy and see if we can get tickets to the Panama-Costa Rica match on Saturday. And then I’ll take you out to a club and we can all get hammered Panamanian style. How does that sound?”

“Actually, Justin and I already sort of have plans for Saturday.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, that’s kind of why I stopped by.” Eddie could tell that his pitch was going wrong. He was being too equivocal, too mealy-mouthed in his approach. He needed to step up his game. “We’re gonna go see a cockfight, and I wanted to know if you’d like to come.”

“A cockfight?” The smile vanished from Juan Pedro’s face as he tried to comprehend. “Why would you want to see something like that?”
Eddie laughed. “Well, it’s something you don’t see every day in Atherton,” he said. “Something out of the ordinary like that…it’s the kind of experience you never forget.”

“Yes, yes, I can understand that,” Juan Pedro said. “You are new to the country and you want to see something unique that you can tell stories about when you go home. That I can understand. All the same, I must advise against it. It is a very low-class type of person who goes to watch these fights in Panama. It wouldn’t be safe for you to set foot in there at all.”

Eddie had expected as much from Juan Pedro. One of the first Spanish words he had learned in the country was “cholo,” and he had heard Juan Pedro use it to refer to everyone from the guys selling flowers by the side of the road to the monolingual members of the school’s custodial staff. And while his concerns about safety may have been compelling at first, they weren’t going to work this time. In his snobbish dismissal of “low class” types, Eddie recognized the same fear that kept his parents from driving through bad neighborhoods back home.

“I don’t want you to do anything you’re not comfortable with,” he said. “I guess Justin and I will have to make do on our own.”

“You mean you’re going to go looking for a cockfight by yourselves?”

“We’ve pretty much made up our minds about it,” Eddie said. “I just thought I’d ask seeing as how you might be able to make it easier for us to find one.”

The chair creaked under his weight as Juan Pedro readjusted his posture. “I’d rather you not go looking for one at all,” he said. “But if you’re dead-set on the idea, then it’s my responsibility as your host to make sure you do it safely.”
“Well,” Eddie said. “We are pretty dead-set on it.”

Juan Pedro rubbed his thick hands together as the unsettling thoughts ran their way through his mind. Eddie knew he needed to be careful not to scare him off. He liked Juan Pedro, and the adventure he imagined seemed incomplete without having a native along for perspective.

“It would be great if we could all go together as a group. If you like, I can ask Beth and Sarah if they want to come along.”

“I don’t think so,” Juan Pedro said. “The type of place we’d have to go to see a cockfight…it wouldn’t be appropriate for women.”

“I understand,” Eddie said. Ordinarily he wasn’t one to take pleasure in the exclusion of others, but this time it felt oddly satisfying. “So you’ll take us to see one, then?”

“Give me some time to look into it. We need to be very cautious about this.”

“Right. Sounds good.”

That evening, Juan Pedro stopped by their apartment on his way home from the school. He was very tense as he spoke, leaning forward in his chair with his hands locked around a glass of dark rum, taking short, hurried breaths as he laid out the details.

“I found a fight going on Saturday night,” he said. “I know a guy who’s been to the place before. He does landscaping for us from time to time. He says the arena is in a bad part of town—really bad—and I don’t feel safe taking you there unless he comes with us.”

“Hell, bring anyone you like, man,” Justin said. “The more the merrier.”
Juan Pedro went on to explain the precautions they would need to take—what not to bring, what clothes not to wear—in order to avoid drawing attention to themselves at the arena. But Eddie was only half paying attention. He was too caught up in the realization that his gambit had paid off, and that soon he would be seeing a cockfight with his very own eyes. He already had a title picked out for his blog post—*A Walk on the Wild Side*.

Saturday night, they waited outside the apartment building for Juan Pedro to arrive. The grounds were walled-off all around except for an automated gate adjacent to the security booth. As with everything else in Panama, they found that the gate only worked right about half the time. The chain tended to slip from the gears, leaving many a car to squeeze through a space only a fraction as wide as the partition in the wall allowed. Considering how accustomed he had grown to these malfunctions, it took a leap of faith for Eddie to expect everything to go as planned tonight.

“Try not to get your hopes up about this,” Justin said. “I know it sounds exciting, but, to be honest, watching two roosters fight gets old pretty fast.”

“But I’m not really interested in the fight itself. I just want to be able to say that I’ve seen one.”

A grating metallic rattle spread across the driveway as the gate receded into the wall. Juan Pedro’s BMW SUV pulled around to the curb, and Eddie and Justin both climbed into the back before realizing the passenger’s seat was empty.

“Is your friend meeting us at the arena?” Eddie asked.
Juan Pedro turned around and stared back at them from the driver’s seat. His face was very grave, and as he puffed short flurries of air between his lips, the smell of spiced rum lingered on the currents of his breath.

“He’s not coming,” he said. “He’s afraid. He says the place is too dangerous.”

“I thought you said he’d been there before,” Justin said.

“He used to go there. But recently there’s been more fights and gang violence in the area, and he says he doesn’t want to risk it.”

“Well, shit.”

Eddie sank down against the seat cushion. It seemed that no matter where he travelled or what lengths he went to the timidity of others would always conspire to keep him boxed into the same familiar world.

“You’re not going to take us, are you?” he asked.

“We can’t drive up to a place like that in a BMW,” Juan Pedro said, turning away. “We’re talking about a cockfight arena in the slums. In the ghetto. It would be suicide.”

“Maybe if you were going alone,” Justin said. “With us there, you might be safer than you’d expect.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’re Americans. Bad things tend to happen to people who fuck with Americans.”

Juan Pedro lowered his eyes. “That’s true,” he said. “Even so, I’d love it if you guys would accept a night at the club instead. Drinks on me.”

“What do you say, birthday boy?” Justin asked. “It’s your night.”
Eddie sat up straight and watched Juan Pedro through the rearview mirror. He could still hear the same slow, labored breathing, and whatever recesses of cruelty would allow him to exploit his friend’s guilt, he drew on it now as he never had before.

“Do you know what my mom told me right before I left for Panama?” he asked. “We were standing outside the air terminal and she looked me square in the face and said, ‘If anything bad happens to you while you’re down there, it will kill me. It’ll just kill me.’”

Juan Pedro’s dark eyebrows furled across the reflecting glass. “Then why would you risk something bad happening?” he asked.

“I’ve been taken care of my whole life,” Eddie said. “At home, at school, at college. Everywhere I go there are people looking out for me, trying to protect me from a million nameless threats, and never once do they stop to ask me how I feel about being protected.” He pounded his fist against the seat cushion and glanced out the window at the iron security gate. “I’ve got this one year to try to be wild and free, and I’m not going to give that up on the off chance that something bad might happen to me.”

“I want you to have a good time here,” Juan Pedro said. “It’s just that…you don’t know what we’re getting into. The cholos who live in the slums…they’re like animals.”

Juan Pedro wiped the beading sweat from his forehead. As if sensing the right moment, Justin removed a flask from his pocket and passed it up to him. Juan Pedro hesitated before wrapping his lips around the spout and taking a sizeable pull.

“You know, Juan Pedro,” Justin said. “If we only stay for one fight, we wouldn’t have to be there very long. I mean, one fight can’t take more than a couple of minutes. We’ll be out of there in no time.”
Juan Pedro looked up briefly, as though imploring some higher power through the clear glass panel of the sunroof. His fingers closed over the key in the ignition.

“All right,” he said. “One fight and then we go.”

When it was over, Eddie walked out of the arena with a brisk and easy-going stride. He stared up at the night sky and laughed in giddy amazement. It was over. He had done it. The fight had lasted all of ninety seconds, but it was an experience he was sure he would never forget. He finally felt like a real world traveller now. He wanted to find some cheap bar and drink rum and smoke a cigar and let the smoke drift up over his face like in an old movie. Now he had an even better title for his blog—Laughing in the Face of Death.

Justin strolled up behind him with a fresh cigarette tucked into the corner of his mouth. He slid the lighter into his pocket and smacked Eddie on the back. “So what did you think, bud?” he asked. “Was it everything you hoped it would be?”

“I’m happy I got to see something like this,” Eddie said. “I hope that doesn’t make me sound like a terrible person.”

“Not at all, man. We were just watching. It’s not like we were out there forcing the birds to kill each other.”

“I was surprised to see the metal spurs attached to their feet. Wasn’t expecting that.”

“Most roosters nowadays don’t have spurs worth a damn. The ones my grandpa used to raise would have been useless in the ring.”

“I didn’t know you came from a farm family.”
Justin laughed. “I’ve changed a lot since I was a kid,” he said. “Seeing the world will do that to you.”

The turnstile creaked in rotation as Juan Pedro came to join them outside the gate. He was moving as fast as Eddie had ever seen him move, his heavy panting working in counterpoint with the swish-swish of his thighs. He had been a nervous wreck all through the fight, and now, with the mission accomplished, Eddie resented having him there to spoil the mood.

“Come on,” Juan Pedro said. “Let’s get out of here before it’s too late.”

The BMW was in the dirt lot where they left it, just as Justin had assured Juan Pedro it would be. Eddie climbed into the backseat, again leaving Juan Pedro alone in the front. He reached under the floor mat to retrieve his wallet and phone. “Everything looks good,” he said. “No thieves or murderers in here.”

They set off from the arena with the engine revving to accommodate the sudden acceleration. Between them and the highway was a stretch of broken sidewalks and clapboard tenements painted in bright pastels of yellow, blue, and red. Juan Pedro gripped the wheel with both hands. At each intersection he slowed to a transient crawl, but did not stop completely.

“We weren’t safe in that place,” he said. “Did you see the way those cholos were staring at us? They were getting ready to start something.”

Eddie turned to the window and rolled his eyes. A fairly small crowd had occupied the circle of bleachers surrounding the ring, cholos who appeared no different from the men Juan Pedro’s father paid to change light bulbs and empty trash bins around the school. Eddie had noticed them staring at him during the fight, but he hadn’t felt
threatened exactly. If anything, it just made him uncomfortable, as if he had crashed a party that wasn’t meant for him.

“You know, Juan Pedro,” he said. “I’m sure if you sat down and talked to those people, you’d find that they really aren’t that bad. We were probably in a lot less danger than you think.”

Juan Pedro glanced back at him through the rearview. “This city is a dangerous place, man,” he said. “You don’t even know. When I was seventeen I had a gun held to my head. It’s true. I’ll tell you about it sometime.”

Eddie smiled, amused by the notion that Juan Pedro had his own crazy story that he had been keeping from them all this time. “Why not now?”

“Yeah, tell us,” Justin said.

They turned onto the ramp of the elevated highway leading out from the slums. In the slender space of that city, it wouldn’t take more than ten minutes for them to get home.

“Daddy had just bought me a car for my birthday,” Juan Pedro said. “It was a Friday afternoon and I was stuck at a traffic light off the Via Transistmica. The cholo came up to the side window and smiled at me. He was holding a bouquet of roses. I started to say no, thanks, I didn’t want to buy one, but then he opened the door and slipped inside. That’s when he pulled out the gun. He was hiding it between the stems of the flowers. It was a real pistol, too, all silver and shiny along the side of the barrel. I don’t know where he could have gotten it, he was such a skinny little guy who didn’t even have a real pair of shoes, just some old gray sandals with mud and grime sticking
between his toes. He raised the gun at me and pointed it straight at my forehead. And then the light turned green and he just said, ‘Drive.’ And that’s what I did.

“He made me drive around all afternoon taking out cash from different ATM machines. When I had taken out all the money I could from one ATM, he made me drive to another one and take out more. All the time he kept telling me derecha or izquierda when he wanted me to turn, but beyond that he didn’t say a thing. He just kept holding the pistol against me and jabbing it into my rib every now and then. I tell you, before that day, I used to like going out and shooting guns. It was a fun time. But since then, anytime I even see a gun, no matter how small, I get a heavy falling feeling and have to stand still just to catch my breath.

“Finally, when he had all the money I could get for him, he made me drive out to a neighborhood I had never been to before, a place in the ghetto not far from where we were tonight. I started thinking, this is it, this is how I’m going to die. He told me to stop in front of this little red house and shut off the engine. So I pulled over and closed my eyes and waited to be shot. But the shot never came. I opened my eyes and took a good look at the house.

“And you know what? It was just an ordinary house! There were little kids playing in the yard and old people drinking beer on the porch. The son of a bitch actually had me drive him home, like I was his fucking chauffeur! I looked at the cholo again and he was smiling at me. ‘Gracias, chico,’ he said. ‘Hasta luego.’” That’s what he said to me—see you later.

“I drove away as fast as I could, but before I was halfway home I had to pull over. I fell across both seats and cried and cried until I couldn’t hardly breathe anymore. I tell
you, I was as big then as I am now, but after what happened it was like I was a little baby again. The cholo had left me feeling like the lowest kind of bitch, and I didn’t know how I was going to go on.”

Feeling like a pompous ass, Eddie leaned forward and touched Juan Pedro’s shoulder. “I’m sorry that happened to you, man,” he said. “I can understand why going through something like that would leave you shaken up.”

“I’m not finished,” Juan Pedro said. He turned off onto the Punta Paitilla exit, setting them on course to rejoin the steel and electric skyline up ahead. “When Daddy got home, he found me curled up on the couch and I told him everything that happened. He started breathing really loud and told me not to worry. ‘We’re going to get him,’ he said. ‘We’ll make him pay.’

“And we did make him pay, let me tell you. That night we went to the police and I told them the whole story with Daddy and his lawyer sitting next to me. Daddy pulled out a fistful of money and told the police captain to do what he needed to do. The next thing I knew, the police were gearing up for a raid. They knew exactly where to find the house because a lot of them had grown up in the same neighborhood and some were living there still. They asked Daddy and me to come along and even gave us a pair of bulletproof vests to wear over our clothes.”

Eddie remembered Juan Pedro’s father sitting on his balcony after dinner smoking a thin cigar, and he tried to imagine the same man suiting up for a police raid, strapping a Kevlar vest across his massive chest.

“When the cholo was in custody, the captain came by our place to speak with Daddy in private. Daddy took him out on the balcony and gave him a glass of Scotch. I
don’t know what they talked about or how much Daddy had to pay to see justice done. But whatever the case, the next day the guards surprised the cholo in his cell and made sure he’d never carjack anybody again. I went to see him in the hospital a week later. I thought it would help me to get over what happened. And it did, in a way. Seeing him laid out in the bed with tubes coming from his throat and his arms and legs all wrapped in plaster. I’m not sure if he could hear me, but I said to him, ‘Fuck with me again, cholo, and next time you’ll get worse.’ And that’s the last I saw of him.”

“Fucker got what he deserved,” Justin said.

Eddie emerged from the silence and stared at his roommate dumbstruck. “Do you really think that?” he asked.

Justin took another pull from his flask. “Think what?”

“That it was right for the police to cripple the guy? That he got what he deserved?”

“For sure,” Justin said. “If you’re gonna make it in this world, you gotta be ready to protect what’s yours. That’s why I never go anywhere without insurance.”

Justin pulled something from his back pocket. Eddie couldn’t see it clearly, not until he unfolded the blade and the steel caught the gleam of the passing headlights. Justin held the handle in his fist, his smile growing wider the longer Eddie remained unspeaking.

“You think you could use this thing if it came down to it?”

He uncurled his fingers so that the blade lay flat against his palm.

Eddie looked away. “No,” he said. “I don’t think I could.”

“You sure?”
“Yeah,” Eddie said. “I don’t want it.”

Justin’s smile faded. He closed the knife and stuck it back into his pocket.

“Whatever, man,” he said. “It’s your birthday.”

They pulled up to the front gate and Juan Pedro signaled for the security guard to let them inside. But no sooner had the gears begun to turn than the chain went lax and the gate came to a halt on the track. Juan Pedro waved at the guard a second time, gritting his teeth in impatience.

“What’s the problem here?” he asked.

“The gate broke down,” Justin said. “Usually doesn’t cut out so fast.”

“You mean this happens all the time?”

“More or less.”

Juan Pedro’s huge shoulders moved slowly up and down. “That is unacceptable,” he said. “Daddy pays too much for your apartment for the gate not to work.”

Before Eddie could process what was happening, Juan Pedro was outside on the curb, banging his hand against the security booth window. The door swung open and a middle-aged cholo in green khaki stepped out onto the sidewalk, his thin legs struggling to hold himself after hours of sitting. Juan Pedro pointed to the gate and barked out an order in Spanish. The guard nodded sullenly and looped one arm through the bars. At first glance the arm appeared to end at his wrist, but then Eddie noticed the shine of two steel prongs joined at the stump.

“It’s all right, Juan Pedro,” Eddie said. “The gate doesn’t matter. We can just walk around to the other side.”
“It does matter,” Juan Pedro said. “Whether you like it or not, the gate is needed to keep you safe. It is here for you.”

The guard rolled the gate open, his head bowed low beneath the pointed finials. Once Eddie and Justin were safely beyond the wall, Juan Pedro ordered him to close the gate behind them. Then he climbed back into the BMW and drove away down the street, leaving the guard to shuffle back into the booth and resume his normal duties.

Eddie waited outside the building while Justin finished smoking a cigarette. His attention was still drawn to the booth. “It’s funny,” he said. “All this time, I never realized the guard was missing a hand.”

“Forget about it,” Justin said. “He probably fought for Noriega or some shit.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right. It’s just…I don’t know.”

Justin flicked the cigarette butt onto the driveway. “Let’s go up and call a cab,” he said. “The night’s still young. There are drinks out there calling our names.”

“You go ahead,” Eddie said. “I’m going to wait out here for a bit.”

“What for?”

Eddie pulled his phone out and checked the time. “I’m expecting a call from my parents,” he said. “They always call right at midnight on my birthday.”

“That’s cute,” Justin said. “All right, see you up there.”

Eddie waited until Justin was in the elevator before he put the phone away. He sat down on the curb with his legs spread out over the asphalt, looking ahead at the high enclosing wall with coils of razor wire snaking across the perimeter of the property. He picked the cigarette butt off the ground and tried to inhale. But he started coughing after one drag and decided that it, too, wasn’t for him. With his birthday almost here, there was
nothing for him to do but sit alone and think about the year to come, and all the twenty-one years that had safely passed him by, while Juan Pedro’s words echoed in his thoughts—*the gate is needed...it is here for you*—as if all those bars and all that metal had been a gift to him all along.
CHAPTER 7

YEAR OF THE SNAKE

The new year was two days away and already there was smoke in the streets of Hsinchu, families torching stacks of fake money in iron barrels outside their homes, lighting sticks of musky incense on gold-painted pillars in front of the city temples, filling the night sky with the rotten egg stench of fireworks that seemed to be more sulfur than sparkle. And as he stomped along the half-mile stretch of sidewalk between his school and the Sogo department store, Spencer was surprised by how beautiful it all seemed to him. Wilted flakes of ash descended on the road in short flurries, clinging to the chest and shoulders of his winter coat, but Spencer didn’t bother brushing them away. He had changed a lot in the past year. When he first came to Taiwan, before he started seeing Claire, Hsinchu had seemed like hell on Earth, and never more so than during Chinese New Year.

Crossing an intersection in front of some idling scooters, Spencer felt his phone buzzing. He was running late for their dinner date, and he figured Claire was texting to see if he was on his way. The wind was picking up and Spencer ducked into an alleyway to escape the chill. But as he leaned against the brick wall and read the words on the screen, his face started to feel suddenly warm.

What up, Spence? Long time no talk. Teaching in Jhubei now, staying overnight at a motel in Hsinchu. Meet up for a drink later? If not, it’s cool, I understand it’s short notice.
Spencer read Troy’s message twice over before lowering the phone. While he could never bring himself to unfriend his old coworkers from Korea, he hadn’t paid attention to their Facebook updates in months. He had no idea that Troy had moved to Taiwan, much less that he was living right up the highway in Jhubei. The last time they had seen each other was the night of his going away party in Seoul. They had both gotten sloppy drunk on beer and whiskey and soju. Spencer had been wearing those damn smooth-soled leather Oxfords, and he kept slipping on the stairs of the Itaewon subway station, landing flat on his ass and rolling with laughter as Troy, who was also cracking up, kept trying to pull him to his feet. It was four days before the bruises on his thighs stopped stinging.

Spencer stared out at the neon lettering of shop marquees, wishing he still carried cigarettes on his person. He had always gotten along well with Troy, and as drinking buddies they had shared plenty of good times in the expat bars of Seoul. But that friendship and that life seemed so far removed from where he was now that no amount of mental gymnastics could reconcile them to himself. No matter what Claire and her Taoist parents chose to believe, he knew the yin and yang could never sit comfortably in his heart. One slip-up, one night of weakness, was all it would take for fragile light to be eclipsed by the dark.

He stood with his thumbs hovering over the screen, trying to think of a polite way to leave Troy hanging. But there was too much noise to concentrate. The drone of passing scooters blended with the low screech of the wind, and far beyond the stereo pop music of the shopping district, the acolytes of the Cheng Huang temple were sounding the gong.
Claire was waiting for him when he stepped off the escalator at the top floor of the building. After a long workday, they often met for dinner at the Sogo food court. It was a place where Spencer could get a burger combo and Claire could have noodle soup, or vice versa. They bought their meals at separate counters and carried their trays to a square white table at the back. Spencer leaned over and kissed Claire’s cheek. She rubbed his leg under the table.

“I talked to mom on my lunch break,” Claire said. “She’s excited to see us for New Year’s Eve.”

“I’m glad,” Spencer said. “It was nice of her to invite me, seeing as how I’m not even a member of the family.”

“We’ve been dating for a while now. She says you’re practically family.”

Again Claire rubbed his pant leg. Spencer folded his hand over hers.

“Your mom’s a sweetheart,” he said. “I just wish your dad felt the same way about me.”

“What do you mean?”

Spencer took his hand away and sucked watery Coke through a straw.

“Just a feeling I get from him,” he said. “Like he’s unhappy every time he sees me.”

“He doesn’t mean to come off like that,” Claire said. “He’s been a little depressed ever since his knee surgery. He doesn’t like to feel that he’s getting old.”

“I just keep thinking about how he introduced me to his friends at the temple. How he kept calling me Spencer lǎo shī. It’s the Chinese term for ‘teacher,’ isn’t it?”

“So? What’s wrong with that?”
“Spencer the teacher. As opposed to your brother the engineer.”

Claire set her chopsticks on the edge of the tray and glared at him, brows pinched together above the flat upper rim of her eyes. It was a look she seldom gave him, one that reminded him too much of how the native teachers at school looked when they scolded misbehaving students.

“When did you get so insecure all of a sudden?” she asked.

Spencer wiped his lips with a paper napkin and looked away. “I don’t know,” he said. “Guess I’m just tired from work.”

“Well, you shouldn’t worry about my dad,” Claire said, returning to her ramen. “He likes that you’re a teacher. He thinks you’re very responsible.”

“Responsible? Really?”

“He made a point of telling me so,” she said. “He likes that you don’t go out to bars and get drunk like so many other foreign teachers. When we first started dating, he worried you were planning to mess around here for a couple of years before moving back to America. But when I told him you didn’t drink or go out to bars, he changed his mind about it.”

“That’s good,” Spencer said. He glanced down at the bowl of lukewarm curry below him. “I guess your dad is pretty old school Taiwanese when it comes to drinking.”

Claire finished chewing and nodded. “He doesn’t have respect for drunk people,” she said. “Once, when my brother was in high school, dad found out he was skipping cram school to hang out with his friends at night. So he left mom and me alone and went out to track him down. He found him and his friends hanging out on the steps of a stone bridge over the canal, empty beer cans littered all around them. Steven was drunk and
throwing up over the side of the bridge. Dad didn’t say anything, he just grabbed
Steven’s arm and dragged him home. The next morning, all of Steven’s video games and
the second TV were gone. Dad had given them away to our neighbor’s children, who
were too poor to have games of their own.”

Spencer’s face started to feel warm again, and not because of the curry. “Strange,”
he said. “I wouldn’t have figured Steven for a troublemaker.”

Claire shook her head and laughed in a way that led Spencer to imagine a whole
trove of family scandals involving her brother, more stories of his rebellious youth that
could be laughed about now because they were far behind him.

“Well,” she said. “He hasn’t always been an engineer.”

Spencer smiled weakly, stirring the brown mass of sauce and rice in his bowl. And
I haven’t always been responsible, was what he wanted to say to her, what he had been
trying to find the words to say since they first started going out. There were times when
the line between a changed man and a fraud seemed so blurry, he didn’t know if he was
protecting himself or her by keeping his past a secret. But whatever inner strength had
helped him to stay sober this long, he was certain he never would have found it on his
own. He touched her hand again.

“Oh my way here, I got a message from an old friend from Korea,” he said. “He’s
living in this area now, and he wanted to know if I could hang out with him tonight.”

Claire’s face lit up in surprise, her lips expanding as if she were about to laugh
again. “You should go,” she said. “You never hang out with friends of your own.”

Spencer kept his hand in place, but leaned away from her. “Is that what you
think?”
“I’m just saying, you never go out with your coworkers, and it’s been a long time since you’ve seen any of your friends from America.” Claire smiled. “It might be good for you to see an old friend. That’s a big part of the New Year’s holiday.”

“I thought you liked the fact that I don’t go out to bars with other foreigners.”

“My father likes it,” she said. “But I worry that you’ve become too isolated living here.”

Spencer pushed away his tray. For months he had been looking forward to the New Year’s break, the one long holiday in a nation of workaholics who had only recently adopted the five-day workweek. Seven days without classes had seemed like heaven to him, but now that they were here, he wondered what he was supposed to do with all this free time.

“What about you? If I go hang out with him, what will you do tonight?”

“Mom and dad asked me to go to the temple with them,” Claire said. She wiped the dry corners of her mouth and folded the napkin into her bowl. “You know you’re welcome to come, if you don’t feel like seeing your friend.”

“The temple.”

Spencer sucked the last ounce of soda from his cup, already dreading the thought of another awkward night among the elderly devout. He could see it clear as day—Claire’s mother fussing over the offerings to the altar, her father limping through the aisles with his cane, the endless procession of strangers bowing and chanting. And through it all he would remain “Spencer lǎo shī,” the silent, smiling foreigner surrounded by words and rituals he would never fully understand. He checked the time on his phone.
“Maybe I’ll see what Troy is doing,” he said. “Been a long time since I’ve seen him.”

He came to Korea when he was twenty-two, a four-year graduate of the Cal State system who had stayed out of trouble by working a series of demanding part-time jobs and only drinking beer at parties. Overnight he found himself on the other side of the world, with money to spare, surrounded by ten million socially mobile Koreans and thousands of young westerners who wore their dark slacks and collared shirts like service uniforms that bestowed some special immunity upon them. In the beginning, he and Troy would go out after work and hit up the cocktail vendors in Hongdae, walk the streets sucking Tequila Sunrise out of sixteen-ounce Ziploc bags. Then they would get on the train, already buzzing, and debate which dark alley of Itaewon would get them sufficiently drunk for the lowest price. It was a freedom that Spencer had never known, an electrifying awareness that no matter where they ended up they were bound to find others who were after the very same thing.

One night, while scouting the office girls at a club in Gangnam, Spencer looked across the blue-lit dance floor and noticed the assistant manager of his school sitting alone at a booth. He wasn’t sure it was him at first. Brody was known around the office for being a lot of things—half-Korean, half-American, notoriously easy grader, second in command to the owner of the school. But Spencer had never thought to add “club guy” to the list.

“Let’s go over and say hi,” Troy said, nearly spilling his Cass down his shirt.
Brody stood to shake their hands as they approached him. “Well, well, well,” he said. “Look how the universe provides. Here I was wondering how I was going to piss away the night, and the cosmos sends two friendly faces my way. Let’s order some drinks to kick things off.”

Before that night, Spencer had never drunk Scotch neat, let alone finished a third of a bottle in one sitting. His vision grew spotty toward the end, but he seemed to see himself more clearly than he had since before moving to Asia. All the burdens of his former life had been lifted. It no longer mattered who his parents were or how he had been raised, only that he was an American with a college degree in a country where status was everything and only surface-deep. In Seoul, he could be whoever he wanted to be. Among the ranks of western expats, he could finally be free.

Brody upturned the bottle of Johnnie Walker and shook the last drops into his glass. “Not one word about this in front of the students,” he said. “Seriously, you don’t know how bad things can get when the little shits start gossiping in the halls. If you want to stay out of trouble around here, you’ve got to learn to live with two different faces. Ludacris says he wants a lady in the street and a freak in the bed, right? Well, as teachers, you can be a drunk in the street only as long as you’re a saint in your class.”

Spencer laughed and clinked his empty glass against Brody’s. “No problem,” he said.

He texted Troy directions to a western-style pub across from Sogo and said he would meet him there at a quarter to ten. He arrived early to scope out the place. As he had hoped, the pub, which was several blocks from the main row of bars across the canal, was
practically deserted. A few balls lay scattered across the green felt of the pool table while
the well-dressed staff stood watching TV behind the mahogany bar, as idle and decorous
as the unopened bottles of whiskey lining the shelves above them.

“Ni Hao,” he said to the skinny bartender with ice-blond bangs. “Club soda with lime.”

The bartender smiled in embarrassment. “Sorry. Say again, please.”

“Club soda. With a piece of lime.”

“Canadian Club and soda?”


The bartender nodded and filled a cylindrical glass with ice. Spencer leaned over
the bar and watched him, making sure he didn’t add a shot of liquor out of habit. Then he
raised the glass to his lips, tasted it, and slid the money across the counter.

“I’ll be back for another drink later on,” he said. “I want you to make it just like
this one. Soda and lime, no alcohol.”

The bartender stuck the pink bills into the register. “No party tonight, I
understand,” he said, and returned to watching the American spoof comedy with Chinese
subtitles playing on the corner TV.

Spencer carried his glass to the high table across from the bar and sat with his
arms folded in front of him. He took the straw in his fingers and stirred the ice around. He
pushed the wedge of lime to the bottom and stabbed the juicy pulp into mush. He sipped
from the rim and repeated the process. By the time Troy arrived, only pith and peel
remained.
“Jesus,” Troy said, crossing over to Spencer’s side of the table. “It’s true. You’re still among the living. Let me get a good look at you, sir.”

Troy had put on weight since Seoul. He had always been stocky, but now, when he smiled, his face pooched out, and Spencer was reminded of the iconic obese Buddha, pendulous earlobes hanging down by his second chin, breasts supported by the dome of his gut. Troy wasn’t there yet by any means, but the past year had definitely taken its toll.

“You’re leaner than I remembered,” Troy said. “Been working out?”

Spencer shrugged. “Here and there. Hiking mostly.”

“Can’t say I like the new haircut. Is that how they all wear it down here?”

Spencer brushed his fingers over the half-inch of brown stubble covering his scalp. “Started buzzing it myself at home,” he said. “Good way to save money.”

Troy shook his head. “Jesus,” he said. “You look like a monk!” He turned to the bar and ordered. His fingers beat a rhythm on the wood as the bartender prepared his drinks. “Cheap red wine and a sake bomb,” he said, moving the glasses to the table in shifts. “Don’t ask me how I discovered it, but it makes for one hell of a terrific pairing.”

Spencer watched him drop the sake shot into the pint glass of lager and gulp down the mixture in one straight go. Troy gasped and wiped the foam from his lips. “With the New Year’s holiday, I thought there’d be a lot more going on tonight,” he said. “But it’s the same story everywhere I go, ever since I came to this goddamn country. I mean, look at this place, mate. Fucking ghost town.”

“New Year’s is mostly a family holiday for the Taiwanese,” Spencer said, eyeing his club soda. “Last year it was a bigger deal because it was the year of the dragon. That means a lot to them. Tradition says that a baby boy born in the year of the dragon will
grow up to be a great leader, a big success. You should have been here in the summer.
Half the women in Hsinchu were sporting baby bumps.”

“Superstitious bullshit,” Troy said. “I tell you, Spence, it’s been a royal letdown ever since I arrived. I don’t know if I’ll ever adjust.” As he settled into his wine, Troy unloaded the disappointing details of how he wound up teaching in Jhubei. “You left Seoul at the exact right time,” he said. “Wasn’t two months later that Brody took a job with a school in Apgujeong and a new assistant manager came in to supervise. An Asian Mormon, stiff and sober as the Pope. None of us could stand the prick. Half the experienced teachers left before the end of summer. As for me, I tried to stay and make peace with the new situation, but by Christmas I was pulling my hair out in clumps.”

Spencer listened with silent envy as Troy recounted his travels since leaving Korea, three weeks bumming around Kyoto and Tokyo, sleeping on the sofas of former coworkers who Spencer had all but forgotten. At the start of the new year—“the real new year,” as Troy put it—he answered a job listing for a school in Jhubei, not realizing that Taiwan was just about the most boring corner of the continent.

“My first week I asked the manager if he knew any good places to go to hear live music. He looked at me like he didn’t know what I was talking about. I mean, I wasn’t expecting anything on par with the jazz clubs in Cheongdam, but to find nothing at all was a real shock to the system.” He shook his head morosely and poured more wine down his pulsating throat. “Whole reason I came to Hsinchu was to see how it compared. Maybe drop off a résumé with a competing cram school. But from the look of it, I’d say you all have got even less to offer a foreigner in need than the assholes in Jhubei.”
Spencer set his finger on the edge of his glass and spun it slowly around on the tabletop. He wasn’t going to get defensive on behalf of Hsinchu, not when everything Troy was saying was basically true.

“The Taiwanese try to be modern in their own way,” he said. “A lot of them are obsessed with progress, in fact. Even with what happened in Fukushima, they’re still building new nuclear plants left and right. My girlfriend’s brother is helping to design one of them.”

“It’s true, I suppose there are westerners in Asia who are doing a lot worse than us,” Troy said, replacing the burned-out cigarette in his hand with a fresh one. “But they’re mostly in the Peace Corps, doling out rice and antibiotics to Indonesian children.”

Spencer cleared his throat. “There are things to do if you’re willing to go look,” he said. “You might just have to open your mind to new ways of living.”

“Oh, really?” Troy turned up the corner of his mouth. “So what would you have done tonight if I hadn’t messaged you?”

Spencer’s glass had turned foggy from the ice. He wrapped his lips around the straw and sucked down the last bitter mouthful of soda. It brought him neither joy nor refreshment, only a renewed thirst for something different and much stronger.

“I would have gone to the Cheng Huang temple with my girlfriend and her parents.”

Troy banged his palm against the table and roared. “The Cheng Huang temple? Jesus!” He threw back the remainder of his drink and leaned over the table with his head bent forward. Even in the dim light of the pub, his face seemed excessively red for just a single glass of wine. “I’ve missed hanging out like this, Spence,” he said. “It’s true you
never realize how good you have it in a place until you’ve landed somewhere worse. Even if my boss was paying me a decent wage, I’d have no free time to spend it. Most nights after work I’m so tired I sit alone in my room eating takeout noodles, drinking beer, and watching American TV online.”

“It was hard for me too at first,” Spencer said. “But it does get better. You’ll see. You can make a home anywhere if you make an effort to adapt.”

Spencer knew he was trying to convince himself as much as Troy. He eyed the curls of smoke rising up from his cigarette, imagined the same soothing smoke filling his lungs for the first time in months.

“I don’t think anything will get better for me as long as I’m here,” Troy said. “Seoul, Tokyo, Hong Kong—those are proper cities for teaching abroad. Good salaries, good bars, good massage parlors if you’re into that sort of thing. There’s incentive for westerners to stay and teach in those places. But out here, in dirty little Hsinchu and humdrum Jhubei, you can see everything there is to see in a weekend. And only one week of paid vacation a year. It’s enough to drive you mental.”

“I don’t know,” Spencer said. “There’s nothing wrong with a simple life. There’s honor in teaching.”

“See, you’ve been hanging around the Chinese too long,” Troy said, staring into the empty bowl of his glass. “No one ever got into this life because of the honor.” He slid off his stool and turned halfway to the bar. “Listen to me, going on like a regular downer. Let me get the next round. What’re you drinking?”

Spencer rattled the glass of ice in his hand. As he considered his answer, he pictured Claire’s parents making the rounds of devotions in the dusty, cramped space of
the temple, her mother dropping coins in small clay bowls, her father mouthing prayers to some such spirit or deity. If they had it their way, he would live out the rest of his mundane life on this island, scribbling verb forms on dry erase boards for Taiwanese ten year olds to memorize, propped up in front of his class in starched shirts and cheap slacks, as stiff and lifeless as the masked straw men enshrined inside the temple.

“Scotch neat,” he said. “Then let’s go hit up someplace else. There are better bars across town, over by the canal.”

It was the hangovers that had ruined him in Seoul, debilitating, day-long ordeals that left him zombie-walking the streets in dark sunglasses, gorging on fried foods and coffee. For three years he had balanced the rigors of his workweek with semi-nightly trips to Itaewon, burning the candle on both ends and saving Sundays for laundry and recuperation. He developed a routine and made it work for him as well as he could, as well as any of the five million other men in the city who spent all day at work and then lingered in bars because they couldn’t stand to go home.

The spree came to an end on a Tuesday morning following a three-day weekend, when Spencer staggered into his classroom sick as death and tried to carry on with the lesson as usual. Within the first ten minutes, he had to excuse himself to use the restroom. When he returned, his face was flush and he was chewing an entire handful of breath mints. His students appeared oblivious about his condition. But that afternoon, Brody called him into his office.

“ Heard you were feeling under the weather this morning, Spence,” Brody said, closing the door behind him. “Something wrong with your stomach?”
Spencer fidgeted in his seat. Atop Brody’s desk, his white earplugs were curled up in a bundle, but the iPod was playing the same Kanye West track he had been listening to before Spencer arrived.

“Just a touch of the flu. Nothing contagious, I think.”

Brody relinquished his desk chair and opted for the plain gray folding chair by the wall. “I’m not worried about the flu going around,” he said. “I’m worried about gossip.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Brody shook his head. “We talked about this a long time ago,” he said. “Doesn’t matter what we do when we’re off the clock, so long as we pull ourselves together by the time class starts.” He crossed one leg over his knee, a casual gesture that didn’t do much to lessen the severity of his expression. “If you’re having trouble managing that, then maybe you should take a break for a little while.”

“We just had a holiday.”

“Dude. You know that’s not what I mean.”

Spencer took a deep breath, and as his pulse began to race, he overcompensated by trying to sound as clear-headed and calm as possible. “Am I fired?”

“We’re going to call it an indefinite sabbatical,” Brody said. “We’ll get Troy to cover your classes for the rest of the week, parcel them out to the other teachers starting Monday.”

“When can I come back?”

“You won’t get a return date. Not now, not ever. You’ll be paid at the end of the week for the classes you taught up to this morning. I’ll try to work in a severance bonus,
enough to see you through another month or so. Beyond that, you’ll have to figure out your own plans.”

“Please,” Spencer said, eyes stinging. “Couldn’t you look the other way just this once? It won’t happen again.”

Brody laced his fingers together under his chin. His gestures were becoming more and more rehearsed, as though part of a repertoire he had developed for these kinds of situations. “I’ve got to think about what’s best for the school,” he said. “If word got out to the parents about this, it could ruin us. In my time here, I’ve seen entire class rolls vanish because the teacher had developed a reputation as a mean grader. Can you imagine what the parents would do if they found out a member of our staff was teaching classes hungover?”

“But I’m not—I mean, I didn’t have any problems with the lesson.”

Brody scowled. “One of the boys heard you in the bathroom. He said it sounded like you were losing a lung in there.”

Spencer lowered his head and felt the first slow tears sliding down the ridge of his nose. “You were the one who got me started on this,” he said. “I never used to drink hard liquor before I moved here. I screwed up, and I know it. But I’m not the only one.”

“Of course you’re not, Spence,” Brody said, handing him a tissue from the box on his desk. “No one ever said you were. That’s not the issue here.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You’re not being let go because you taught a class hungover. I’ve taught plenty of classes hungover. Hell, go into any office building in Gangnam and you’ll find a hundred guys doing their jobs with secret hangovers. That’s not the issue. The issue is
that you gave yourself away—you got sloppy and let the curtain fall down on you. That’s what we call a loss of face. Think of yourself as a rapper who fucked up and lost his street cred. And because you let it happen, there’s got to be consequences. Hence the sabbatical.”

Spencer opened his mouth slowly. “I’m a rapper who lost street cred?”

“Or however you want to put it. Call it what you will, the repercussions are all the same.” Brody stood up and adjusted his tie so that the silver clip was evenly situated between the two middle buttons of his shirt. He moved the tissue box to the edge of the desk. “Take as long as you need to pull yourself together,” he said. “Just make sure you don’t look upset as you’re leaving the building.”

For the rest of that week he confined himself to his apartment, boiling instant ramen and browsing EFL websites for new job listings. By the time Troy called to see where he had been, he was able to invent a sufficient cover to account for his absence from work—that he had decided it was time for a change and accepted a position at a school in Taiwan. He spent his final Saturday night on the peninsula getting drunk with Troy and some of his other former coworkers, and with each clear glass of soju he knocked back, and with each moment he sat sweating over the restaurant’s sizzling communal grill, he could feel the curtain of his life growing thinner and more tattered, and he knew he couldn’t keep going like this much longer.

He trundled into the apartment sometime after noon. He ducked into the bathroom and turned the hot water knob in the shower to full blast. Then he sat down on the edge of the tub and looked down at his one remaining shoe. The other one was gone when he awoke,
lost somewhere in the course of the night. He tore the filthy sock off his foot and flung it into the hamper. But now he felt even more pathetic, dressed like an office worker from ankle to neck, but with one bare foot. As steam filled the room, the pressure dissipated like soda bubbles under his skull. He closed his eyes and breathed in the heat. He didn’t open them again until Claire came through the door.

“I called three times,” she said, sounding more concerned than irritated, if only slightly.

Spencer clutched his sides and leaned forward. Just when he thought the nausea couldn’t get any worse, his stomach found new contortionist positions to try out. “I woke up just a little while ago,” he said. “Didn’t see your calls until it was too late.”

Claire stepped barefoot onto the bathroom tiles. Under the short cuffs of her running bottoms, the skin of her thighs was creamy and tan. Spencer wanted to reach out and hold her, but he was too sick to focus on anything but his own aches.

“Where were you?” she asked. “Why didn’t you come home?”

Spencer shook his head. Even that small movement was painful. “I stayed the night in my friend’s motel room,” he said. “I drank a lot with him. So much that I blacked out.”

He expected to see her eyebrows furl into an angry glare, but instead she laughed.

“That’s new,” she said. “How did it happen?”

“It’s been a long time since I’d had a drink,” he said. “I thought I could control it.”

“Were you drinking to relax or to get drunk?”

“I don’t know. I think I was drinking to mourn.”
Claire made a face like she needed a translator to understand him. She pulled a jar of aspirin from the cabinet, set it on the sink, and handed Spencer a bath towel. “I thought seeing your friend would improve your mood,” she said. “I wasn’t expecting this.”

“I’ll be fine,” Spencer said, breathing slowly. “What time is dinner at your parents?”

“Mom said to come over around four. Will you be okay by then?”

“Yeah. I just need to get cleaned up. Maybe drink some coffee.”

Once Claire had shut the door behind her, Spencer slid off the edge of the bathtub. He got down on his knees and hugged the rim of the toilet bowl. As steam drifted down onto his back, the sound of the shower drowned out the convulsions of his throat.

Claire’s parents’ home reeked of herbs and seasonings—ginger, five-spice, coriander, and others. Spencer sat on the side of a long dining table packed from corner to corner with platters of meat and vegetables. He sipped water cautiously and breathed through his mouth between sips. Nearly the whole family had come out for New Year’s Eve dinner, uncles and cousins and one ancient great-aunt, all of them chatting loudly and excitedly in Chinese, making Spencer’s headache all the more excruciating. Claire’s brother Steven sat on the opposite side of the table with his wife, a former Tainan office girl who was nine years younger than him and eight months pregnant. With one hand Steven held her leg under the table, and with the other he chugged Coke from a miniature plastic bottle.

“How’s the teaching going, Spencer?” he asked. “Taiwanese students giving you headaches already?”
Spencer ceased rubbing his temples and tried to be sociable. “It’s going fine,” he said. But just then his stomach rumbled loudly, so much so that Steven’s wife started snickering.

“Spencer’s feeling a little fluish today,” Claire said, rubbing his back. “You know how kids are, always passing germs around at school.”

Her father sat at the head of the table, one of several western customs that, according to Claire, he had brought into the house over the years. Yet for all the tolerance and respect he showed the West, he had always seemed like one of the more conservative and traditional men Spencer had met since coming to Taiwan. Back when he was still jogging in the mountains every morning, Spencer used to pass him on the way to the hiking trail. Before the knee surgery, before the cane, the old man was at the base of the hill each day at sunrise, practicing tai chi, moving his slender arms through the air with composed grace and agility. Now, with everyone seated at the table, he quieted the room with a single look, then rose with some difficulty from his chair.

“For the benefit of our guest,” he said, “I will say what I want to say in English.”

Claire turned and smiled at Spencer, who lowered his head embarrassedly and took another drink of water.

“Another year has come and passed for our family, and with the new year there is the promise of much change. This is desirable, for not all change is to be feared, and without new additions the life of a family cannot succeed.” Claire’s father rested his hand on the table corner, clearly trying to hide the effort he was exerting to stay standing without his cane. “Before the year of the snake is through, we will have a new baby grandson in the family. My son Steven will finally be blessed with fatherhood. This is
wonderful news, of course, particularly because our family has grown very old in the past several years. There are too many gray heads at the table now.”

The older members of the family feigned outrage while the nieces and nephews laughed and teased them.

“Also, I am very happy to welcome Claire’s boyfriend Spencer to our home for the celebration dinner.”

Spencer tried to reciprocate the smiles of Claire’s relatives, but the carbonated feeling in his skull had returned, accompanied by a radiating pain in his stomach.

“Claire and Spencer have been together for almost a year now, and we are very pleased to have him with us today. From the first time I met him, I was impressed by how respectful and mature Spencer is, and for my only daughter I could not ask for more in a partner than that.” Struggling to keep his balance, Claire’s father raised his water glass above his head. “To the new additions to the family, those living and those still to be born, I say welcome to you. Welcome to our family, and may a thousand blessings be on you for the new year. May the happiness you bring our loved ones be returned to you all the—”

Spencer didn’t get the chance to hear about the happiness that would be returned to him. No one in the family did. From the bathroom, over the sounds of his own sickness, he could hear Claire working to relieve her family’s concerns, the Chinese word for “flu”—“Liúgăn”—thickly peppering her speech. But unless he was whispering, Claire’s father didn’t seem to be talking anymore, and had probably already sunk back down into his seat. It was the last thing Spencer wanted to do, leaving before the end of
his toast. But between that and vomiting onto the dinner table, he had to choose the lesser of two evils.

He had never planned on leaving Korea for good, not even after he accepted the job in Hsinchu. What he needed, he thought, was to dry out for a year or so in a place where he would have less time and money to spend on his vices. Then, when he returned to Seoul, he would be ready to pick up where he left off, except he would be wiser and better adjusted, and wouldn’t make the same mistakes again. Coming into Taiwan, he had viewed the place as a purgatorial experience, the punishment he would endure until he was ready to resume his life.

At first the country proved to be even more of a deprivation than he had expected, to the point that he considered breaking his contract and flying back to Incheon before it was too late. But the money he was making now wouldn’t cover a scooter at retail price, let alone another plane ticket. He tried to take his mind off drinking, but there was nothing and no one around to occupy him. His new coworkers only went out once a week, to the same dreary bar by the canal, where they sat drinking Carlsberg out of room temperature mugs, complaining about their students and how nitpicky the manager was. Spencer went out with them a couple times, but it only made him think about Korea and how much he despised the club soda in his glass. By the end of the first month, he was buying all his meals at 7-Eleven—microwaved spaghetti and curry rice and soggy chicken sandwiches that squirted hot mayonnaise with each bite.

He started hiking the mountain trails behind his apartment every morning before work. In the early hours of the day, with sweat beading on his forehead, he pushed
himself along the asphalt path while a funky dance beat blared through the loudspeakers and senior citizens practiced calisthenics in unison. As his walking pace developed into a steady jog, his old t-shirts from Seoul no longer fit him. One morning, as he neared the final leg of his route, he passed a girl with tan skin and strong thighs who he had seen running there a couple times before. He had no reason to expect that she spoke English, but decided to take a chance.

“How far do you run usually?” he asked.

To his surprise, the girl circled round and stopped to stretch her legs behind her back.

“Once to the pagoda and down again,” she said. “I’ve noticed you increased your pace.”

Spencer smiled and wiped his sweaty hands off on his shorts. “My endurance is up,” he said. “Maybe I’ll try another couple of miles. If you don’t mind the company.”

He started meeting Claire at the same place each morning to run the series of paths and switchbacks leading up to the pagoda. He learned that she worked in the office of a manufacturing company, and that she had studied English in school. When she finally agreed to have dinner with him after work, he found out that she had almost studied abroad in America, and that three of her last four boyfriends were foreigners.

“I love living in Taiwan, but I’ve never cared about where a person is from,” she said. “When the world is so small that you can live anywhere, all that matters is what’s in your heart.”

“That’s true,” Spencer said. “But maybe the right place can change your heart.”
And now Claire was standing with her back to him, scrounging in the medicine cabinet above the bathroom sink, while Spencer sat squatting on a plastic footstool by the shower, saliva soaking into the front of his shirt, still panting from the purge he was ashamed to have had her witness.

“I don’t see any Tylenol,” she said. “Mom and dad don’t keep much western medicine in the house.”

“I’m so sorry,” Spencer said. “I’m sorry for ruining the holiday.”

“Hush.”

Claire handed him a cup of water. She kissed his forehead, then turned to the door.

“I should have talked to you about this a long time ago,” Spencer said. “I shouldn’t have surprised you with it like this.”

“We’ve got a whole new year to talk about things,” she said. “To be continued.”

Claire left him sitting alone on the stool, like a child in timeout, while she returned to finish the rest of the meal with her family. Spencer took a small sip of water and dumped the rest down the shower drain. He buried his face in his hands. After a while, there was a knock at the door and Steven entered carrying two fresh bottles of Coke.

“Hey, buddy,” he said. “How’s the flu going?”

Spencer belched softly into his fist. “I’m sicker than I realized,” he said. “Not sure I’ll be able to eat much tonight.”
Steven laughed and leaned his back against the sink. “I know how it is,” he said, passing him one of the Cokes. “This’ll make you feel better, trust me. Hurry, before my mother tries to force-feed you some Chinese medicine and tea.”

Spencer unscrewed the plastic cap and sipped the Coke lightly. “Oh my God,” he said. “Is there whiskey in this?”

“A couple shots of Jack,” Steven said, and he took a big gulp from his own bottle. “I saw you were hurting the minute you and Claire arrived. If I knew it was this bad, I would have snuck you a bottle before dinner.”

“Do you always carry around bottles of Jack and Coke?” Spencer asked. “Or just during the holidays?”

Steven shrugged. “Most days I don’t have to sneak around as much,” he said. “There’s a really good western bar not far from my work. But you know how my dad is, always on the lookout for something to criticize.” He turned the bottle upside down and poured the last small measure of liquid down his throat. He hid the remains in the trash bin under the sink. “You and me should grab a drink after work sometime,” he said. “I’ve got a bunch of western friends I’d like you to meet. Americans mostly, couple of crazy Germans too.”

“You’re going to have a child soon, Steven. Are you sure it’s a good idea for you to be drinking all the time?”

“Relax. I know how to keep my fun separate from my responsibilities. There’s Steven the engineer, the person most people see, and then there’s the other Steven only my friends and bartenders see. I don’t know if that makes sense to you.”

“Yeah,” Spencer said sadly. “It makes sense.”
While the family dinner carried on in the other room, Spencer remained inside the bathroom, finishing the rest of the Jack and Coke while Steven fanned cigarette smoke out the window. He stayed in there even after Steven left, holding the empty bottle in his hands, trying his hardest to think of what he would say to Claire when the holiday was over, when the time came for them to decide how they would handle his drinking, and whether the new year would bring them closer together or be the start of some unstoppable rift. He spent so long in the bathroom that, by the time he came out, the meal was already over and Claire was chatting happily with her aunts in the living room. Spencer sneaked out into the backyard, where he found her father alone at a patio table, staring out into the twilight sky over the hills.

“Are you feeling better now?” he asked. “Stomach all right?”

“Yes,” Spencer said, taking a seat across from him. “Much better.”

“That’s good. You want some mijiu?”

The old man lifted the clear bottle at the center of the table and poured some rice wine into two ceramic cups. Spencer noticed that he sipped the drink like tea, and tried to copy him.

“I didn’t know you drank,” Spencer said.

“In moderation, yes. On special occasions.”

Spencer nodded and continued taking small sips from the cup. It was the first time he had been alone with Claire’s father, and with everything else that had happened, he didn’t have a clue what to talk about.

“It’s a shame about Steven’s baby,” he said finally.

“What shame is that?”
“He won’t be born in time to be a dragon. He’ll have to settle for being a snake.”

The old man poured more wine into his cup. “I just hope that he will grow to be an honest man,” he said. “Being a snake, honesty may be difficult for him.”

“I know.” Spencer set his cup on the table, but declined the old man’s offer for a refill. “Must be nice to be born a dragon, to be hardwired for greatness from day one.”

“Bah,” the old man said. “Dragons are overrated.” He looked at Spencer through the fading sunlight and patted his knee gently. “I’d rather have an honest man in the family than a great one,” he said. “Honesty is a very rare thing in this world.”

He grabbed an egg custard tart and slid the plate across the table to Spencer. They sat together as the sun went down, sipping wine and chewing the small cakes, keeping an eye out for the first flashes of fireworks. Sometime after midnight, Spencer and Claire settled down together under the covers of her childhood bed. Explosions sounded constantly all through the night sky. But inside the house, things were quiet and still.
CHAPTER 8

MORTAR, GRAIN, AND PESTLE

For over fifty years, Nancy Yaw Davis, an independent anthropologist with a PhD from the University of Washington, has been the leading proponent of a controversial theory concerning the Zuni people of modern-day New Mexico. According to Dr. Davis’s research, at some point in the thirteenth century, Buddhist missionaries from Japan arrived in North American and began intermingling with the Native populations of the American Southwest. This would account for the striking genetic, linguistic, and religious similarities between the Japanese and Zuni Indians on the other side of the world.

The missionaries would have first had to pass through California, but no trace of them being there has ever been found.

The newcomers accepted our porridge with smiling gratitude, but would not touch the meat. Little Sister looked up from her bowl and peered at the strangers’ mouths, trying to guess what could be wrong with their otherwise perfect teeth. What else could force three strong young men to eat like sickly old people? Bald Head Fat Belly explained that their reasons had something to do with their spirits, who would be very upset with them if they broke their dietary vows, even though they had eaten nothing but ground corn and ricegrass for twenty-eight consecutive days. Their refusal still offended Mother, who slid the tray of roast quail from the center of the mat to the edge so that it was directly in front of their knees. Spirits, she said, do not follow the traveller from one place to another.
They are tied to the land, to the plants and creatures that dwell on it. Surely none of their spirits could have followed them this far.

The strangers continued smiling as Bald Head Fat Belly translated for them. And after a short exchange of words, Bald Head Fat Belly apologized on their behalf and asked Mother and Father to please be patient with them as they endeavored to learn our ways.

“It is no easy task, throwing off one life and picking up another,” Bald Head Fat Belly said. “It was not so long ago that I stumbled upon this land for the first time. Try to remember how strange and ill-mannered I must have seemed to you then.”

Of course Mother and Father needed no reminder of that momentous day years before. Even those of us who were born long after knew the story well. It was a favorite source of laughter around the fire pit, the story of how one morning Bald Head Fat Belly emerged like a phantom out of the winter fog, with a large round belly and not a single hair upon his head, wrapped in flowing orange robes that were more ostentatious than a woman’s wedding garments. Some of the warriors were distrustful at first, and wanted to kill him or drive him farther east into the endless desert beyond. But the women of the tribe intervened on his behalf. A shortage of young men had led several eligible maidens to remain indefinitely single, and the mothers saw no sense in tossing a fresh bachelor aside when the spirits had all but dropped him in our lap. For his own part, Bald Head Fat Belly worked hard to make himself acceptable to the tribe. By the time of his name-taking, he had grown as lean and long-haired as any of the other men. The name merely served to emphasize how far he had come.
“Leave these young wanderers to me,” Bald Head Fat Belly said, gesturing to the new arrivals. “I will help them to understand what is expected of them.”

When the meal was finished, the elders sent us outside so they could continue talking in private. Little Sister chased crickets through the three-awn grass while I stood swinging my arms and dragging my bare toes across the ground. Beside me was Precious Grain, son of Bald Head Fat Belly and his wife Laughing Woman. The oldest boy of our generation, his coming had marked the end of the woeful time, a stretch of eight or nine years when the harvests consistently came up short and only girls were born. But even if the harvests had been booming, those years still would have been a time of woe. For as long as we have been, the maidens of our tribe have been doubly burdened—responsible for carrying their family line from one generation to the next, and dependent on men to do so.

“What good is a daughter without a man for her to marry?” Mother would ask sometimes, usually when Little Sister had made a mistake with the gardening. “Can the earth yield corn without having a seed planted in it first? No, I say. Without the seed it is only so much dirt.”

The night Laughing Woman went into labor, the women of the tribe held vigil outside her hut, and when the baby boy came into this world, they broke into tearful celebration that lasted until the following evening. Once it was clear that the boy would live, he was given the name Precious Grain—that which is essential for survival. When I arrived a year later, my name, Salt and Water, carried the same significance.

“Do you think the strangers will stay or go back where they came from?” I asked.
Precious Grain tossed a stone from hand to hand, gazing out at the twilight-covered field. “I think they will stay,” he said. “Their boat was destroyed when the winds swept them across the deep water. Same thing happened to my father when he left the old tribe. My father chose to stay, and I think he will convince them to do the same.”

“Why did they leave their tribe? What were they looking for?”

“It is their way. They leave the place of their birth and go out into the world. Their spirits demand it of them.”

I looked at Precious Grain and opened my mouth slowly. “When you are older, will you do as your father did? Will you leave and find a new tribe somewhere else?”

“No,” he said. “This is where I was born. This is my tribe. I will not join another.”

“I am glad. It would sadden me to see you go.”

Precious Grain smiled and pelted me in the knee with the stone. I walked in a circle and, as a kindness to him, pretended it hurt more than it did.

“Is it true that you are going to take my sister for a wife?”

“Yes,” he said, juggling the same stone once more. “Our parents agreed on the betrothal a few days ago, before the new men arrived. They are probably discussing it right now.”

I looked out across the field and watched Little Sister moving through the grass. Though she seemed quite young to me still, there was no missing the conical breasts and underarm hair she had developed over the past year.

“She becomes a maiden in the spring,” I said. “Will it be that soon?”

“Possibly. My mother and your mother don’t see any reason to wait.”
I turned so that he would not see my smiling face. “After the wedding, we will be family. Like brothers.”

Precious Grain laughed and gave me his usual look that said I was too strange for my own good. “You have been following me around for as long as I can remember,” he said. “We are like brothers already.”

“I think so, too.”

That night, while the rest of the tribe slept with plumes of smoke rising out of their huts, Precious Grain and I crept outside and hid in the needlegrass thicket within earshot of the fire pit. We lay soundless on our bellies as the three strangers gathered in a semicircle around the glowing embers. Bald Head Fat Belly stood balancing atop the hearthstones with the light on his back. He passed his gaze over the robed strangers and then began to speak in the words of his former tribe, a coarse and forceful language that set the hairs on the back of my neck at attention. After only a short time of listening, two of the strangers began to weep.

“What is he saying?” I whispered, my lips almost touching Precious Grain’s ear.

“He is talking too fast,” he said. “I can only understand some of it.”

What Precious Grain gathered from his father’s speech was this—Bald Head Fat Belly entreated the strangers to forsake the vows they had made to their spirits. He said they had been forsaken themselves, that the deep water had brought them to this new land and left them with no way of ever returning to the old. No one here would ever accept their spirits or pay respect to them as they hoped. The only choices they had were to suffer and die alone while clinging to the old ways, or do as Bald Head Fat Belly had done and embrace the new. On this point, Bald Head Fat Belly promised that no hardship
awaited them, that the people of our tribe were happier and wiser than even the sagest leaders of theirs. His final words on the matter were devoted to boasting of all that he had gained since coming here, of the virtue of his kind-hearted wife and the strength of his young son. And through all his talking I lay transfixed and breathless with my face in the stinging grass, listening to Precious Grain’s translation and detecting a similarly breathless flutter in his voice. Truly it was an experience to contemplate, hearing our tribe extolled by one who had the benefit of seeing it from both inside and out.

No sooner had Bald Head Fat Belly finished talking than the two weeping strangers sprang to their feet and tore off their gaudy orange-colored robes. In the weak glow of the pit, they stripped themselves bare and cried out in their own language what could have only been words of praise to their newly adopted spirits. Bald Head Fat Belly embraced them both, naked as they were, and began to lead them in songful prayer. But their devotion was cut short by a sudden tension. For the third stranger, far from being moved by Bald Head Fat Belly’s plea, had grown resistant to the point of shutting out any further discussion. A tall young man with ears that spread out from his head like the wings of a moth, he said nothing even as his companions cast off their vows right along with their clothing. He simply stood and walked with folded arms out into the darkness of the eastern plain where no family ever slept and summer gnats swarmed as thick as rain. He didn’t even have a blanket to call his own. But you never would have guessed it from the look of quiet serenity that showed on his face through the dim ember light.

At daybreak everyone gathered outside Bald Head Fat Belly’s hut to find out for sure what had happened. Rumor had already spread that he had failed to convert one of
the strangers—this was confirmed for us the moment we saw the deadened look in his normally expressive eyes.

“Three have come and two will join us,” he announced through the entryway, shielding his face from the morning sun. “Do not trouble yourself with the other one. No use will come of it. He is like the corn kernel that has grown hard and will not yield to the force of the pestle. No matter how we may try, he will give us no grain. Stubbornness is a part of his nature.”

Overnight, the path before us became clear—while the two newest members of the tribe would grow their hair long and take their names in time, Hard Corn would remain on the outside, giving us nothing and receiving nothing in return, until he either moved on to some other place or succumbed to hunger and illness on his own.

“He will head back to the deep water before long,” Father speculated during the midday meal. “A sane man cannot live alone and motionless for very long.”

Mother shook her head and sighed. “Better he had drowned before reaching our shores,” she said. “Every day he lingers is another insult to the spirits of the land. How long before they begin to punish us for tolerating him?”

As days passed, Mother’s fears became the fears of the entire tribe, and the question of what to do with Hard Corn—of what permanent solution could be found to deal with him—became the elders’ most frequent topic of discussion, and then their only topic. It would have been one thing, they said, if he was content to shut himself away like some benign hermit. But what he was doing out there alone on the plain had become, by virtue of its mysteriousness, the business of every thoughtful person in the tribe. First he managed to construct a type of crude shelter for himself, a rather ugly little hut forged by
bundling rows of sticks and plastering them with a paste of creek water, earth, and straw. Then he turned his efforts to transforming the land around him, pulling up weeds and clearing away the inedible grasses so that only his private garden remained. From the looks of it, one might have thought that Hard Corn hoped to sire a new tribe up there on his hilltop clearing, as if a wife and children might sprout up suddenly from beneath the ground. But even if he had no plan whatsoever, as indeed some of the elders chose to believe, there was no ignoring the remarkable resourcefulness he exhibited while fending on his own. Without any friends or allies, and with no prior experience with the terrain, he had managed to carve out a space for himself where he was free to hold on to his traditional ways. He lived as a woman, sowing and tending to his own small patch of ricegrass, and gathering no meat whatsoever. And he appeared perfectly content and even thankful for the opportunity, sitting several times a day with folded legs and covered eyes, casting silent prayers to the spirits of his faraway homeland.

“There are young people in our tribe today who have never known real hunger,” Mother remarked one morning while mashing grain in the mortar passed down from her grandmother. “Yet how many of them show even a portion of the gratitude Hard Corn does? Not one, I say. That is how thoughtless we have become, that even a heathen like him can put us to shame.”

Again, if Hard Corn had been satisfied merely to plant and pray and carry on with his traditions in private, I do not think it would have been much of a problem. But once he started dragging huge slabs of wood in from the creek bed, everyone in the tribe held their breaths and whispered, “What now?” And then, when he set about carving the thick trunk section of a fallen ash tree, and once the carving began to resemble the face and
form of a sitting man, a fearful pulse moved through the hearts of the elders like wind
rippling the surface of a pond, and all of us young and old understood that something had
to be done.

“He is making a totem,” Mother said with her hand over her mouth and nervous
breaths parting through her fingers. “He has moved beyond insult. Now he threatens us.”

At nightfall, all of the elders gathered around the full flames of the pit to decide
what to do about Hard Corn and his foreign totem. Precious Grain and I lingered on the
perimeter of the gathering, knowing that we would not be permitted to speak, but
determined at least to listen. Summer Shade, eldest of all the mothers and grandmothers,
commanded the course of the meeting. She sat hunched down inside the shrunken flesh
of her body, peering out at the fire through slits of eyelids as all waited patiently for her
to speak.

“We must be cautious of how we approach this threat,” she said. “No one knows
better than I what misery can be sowed when the spirits are angered. Seven sons I have
brought into this world. One yet lives and one fell in battle. The rest were taken by illness
or injury when our offerings failed to appease the higher forces of the land.” Her
toothless mouth moved enigmatically and the crowd leaned in to hear her better. “Still,
we must be careful. It is not our place to fight the spirits’ battles on their behalf. Much
harm can come to those who meddle with powers they do not understand.”

Summer Shade seized the gourd with her shaking hand and brought it to her lips,
signaling that she had finished talking for the time being. A row of murmurs rose up from
the crowd and disappeared just as quickly. Bald Head Fat Belly had broken decorum by
standing to speak before the remaining grandmothers had their turns.
“Hard Corn is no great danger to us,” he said, and his fellow converts nodded their heads in agreement. “His totem is no more than a keepsake, a token to remind him of what he has lost. Its power will die with him, and that will be the end of it. For he still follows the old ways—he will never take a wife nor father children. Let us heed Summer Shade’s warnings. Ignore him, and leave it to the spirits to decide his fate.”

All the worried faces converged on Bald Head Fat Belly, their silence saying more than speech and compelling him to take his seat beside his wife. ordinarily, the combined wisdom of Summer Shade and Bald Head Fat Belly would be enough to convince us of any point of view. But the possibility of having to endure Hard Corn and his totem for the rest of his life was too much for our mothers and fathers to accept. You must try to understand. Our tribe was neither old nor great. In truth, it was barely a tribe at all. At some point it had been stitched together from the surviving fragments of several larger tribes that had been decimated by a great war in the time of our grandfathers’ grandfathers. From many separate scraps, a new fabric had been sewn. But even in my time, some of the threads were still showing. In our house, Mother and Father spoke the same words with two distinctly different accents, just as each of their parents had when they were young. Moreover, while everyone in the tribe agreed on which spirits to honor at the start of the seasons, the exact rituals of the offerings varied so much from family to family that large group ceremonies could rarely be attempted without discord. And since a failed crop or overlong summer could always be attributed to spiritual malice, every setback our tribe encountered served to remind us of the price we paid for sticking together in spite of our imperfect bonds. If our ancestors were gazing down at us from the
afterworld beyond, we could only imagine them enraged at seeing their heroic blood coursing through the veins of so many mixed-breeds.

In a way, Bald Head Fat Belly’s arrival had helped to mend some of the fractures that had been carried over from an earlier time. Differences that had long divided us seemed suddenly small compared to his foreign ways. With him around, warriors whose grandparents had never fully trusted one another could stand shoulder to shoulder and speak the words, “In our tribe” without any suspicion in their hearts. Up to that point, our warriors had suffered many humiliations at the hands of neighboring tribes that had always managed to outnumber us in battle. But then our men began to fight with unbendable spirits, with each warrior summoning the strength of ten, and for twelve years every enemy that challenged us was driven in defeat from the field. Bald Head Fat Belly was no great warrior himself, but his presence had helped us to survive despite our dwindling ranks. Years later, he was still respected by all for helping to bring about our change in fortune. But not enough to stop the chain of events that was born out of that meeting.

“Token or not, we cannot risk having a foreign totem in the presence of our children,” Mother said, breaking the silence. “To protect them from spiritual vengeance, we must destroy the totem once and for all. Either that or convince Hard Corn to accept our faith as his own.”

“He will not be persuaded,” Bald Head Fat Belly said. “His faith in the old spirits is too strong to be shattered by anything we say.”

Summer Shade brought her withered arm out from under her cloak and hushed the crowd with a single wave. “Perhaps,” she said with strange mischief shining through the
slits of her eyes. “But if we can make him believe that our spirits are more powerful than
his, we may not need to say anything.”

I remember very little of what was said after that, as the atmosphere of the
meeting turned from fearful to pompous, with each elder fighting to prove his or her own
cleverness while Bald Head Fat Belly and his faction kept their mouths closed for lack of
recognition.

I said to Precious Grain, “I’m going to bed. I don’t want any part of this.”

“Me neither,” he replied. “I hate seeing my parents being treated this way.”

Lying awake under my blankets, not even the full weight of the day’s fatigue
could bring me to rest soundly. Sometime in the night I heard Mother and Father coming
into the hut. Then, after what felt like only a few minutes, I heard them stirring again. I
threw the top cover off my face and sat up to see what was the matter. Daylight was
already peeking through the gaps in the willow poles, and I saw Father sitting hunched
forward on his knees rolling a thick bundle of three-awn and securing it with twine. He
looked at me and raised a closed fist to his mouth—the sign that told me I must be quiet.

“Do not wake your sister,” he whispered. “She should not see what is going to be
done.”

When the grass bundle was finished, Father tucked it under his arm and crawled
on hands and knees to the entryway. He reached behind his shoulder and beckoned me to
follow after him. For a moment, I hesitated to obey. If Little Sister was not meant to see
what was about to happen, then it had to be something far outside the realm of childhood
understanding, something that dwelled in that murky area of adult complexity. Such a
thing was perhaps still beyond my comprehension, though I was several years older than
her and just shy of becoming a man. Out of fear I hesitated, but then followed behind Father all the same, out of respect for him and the expectations of the tribe, and the far greater fear of where defying them would place me in their eyes.

At the western border of the plain, all the warriors of the tribe had gathered together, the few of them there were. Precious Grain was there along with his father, though Bald Head Fat Belly remained standing off by himself, apart from the main center of activity, without any grass bundle or tool in hand, studying the shapes in the earth. He had lost so much weight recently that his name finally seemed absurd. At first chance, I left Father’s side and approached Precious Grain, who was also separated from the rest of the group, loitering around on his own.

“Is something wrong with your father?” I asked.

He looked up with eyes that were bereft of all the pride and good humor that made him familiar to me. A stranger’s face, its foreign features somehow accentuated, stared out at me from where he stood.

“He did not sleep,” Precious Grain said. “He and the converts left the meeting early and stayed up talking the whole night. They refused to come this morning when he called.”

I looked at the warriors huddled together on the edge of the plain. It was true—the short-haired, fuzzy heads of the newcomers were nowhere to be seen.

“What is going on? What do they plan to do?”

Precious Grain shrugged. “Father would not say. I have never seen him like this.”

As the sun finally broke out in full over the mountains, the dry and golden leaves of the plain grasses began to shine and Hard Corn’s small clearing at the peak of the hill
became more visible to us. From its original outline, the totem of the sitting man had grown amazingly detailed, with a symmetrical mouth, eyes, and nose all staring out at the world from the pedestal of layered stones on which it sat. The warriors waited and watched for signs of movement from Hard Corn’s hut, and when none was detected four of the eldest warriors, Father among them, emerged from their hiding places and stalked up the side of the hill with the grass bundles in hand. From where I crouched I could tell that they were taking special care with how they placed the bundles at the base of the totem. I suppose it wasn’t something they could have rushed and expected to get right—too far in and the airflow might have become blocked, not far enough and the flames could have died out before spreading.

“I have never seen a totem of a man before,” I said. “Hard Corn’s spirits must be very different from ours.”

I waited for Precious Grain to respond, as he always had some opinion to give on any topic that came up. But this time he said nothing and continued to watch the events unfolding atop the clearing, breaking his gaze now and then only to look at his father and scrutinize his own mysterious silence. For me, it was like seeing a reflection reflected a second time across a different shining surface—everything warped and magnified at the same time.

Once the bundles were lit, Father and the other warriors retraced their paths across the plain with even greater speed than before. And for good reason, too—as soon as the fire ate its way inside, the compacted dry grass at the center of the bundles ignited and flames sprang up from under the base of the totem and licked the unassuming face of the sitting man. In a matter of minutes, the entire totem was consumed, its once marbled
wood glowing dark red and fracturing into shards. Gray smoke rose up and unraveled slowly across the clear morning sky. Its sour odor spread out in all directions and must have even passed through the small opening of Hard Corn’s hut. Because just then he came sprinting outside and fell on his knees in front of the burning totem.

“Now he sees that our spirits are greater than his,” Father said. “And now we will see how he responds.”

At first there was no response from Hard Corn that we could perceive. He remained kneeling where he was, staring straight into the engulfed face of the sitting man, until finally the base of the totem gave way and the whole thing collapsed in a burst of falling ash and floating cinders. Each of us on the border of the plain seemed to be breathing in a single steady rhythm, our anticipation for what would happen next growing more unbearable the longer that nothing occurred. Then, at last, as the flames shrank down and the embers turned to white, Hard Corn rose calmly to his feet and walked back inside the hut. He returned a moment later, dressed in the same flowing orange robes he had been wearing when he first arrived, and toting a small bag of yellow cloth on his shoulder.

“Is he leaving?” I asked.

“I doubt it,” Precious Grain said. “Where is there for him to go?”

Hard Corn walked out onto the clearing and stopped a few steps in front of the still smoldering pedestal. He sat down on the short grass and crossed one leg over the other so that he was in the same pose the sitting man had been in minutes before. From the bag he produced a type of ornate rawhide gourd with many gleaming stones sewn into the fabric. He yanked the stopper out of the smaller end and lifted the gourd high above
his head. A stream of clear liquid poured forth with a consistency somewhere between water and honey. It trickled down the sides of his head, behind his enormous ears, over his lips, and down his chest and back, soaking right through the orange cloth. When the gourd was empty he turned it upright and set it gently on his lap between his knees. He folded his hands in front of his chest and swayed back and forth a number of times, his mouth making words we could not hear and would never understand. Then, with a smile that I still see sometimes in my dreams, he set his hand down on the ash heap at the base of the pedestal. The flames flickered with renewed strength around his fingers, and I was a child no longer.

“Save him!” Bald Head Fat Belly cried, rushing up the side of the hill. “Put him out! Stop the fire from spreading!”

Even as we trailed behind him, running at full speed, I think we all knew there was nothing we could do to help. The oil-soaked robes had ignited with the fury of twenty grass bundles, and before we had covered even half the distance to Hard Corn, a swath of fire had wrapped around him and ascended twisting and curling several feet into the air. We were at a light jog by the time we reached the clearing, already resigned to our multiple failures since sunrise. I looked at Precious Grain and saw him crying for the first time in years.

“He’s still sitting up,” he said, tears and mucus pouring down his face. “Look at him! He’s still moving!”

As much as I wanted Precious Grain to be wrong, we all saw the same thing happening inside the flames. Even with his eyes blinded and face peeling off his bones,
Hard Corn continued to rock back and forth, back and forth, in a continuous motion. His lips were already gone, but I swear I could hear him praying.

Precious Grain cried out into the fire, “Die! Please, just die!”

I put my hand on his shoulder, but he pulled away. I watched him run up to his father and bury his face in his chest. Bald Head Fat Belly wrapped his arms around his son, but could not stop staring into the flames. When Hard Corn’s charred body finally slumped over onto its side, I feared that he might fall over as well.

“Come on,” Father said. “The women are waiting. We must tell them what has happened, or they may come to see for themselves.”

By midday everyone in the tribe knew about the disaster on the plain. There was no way to keep it secret, not even from Little Sister. Mother was so upset that she abandoned preparations for the midday meal and say praying and shaking her head alongside some of the other women. I looked all around for Precious Grain, not knowing what I would say when I found him. But his family remained held up inside their hut and would not receive visitors. Later on a chill breeze began to blow, but no one bothered to light the pit.

“How can such things ever be anticipated?” Summer Shade said to whoever would listen. “How were we to know that he would react so drastically?”

No one slept well that night. To this day I can recall the sickening, savory scent of human grease that lingered in the air and provoked such nausea that few were able to stomach more than a mouthful of plain porridge at the evening meal. At first dark we all crawled under our blankets with empty bellies and heavy hearts, hoping that sleep would wash away some of our horror over what had happened. But instead nearly everyone in
the tribe experienced nightmares, even those who had not been there to witness. Little Sister later told me she had dreamed that Hard Corn had returned from the afterworld to reclaim his hut. She said she saw him out there on the plain, tending to his ricegrass as he always had, but with skin that was as black and scaly as a snake’s. As for me, I beheld a vision of deformed and sickly hunters tripping and staggering their way over unending hilltops, leaning on their spears for support, ravenous and gangly for lack of meat, but too slow to catch the scurrying quails ahead of them. I wrestled with these sights the whole night and into morning, when I awoke suddenly to find Mother standing over me.

“Wake up, you idiot!” she shouted. “Bald Head Fat Belly is leaving for the eastern lands. He is taking Precious Grain and Laughing Woman with him!”

We ran outside to find the entire tribe awake and agitated, various elders all weaving in and out of different circles, trying to find someone who had an idea worth listening to. I looked for Bald Head Fat Belly’s hut and found it already dismantled. His family and the remaining two strangers were all packed and ready to go, their belongings stowed inside deer skin knapsacks that they had hoisted onto their backs. It was difficult for me to spot Precious Grain out of the group—during the night he had cut off his long hair and scraped the leftover stubble down to the skin. So it was with the strangers, who were once again clad in their original orange robes, as if they had never spent any time with us at all. Laughing Woman appeared the same as before, though she would not meet the beseeching eyes of any who looked upon her or her people. Summer Shade moved toward them as fast as she could and waved her emaciated arms through the air.
“Laughing Woman! Bald Head Fat Belly! Hear me! Nothing but death awaits you in the desert to the east. No one who has ventured far into that place has ever been seen again.”

Without acknowledging the elder grandmother, Bald Head Fat Belly began walking out toward the eastern plain, his face locked in an expression of quiet calm that I had seen at least one other time before. His family and countrymen followed behind him.

Mother ran after them. “Precious Grain! Hear me, my son! Do not follow your parents into that deadly place. Our daughter is yours to take for a wife. We will give you all of our mats and cookware as a wedding gift. We will give you my grandmother’s mortar and pestle. Just stay, please, I beg of you.”

I waited for Precious Grain to stop and turn around, and when he kept on walking something inside me broke and I rushed out ahead of Mother and the other elders.

“Precious Grain! My brother! Hear me, Salt and Water, one who nursed beside you when we were babes. Do not forsake our bonds of brotherhood. Come back. Stay. Stay and let us be brothers as we said we would.”

But there was nothing I could say that would stop his going away. I had remained silent too long and spoken too late. My words fell unheard into that pitiless void that grew bigger with each step Bald Head Fat Belly and his family took toward the sun. Some of the elders lingered for a while on the border of the plain, muttering variations of the same unanswerable questions—“Did Hard Corn know? Was it his plan all along?” Finally, as the strangers travelled beyond the clearing and fell out of clear sight, the other gawkers turned back toward their huts, leaving Mother and me alone.

“What will we do now?” I asked. “Who is Little Sister going to marry?”
Mother stood with her arms crossed over her chest, staring out at the horizon and the final flickering shapes of the figures shrinking away behind it. I’ve had a long time to think since then, and now I believe that she felt ashamed, of herself and the way the whole tribe had behaved. But being a proud woman, and one who was tasked with raising her children to endure, she had no time for regret. She could only try to make the best with what she had left.

“In the spring, we will go ahead with the wedding as planned,” she said. “You will take your sister for a wife, and fill her with a child by the end of summer.”

I took a step back and stared at her dumbfounded. “Take my sister for a wife? Only the truly desperate do that.”

“We are desperate,” Mother said. “Our tribe is failing. The well of young blood is dried up. We need strong hunters to gather meat, and brave warriors to keep us safe. I am old. I cannot bear any more children, and our line must continue. You must do this. You and your sister both.” She uncrossed her arms and walked toward me, diminishing the space between us. “Can I count on you to fulfill your obligations?”

As Mother waited for me to answer, I imagined with dread and bitterness a future that was a very poor alternative to the one I had hoped for. And while I never could have foreseen the hardships that awaited us in the years to come, I did realize even then that Mother had been wrong—spirits do follow us from place to place. Hard Corn’s spirits had been there with him on the plain. They had seen what we had done to the totem, and this was their retribution. There was nothing to do but try to carry on in spite of it.

“I will do it,” I said, all feeling gone from my voice forever. “I will do what is needed for my tribe.”
CHAPTER 9
THE LONELY EMPIRE

It was the heat that drove Blakely out of bed in the middle of the night. The whole house felt hot to him even with the windows closed and the thermostat set to sixty-five. He sat at the dining room table with the lights off and the sky’s dim radiance pouring in through the sliding glass doors behind him. He smoked cigarettes and watched the slow turning of minutes unfold across a phosphorescent screen. The smartphone had been Maly’s idea, and at first he couldn’t have cared less about all the functions and apps she kept going on about. But then he discovered the weather app—the seven-day forecast for every city in the world right at the touch of his fingertips. And once Maly showed him how to program the thing, he was able to keep track of weather changes not just in Fresno but in Guangzhou, Amsterdam, and that other place where his son Derek was working that he could never remember the name of.

He picked the phone up off the table and dragged the rough skin of his thumb over the screen. The time zone app told him it was evening in China, that his younger son, Trent, was probably just getting off work. Blakely pictured him standing in the center of a crowded subway car with his fingers gripping the handrail, body swaying with each sharp turn on the track, surrounded by small brown figures in soggy raincoats packed corner to corner like sardines in a can. The son he imagined was not the man with sideburns and dark stubble he had last seen two years before, but the curly-haired boy standing on the curb outside the middle school with his weekend bag hanging off his
shoulder, peering down the road with solemn eyes and waiting for Blakely to pull up in his pickup truck. Would he have thought to bring an umbrella with him? Would he know to mind his feet on the staircase with all that water trickling down?

Five rings this time before Trent answered. “Hey, Dad. What’s up?”

“Hello there, mister.” Blakely slouched forward and held the phone to his face with his whole hand. “You on your way home?”

“I’m out with some friends. What’s up?”

“I saw you had some rain coming your way the next few days. You doing all right staying dry? Didn’t know if it caught you off-guard or not.”

“Yeah, I’m fine. It’s not even raining here anymore. Just a little cloudy.”

“That’s good. You know it’s been hot as hell here this past week. Ninety-seven was the high today. Ninety-eight yesterday, ninety-three the day before. And they say it’s bound to get hotter next week before it cools off. Might even hit a hundred and five if this front don’t roll in from the Pacific. But a course the weathermen all say different things, so at the end a the day you just gotta try to average it out and—”

“Dad?”

“Yeah?”

“Isn’t it pretty late there? Like two or three in the morning?”

Blakely adjusted himself in the chair. He hadn’t realized until now that one of his feet had fallen asleep. Not his healthy foot, but the crippled one that gave him sporadic pain. “I don’t sleep too good nowadays,” he said. “Ever since the accident, I get uncomfortably hot lying in bed at night. Probably get more sleep on the couch during the day to be honest.”
“Sorry to hear that.”

“Well, it’s one of those things. They say the temperature’s breaking records all across the state this summer. On the news yesterday they had a story about a guy couldn’t have been more than thirty years old and he dropped dead of heat exhaustion. Course the heat wouldn’t mean as much if we got some rain to break it up now and then. But the way this drought is going they say precipitation is at all-time low. Shoot, on Channel 30 they showed pictures of lakes down by L.A. that don’t have more than a foot of water left in ‘em. That’s because it hasn’t snowed like it should in the mountains and the creek beds are so dry—”

“Dad?”

“Yeah, son?”

“I’m out with my boss and coworkers right now, and they’re waiting for me to get back to the table so we can order.”

“Oh, sure, no problem.” Blakely ran his free hand over his face to peel the layer of sweat that had risen there. The heat from outside seemed to pass unchecked through the walls of the house, boring into the very fabric of him. “Just thought I’d check to see how things were going over there. You doing all right teaching? Got enough cash to cover your bases?”

“Well,” Trent said. “Now that you mention it, I’ve been trying to put some money aside to visit friends in Hong Kong at the end of the summer.”

Blakely broke down their finances in his head. “I’ll send a hundred bucks your way in a couple of days. It’s not much but hopefully it should help you out.”

“Thanks, Dad. I really appreciate it.”
“No problem, mister. You take care of yourself and just keep on doing what you’re doing. Love you.”

“Love you too, Dad. Bye.”

“So long.”

The words on the phone read call ended, as if he needed it to tell him so just to be sure. Blakely pulled a fresh cigarette from the pack on the table. He sat for a long time smoking and holding the phone out in front of him, running his thumb along the side of the cool, cool plastic. By the time he heard the bedroom door open, the first glare of sunrise was coming up over the fence posts in the backyard. Maly came into the room with her dark hair done up in a bun and a light wool housecoat thrown on over her nightgown. She was a small woman with a petite frame, but how she could feel cold in the middle of this heat wave, Blakely couldn’t imagine.

“Are you feeling all right?” she asked. “You got up a lot earlier this time.”

Blakely flipped open the empty cigarette pack and closed it again. Already he could hear the little boy and the little girl rustling around inside their room, awoken instantly, as usual, by the first signs of activity in the house. “Still too hot,” he said. “Better I come out here than keep you awake tossing and turning.”

She came closer and put her hand to his forehead. “Do you want one of your foot pills?”

Blakely touched her wrist and ran his fingers up and down her arm. Even before the accident, he had always appreciated how attentive she was. Not many wives, in his experience, could be counted on to care for anyone besides themselves. “Maybe later,” he
said, limping toward the hallway. “Guess I’ll try to catch a few winks before you head out.”

Maly crossed into the kitchen and filled the coffee pot with water. Regardless of whether he slept or not, she still had to be at work by a certain time. “I heard you on the phone earlier,” she said. “Everything okay with your kids?”

Blakely turned around. “I was talking to Trent,” he said. “He’s not a kid anymore.”

Maly didn’t have anything more to say to him after that, just as Blakely had expected. Whenever she caught him on a topic he didn’t want to go into, he found some small way to criticize her English.

Lying awake against the cool bed sheets, with chilled air rising up from behind the headboard, Blakely found himself caught in a nervous halfway space between sleep and wakefulness, a place where thoughts and worries too absurd to dwell on otherwise were finally given sufficient room to grow. At fifty-seven, he felt that an entire life had passed him by without giving him any time to reflect on it until now. Much of it suspect to him, as if memories he had carried for years could no longer be trusted. He knew that as a younger man he had enlisted in the Army and served overseas, that he had been married three times before Maly, and that a hydraulic lift had crushed his foot fifteen months earlier, ending his career in auto repair. These and other rough facts were easy to wrap his head around. But to picture himself at nineteen with bronze shoulders and a full head of hair, running PT drills in combat gear at a base in the Mojave Desert, or to remember that for a time he had been stationed among Germans, that he had gone out among them and
drank their German beer and spoke German words to them—these were the things he couldn’t get a handle on. If he had woken up from a dream about wood sprites and Martians, the dream would have seemed as real to him as things that had happened when he was only twenty-two.

Adolescent memories, on the other hand, were more vivid to him now than the events of the previous evening. For no matter how meaningful his time in the service had been, his real formative years had come before he enlisted, when he was just a teenager and the next big war seemed to be right around the corner. His first summer out of high school, Saigon had already fallen, but still he made the choice to serve his country. Proudly so. That he never got the opportunity to experience combat was beside the point—he had still served, and through his service and the service of countless others his children had been made safe to inherit the world. Used to be people talked about the globe like it was split in half, like there was a big line drawn down the middle. But now the First World was the only one that mattered, and it was all-American. Sitting in his living room in front of the TV, he could take pride in knowing that his sons and daughter could go just about anywhere they wanted to in the world and be respected. He could cast his baby ships in all directions and be certain that they would find safe shores.

So why did he feel all this anxiety swollen up inside of him? Why did thoughts of his children occupy him so entirely in the late night hours when the heat kept him awake? Rolling onto his side, he reached for his phone and pulled up the time zone app. Almost dinnertime in Holland, Lily walking home from her afternoon classes, or maybe grabbing a bite at some Dutch restaurant along the way. Strange to think he had no idea what kind of food she was eating over there, or if the standard Dutch meal was very different from
the stuff the German cooks had fed him back in the day. The weather app called for mist in Amsterdam this evening. But what did that mean? Was mist the same thing as fog? And if so, then would Lily have trouble seeing more than a few steps in front of her on the street? And if she crossed paths with some unsavory types, would they see her coming before she could get out of the way?

Only two rings before she picked up. “How’s it going, Dad?”

Blakely sat up in the bed. “Fine, fine,” he said. “How’re you doing, honey? You staying dry up there with all that mist?”

“Mist?” A strange gonk on the line like he used to hear more on older model phones. “What do you mean?”

“I saw you were getting some mist your way, figured the rain might not be far off.”

“I don’t know. It’s pretty clear right now. Maybe a little windy.”

“Good, good.” He opened the drawer beneath the nightstand and scrounged through the mess of rubber bands and old batteries therein, seeking some scrap of paper and a pen so as to remind himself to ask Maly to look for a better weather app. Honestly, what was the point if the forecasts weren’t going to have any accuracy to speak of? “You know I saw on the Weather Channel the other day about this tropical storm coming up from the South Atlantic toward Florida. They’re keeping a close eye on it in case it turns into a hurricane. Course they never came around and said what the difference was, but you gotta figure a storm that big is bound to cause some problems no matter what you call it. What worries me is, when they’ve got hurricanes or near-hurricanes this early in
the year, what’s gonna happen come September when all that cool air starts moving in from—“

Suddenly he became conscious of another voice on the line, a garbled stream of foreign words coming through as if spoken under six feet of water.

“Who’s that? You in a restaurant?”

“What?”

“I heard somebody else talking just now.”

“I’m at home. That was just Patrice.”

“Patrice?”

“Yeah. We’re making dinner together. I’m trying to do two things at once.”

“Oh. Got it. I won’t keep ya, then. Just wanted to see how you were doing.”

“Thanks, Dad. I’ll call you this weekend when I have more time.”

“No problem, honey. You doing all right? With school and everything?”

“Yeah, I’m good. Just a little short this month until my next stipend comes through.”

“I’ll send you a hundred dollars tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Dad. That’d be great. Love you.”

“Love you too, honey. Take care.”

Once Lily was off the line, Blakely sank back down under the covers and rested with his eyes open until the first rays of sun pierced the blinds, scaring the room with thin strips of light. It was incredible how the temperature seemed to jump from one hour to the next. When the heat of the comforter became too much to endure, he changed out of one pair of boxers and into another and went down the hallway to get a cold drink.
from the kitchen. Maly had already left for work. The boy and the girl sat at the table waving spoons over their bowls of sugary cereal. Blakely walked into the kitchen and felt a freeze-dried marshmallow crumble under his bare foot. Only a few more weeks, he thought, and they would be back in school. He carried a can of Coke to the living room and turned on the TV. The channel hadn’t moved since the night before—instant weather updates from all around the country, soft classical music to track the patterns of storms.

“Your mother say if she was gonna be late tonight?” he asked.

The girl scooped bits of dry cereal from the top of the bowl with her fingers. Her brother slid a toy racecar over the table while his breakfast turned soggy before him. If any information had been left with them, it was lost now forever behind those flat, inscrutable faces.

“Never mind,” Blakely said, and turned up the volume on the TV.

When it came to life experiences, Maly was unlike any of his previous wives. She had been born in a Cambodian refugee camp in the same year he graduated high school. They had met on a website and had married after only a few dates. A former husband had given her two children, both of whom seemed to occupy as much of her attention as Blakely himself. He wasn’t jealous, though, as he had been of past stepchildren. When Maly went to work and left the boy and girl in his care, he simply turned on the TV and left them to their own prerogatives, trusting them to poop and play and feed themselves just as he would have with a litter of well-trained puppies. In this way, his stepchildren grew fat and silent and gentle-hearted—sometimes they would cuddle up next to him on the couch, as if they really were puppies, and stay that way until he grew overheated and shoved them off onto the floor and watched them scamper into the next room. At the very
least, they were well-behaved most of the time, which was more than he could have said about his own children when they were that age.

“Heat wave running through Texas and New Mexico this week,” Blakely said without turning his head. The boy and the girl were so quiet normally it was impossible for him to tell which part of the house they were in. And since they never responded to anything he said anyway, he didn’t trouble himself to check and see if they had heard him. “Ninety-five today in Houston. That may not seem like a lot, ‘cept they get more humidity than we do on account of they’re closer to the South than the West. Now, you take somewhere like New Orleans or Jackson, Mississippi, and they got it worse at eighty-five degrees than we do at a hundred. Course it all depends on how you take to UV rays. Back at Fort Irwin, you’d see guys from back east who’d come in looking like red tomatoes at the end of the day on account of they never…”

The day passed unnoticed over the house, the heat rising and falling according to its cycle, and disturbing Blakely’s comfort all along the way.

On Saturday he talked Maly into giving him a ride to the big chain bookstore on the other side of town. And while the boy and the girl pleaded silently for the pastries kept behind glass in the bookstore café, Blakely slipped away and browsed the stacks of the nonfiction section. It had been so long since he had read anything, he didn’t know where to start. The books with “heat” in the title wound up being all about volcanoes and horny housewives and everything in between. But eventually he found some books on meteorology—books on how to read weather patterns just like the pros, books that told how the forces of the sky and oceans and planets came together to make the weather in
the first place. He selected the three least complicated ones he could find and carried them to the checkout line. Maly and the kids were already waiting for him.

“You mind getting these for me?” he asked. “I’ll make it up to you with my next check.”

Maly angled her head and scanned the titles on the sides of the books. “Are you trying to become a weatherman yourself now?”

“It’s not like that,” Blakely said. His lips twitched slightly as if charged with a current. “Weather interests me, is all. Need to keep my mind active.”

The price of the books came out to over eighty-four dollars. Maly paid with five crisp twenties she had taken from the ATM hours earlier. On the way outside she counted up the change and sang a note of surprise to catch the attention of her children. “Look at that,” she said. “Just enough for frozen yogurt.”

The boy and the girl swung their arms up and down while doing the prepubescent hopping-hungry-happy dance. These outbursts of joy, which generally preceded some small reward of food, were the closest they ever came to getting out of hand, and Blakely had no tolerance for them. “You’re gonna spoil ‘em,” he said, tucking the bag of books under his arm. “Now they’re gonna come to expect a treat every time we leave the house.”

Maly cast him an annoyed look. “Shush. You sound just like their father.”

Blakely clenched his teeth but said nothing. He knew better than to try and upset the delicate arrangement they had reached when it came to finances. His V.A. disability check covered the phone, the cable, and his cigarettes, with just enough left over for the occasional Powerball ticket or parlay bet. The rest—the house, car, food, and
incidentals—fell under Maly’s expenses. Since finishing her night school courses in physical therapy, she had started work at a nursing home and was making more money now than he ever did. Whenever he promised his own children that he would send them money, he could usually count on her to pick up the cost of the wire transfer. This last expense needed no reimbursement as far as he was concerned. It was the least she could do after all the time he spent looking after her kids.

Sitting under the air conditioner inside the frozen yogurt place, listening to the boy and girl lapping up their double-dipped cones, Blakely dove into the first of the big meteorology books. By the fourth page he was already in awe of how much science there was behind something as simple as whether or not it rained on a certain day. Maly watched him for a time as though she expected him to say something, and when he didn’t she took out her phone and resumed a word game with one of her co-workers. Finally Blakely pushed the book aside and rubbed the corners of his eyes with his fingers.

“It all makes sense once you start to look at it scientifically,” he said. “The whole world’s getting hotter on account of there’s too many people and too many gases being pumped out. Someday it’ll get so that even the coldest places are liable to thaw. No escape from the heat.”

Maly looked up from her phone and stared at him with her eyebrows knit close together. She noticed vanilla yogurt dripping from the girl’s chin and attacked it with a napkin from the dispenser. “Okay, so there are too many people,” she said. “Whose fault is that?”
“I just started reading it,” Blakely said. “And anyway, it’s probably too late now to put a cap on it. Gonna have to start thinking about who and what to save once things get outta hand.”

“That’s a long way off. Beyond our lifetimes.”

“I dunno.” Blakely reached into the cup of soda he had ordered and wetted his hand with ice. He tried rubbing water onto the back of his neck, but by then the coolness had already left it. “I remember seeing a guy when I was a kid who found a well underground just by walking with a stick and waiting for it to bend. He said the stick was just a tool, that the real force lay in his perception. Something about the way his mind worked, he could sense things in ways other people couldn’t. So you gotta figure, if one man can sense a well when it’s buried under twenty feet of ground, then maybe another man can sense when things are starting to heat up for real. Maybe he’s got some other kind of gift altogether.”

Maly ignored her phone’s vibrations and looked closely at Blakely. In a life that revolved around detecting other people’s maladies—hearing the crack behind a cough that pointed to fluid in the lungs, feeling for the tenderness that the scales of elderly skin concealed—the strange severity that had come over her husband’s face must have been especially disconcerting to her.

“I suppose,” she said. “Though I’m not sure I would call it a gift.”

By Sunday afternoon, Blakely had it all figured out. Being unable to sleep had given him a whole night to take what he needed from the meteorology books, and a whole morning to work out a plan. He would call Derek first. He was the oldest, his brother and sister
would listen to him. If any of them needed money to tie up loose ends, he would talk to Maly about it later. They would work something out. There was no other choice. While the boy and the girl played alone in the living room, he sat down at the table and readied himself for the call he was about to make. Once he had his firstborn on his side, the rest of the pieces would fall into place. Derek had always been the trailblazer of the family. It was his example, Blakely believed, that had convinced Trent and Lily to move out of the country in the first place. So if he could inspire his brother and sister to follow one course, then he could get them to follow the opposite just as easily.

Four long rings before the call went to voicemail. Blakely tried again and listened to three more before Derek finally answered. “Hello? Who is this?”

“Derek?” Blakely’s voice was hoarse from a lack of sleep and too many cigarettes. “How’s it going, buddy?”

“Oh. Hey, Dad. What’s happening?”

“Oh, ya know, not much. Everything okay down there? What’s the name of the city where you’re at?”

“São Paulo.”

“Right, right. For some reason I always wanna say Rio de Janeiro.”

“That’s a couple hundred miles from here.”

“Right, right. So how’s the weather down there? You been getting a lotta rain this week?” Blakely searched for one of the maps in the weather book in front of him. He had dog-eared so many pages in the course of the night it was hard to find the one he wanted. “You know Brazil is right between the two tropical lines, which means it gets both rain
and heat. Not to mention the hurricanes that blow by there every now and then. Don’t know how you stand it.”

“It’s fine. Been pretty sunny all day. Might be some rain later possibly.”

Blakely leaned forward over the table. “Can you get to a window? Can you see how fast the wind is blowing?”

“Dad, I’m kind of busy right now. I’ll give you call later, okay?”

“Wait, son, please.” Blakely tried to slow his breathing. All through his face he was flushed and overheated. “I didn’t want to alarm you right off the bat, but I’ve got some important stuff to talk to you about.”

“What’s going on?”

“The thing is…I’ve been reading a lot about all the changes happening in the world—”

“You’ve been reading?”

“Yeah, and like I said—”

“Since when do you read?”

“It’s not important. Now gimme a fucking second to talk here, will ya?” Blakely lowered the phone and shook his head. Everything was going wrong. Too hot to concentrate. No words to convey the terror that seized him when he considered what cataclysm the heat was heralding. Over in the living room, the boy had stolen a piece of hard candy from his sister’s pocket and a chase around the couch had ensued. Blakely tried to ignore it. “Derek? You still there, son?”

“I’m here. Go ahead and talk then.”

“Look, I didn’t mean to lose my head. I’m just worried is all.”
“About what?”

“I’ve been thinking, lately I’ve been thinking that maybe you and your brother and sister aren’t as safe as you might imagine. Thinking maybe it’d be a good idea for you to pack up and leave while there’s still time.”

“Leave? And go where?”

“Here a course. Or at least around this area. Where we can all be close. You still there?”

“Yeah, I’m here.”

“Good. So what do you think?”

“To be honest, Dad, I’m stunned you would even suggest something like that. I can’t just pack up and leave Brazil. I’ve lived here for eight years. I have a career here. I have a relationship here.”

“Well, shoot, bring her along. Two by two, like it says.”

“Two by…Dad, what’re you talking about?”

“The ocean’s rising.” Blakely had blurted the words out before he could think it through. But now that they were out, he couldn’t go back on them. “The ocean’s rising, son. I’ve been reading all about it. First the temperature of the planet rises—slow at first, like only a degree or two each year—and then the ice caps start melting, and then the water in the ocean starts rising. Pretty soon it’ll get so entire cities are flooded in the rising tide. You, your brother, your sister—you’re all living in the goddamn path of the flood. You stay around there much longer, you’re liable to get trapped when the waters come. Hello? Derek?”

“I’m here.”
“All right. So what do you say? Can I trust you, son?”

“Trust me? Jesus.”

Static crackled in his earpiece and for a moment Blakely was afraid they were going to be cut off. The boy and the girl had moved their chase into the kitchen, where the girl succeeded for a time in dislodging the piece of candy from her brother’s fist, only to have it slide across the linoleum floor and get lost under the fridge. She appeared to be on the verge of tears. Blakely shushed them both and changed his sitting posture to give the phone a stronger signal.

“I can feel in my bones that something powerful is on its way,” he said. “The world is changing, and not for the better. All this heat…the only way to stand it is together, as a family. You know what I mean?”

“Dad,” Derek said, “You’re starting to worry me.”

Blakely laughed—nervously, fearfully, with sweat leaking down from his underarms. “You know who I was thinking about the other day, buddy? Guess.”

“I have no idea. Who?”

“Noah. I know it sounds crazy, but I started to think about how it must’ve been for him way back in the day, knowing that the big rains were coming without anybody who believed him. Nobody except his family, that is. He had his sons with him, you know. He had his wife and children and all his people together on the Ark, and they saw the flood through as a family.”

“Noah is nothing to me but a character in a story, Dad. I don’t believe he ever really existed. I don’t even believe in God anymore.”
Blakely’s mouth fell open and he sat blinking for several seconds while his son’s steady breathing rustled in his ear. “When did that happen?” he asked, convinced that some friend or teacher must have gotten in his head.

“I don’t remember. In college. Maybe earlier.”

“You used to love going to church. Any time you came to stay for the weekend, we’d wake up bright and early on Sunday.” A flutter of sadness ran through Blakely’s voice, a wistful burning not too different from the heat under his skin. “You loved the donation plate. Every time it came around, you’d make sure I let you drop the envelope in, or else you’d throw a fit.”

He heard a short and baffled laugh, transmitted six thousand miles through radio waves. “I was seven, Dad. You can’t honestly think I’m still the same person I was back then. You couldn’t have thought that I’d stay the same.”

“I’m still the same person. I’ve stayed the same.”

“I know.”

It was almost too hard for Blakely to go on speaking. Like something sharp had become lodged inside his throat. And to make matters worse, the girl had just then decided to unleash a screaming tantrum right in the middle of the kitchen—one of the few times he could remember seeing her genuinely upset, and all brought on by a goddamn Jolly Rancher. Blakely pressed the phone to his face and covered his other ear.

“I need ya right now, buddy,” he said. “You gotta help me convince Trent and Lily to move home too. You gotta talk to ‘em for me.”

“Dad, I’m sorry, but you’re going to have to count me out. For one thing, Trent and I aren’t even on speaking terms right now.”
“What? What happened?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Blakely stood up from the chair. “Damn it, Derek, he’s your little brother. You gotta keep in touch with your brother.”

“Half-brother. And anyway, he hasn’t tried contacting me for close to a year now. Even before that, we hardly ever talked except on our birthdays.”

“I don’t get it. You used to love your brother to death. You boys were inseparable.”

“Dad. You’re thinking about when I was seven again.”

Waves of heat shot up from under Blakely’s shirt collar. He was no longer sweating now—his skin had finally acclimated itself to chronic discomfort, fixing him with a greasy shine like a glazed piece of meat. The girl alternated between sobbing and screaming, her arms hanging down at her sides. And as he looked down at his stepdaughter, Blakely was surprised by just how much hatred he felt for her simply because she expected him to do something to try and make her happy.

“I’m sorry, Dad, but I need to get going. Listen, it sounds like you’re having a pretty rough time right now. If you keep on feeling like this, you should really think about talking to someone. A professional, I mean.”

“Yeah. Maybe I’ll do that.”

“Good. All right, well, take care of yourself, Dad. Talk to you later.”

“So long.”

Blakely set the phone carefully down on the table—screen facing up, to avoid scratches. Then he bent down and grabbed the girl by the shoulders and shook her so
violently that her brother, who was sitting in the other room, began to echo her own broken cries. “What the fuck is the matter with you? Don’t you know better than to holler like that when I’m on the phone?”

The girl managed to wriggle her way out of his grasp, but no sooner was she free than Blakely caught her by the strap of her floral print dress and pressed her kicking and screaming to the floor. God how the heat seemed to radiate from his very breath. “Your mother won’t teach you to behave, your father won’t teach you, so I’m gonna have to teach you!”

The first blows were absorbed by the thick fabric of the girl’s skirt. But as he got into the rhythm of it, he was able to adjust his pattern so that each succeeding strike landed with more force than the last. Between the heat, the children’s constant shrieking, and the repetitive motion of his arm, Blakely felt as if he had become hypnotized. He was barely aware when the bathroom door flew open, or when Maly came running into the kitchen to tear the girl away from him.

“You bastard,” she said, holding the crying child to her chest. “What kind of coward hits a little girl?”

Pulling himself to his feet, Blakely staggered and swayed like a drunken man. He lifted his arms and examined the transparent stains on his shirt. “I’m all dirty,” he said. “Think I’ll fix a cold bath.”

The sounds of Maly leaving were not inaudible to him. The high groan of a suitcase zipper. Jangle of wire hangers and thump of unfolded clothes. All in counterpoint with the irregular gasps and sniffles that Maly herself was providing. With all of it going on out of sight, he remained safe and calm in his bathroom, marinating
gently in the already lukewarm water. And as the bathwater failed to keep him cool,
Blakely tried to imagine what the house and everything around it would be like once the
ocean had finally risen, when the whole valley was beachfront property and the torrents
of a newer, more temperamental Nature raged day and night. He saw himself fighting on
in spite of the rain and thunder and wind, an unvanquished sinner-prophet the likes of
Noah and David. And one way or another, he would have his people before the end. If
not in America, then in some new and better country, where every wife was tender and
patient, and children were fixed to the earth as deep-rooted trees.
CHAPTER 10
THE NEW GODS OF OLD ATLANTIS

Sixty years after Atlantis rose from the sea, there were strip malls and luxury hotels all across the lost continent, and even a university whose creative writing program was internationally ranked. Four-lane highways weaved between mountains of petrified coral while bums pushed shopping carts along sandstone streets that had been under water two generations before. The commercial liner Circe pulled into the port of New Sparta on a Sunday morning, and by noon Talia Chang had disembarked and was wheeling her suitcase down the seamless metal alloy planks of Plato’s Pier. The sunlight glared blindingly from above and below, but through her shaded eyes Talia spotted a familiar figure waving at her from behind the velvet barrier of the unloading platform. Her new employer, Mr. Sok Torus, appeared much as he had during their video interviews—middle-aged, impeccably dressed in a dark Faranghetti suit with silver lapels, his face displaying the typical sharp Atlantian features, but tanned a healthy bronze so that he could have passed for Greek or Italian.

“Talia, how are you, welcome!” He shook her hand and bowed with a slight flourish on the downswing. “We are so happy to have you come to help us with the up and running of the academy.”

“I’m very happy to be here,” Talia said, holding her stomach. Four hours on the ship without a smoke had triggered a nauseating withdrawal migraine. She had left her sunglasses at the hostel in Rhodes, and the longer she stayed on the sundrenched pier, the
worse the pain became. “It’s been a long journey to get here from Baghdad,” she said. “Can’t wait to see my new apartment and take a load off.”

“Certainly, certainly!” Sok Torus said. “But first, Atlantian custom dictates we must share a meal together to cement our new arrangement. I booked us a reservation at one of the top restaurants in the new quarter. Best native cuisine in the city!”

Talia’s stomach churned at the mere thought of food, but she smiled all the same and followed Sok Torus to his SUV. After six jobs in five countries in eight years, she knew there was a script she was obliged to follow when getting to know a new boss. Even here in Atlantis, a country that had spent most of the last two thousand years hidden under the floor of the Mediterranean, there was a professional code of conduct too important to ignore.

From the glittering footpaths of the boardwalk, they rode along the contours of the Sok Aeris Memorial Highway straight into the heart of the city. The architecture varied from white marble columns of the Corinthian style to modern skyscrapers with 3D characters dancing across the window panes, advertising sub sandwiches and sunscreen. Their driver spoke no English, but his face was an architectural wonder in itself, a mosaic of acute angles, freckles, and patches of peeling sunburn. Sok Torus barked directions at him from the passenger seat until they arrived at a restaurant with a large and heavily shaded patio.

“The first thing you must learn is that not all Atlantians are as progressive as our students’ families,” Sok Torus said. “Our driver Teev is a good worker, but he and his family are all Pwekoni, descendants of the Atlantian peasant class. Their grandfathers worked as oyster farmers in the bottommost caverns of the old city, never seeing the
sunlight. For them, the island might as well be under water still. They live in the past, never learning other languages. We Korasti know how to deal with them, but they will try to cheat foreigners if you are not careful.”

“I remember reading about them in my travel guide,” Talia said. She had already taken her vaporizer out of her purse, and was pleased to see she wasn’t the only smoker on the patio. The table across from them was packed with overweight Brits in silk shirts puffing water vapor between sips of imported lager. Most of the customers, in fact, seemed to hail from abroad. They filled the space of the patio with a mix of different accents while pale Pwekoni in clean white shirts dashed back and forth from the kitchen trading out plates.

“I didn’t realize New Sparta was such a popular tourist destination,” Talia said.

Sok Torus laughed an airy, nasal laugh and clasped his hands together. “Yes, certainly!” he said. “Tourism is one of the foundations of our new economy. The annual number of foreign visitors has doubled each year for the past twelve years. That is why it is so important for the children to learn the languages of the outside world, from the sons of President Sok Naru to the lowest Pwekoni boy selling oysters on the street. We must all do our part to bring Atlantis into the modern age.”

“I received similar mandates from my employers in Baghdad and Port-au-Prince,” Talia said, waiting for the light on her vaporizer to turn green. “So don’t worry. I’ll have the students learning their ABCs before long.”

“Wonderful!”

Sok Torus ordered a twelve-ounce Orca steak, which he praised as being the best cut of meat in the city. Even so, Talia opted instead for the seaweed salad, nibbling out of
politeness while taking her real nourishment from the secret contents of her nicotine
cartridge.

“I hope you don’t think it immoral to dine on whale meat,” Sok Torus said finally.
“They also have a truly excellent shrimp cocktail on the menu.”
“I’m fine,” Talia said. “I just don’t eat meat usually.”
“Ah, you are a vegan?”
“Not really. I just have some digestion issues that limit what I can have. Most
types of meat are too strong for me.”

Sok Torus frowned. “Next time we will go to the tofu café in the Asian quarter,”
he said. “It is regretfully true that much of Atlantian cuisine is too overpowering for the
foreign palate. Some of the things the Pwekoni call food, they aren’t even fit to feed a
dog.”

Though she was only half-listening, Talia laughed as though she found Sok Torus
clever. By now the sedatives in her cartridge were working to full effect, filling her limbs
with a delicious warm numbness and making all the long months ahead seem so much
more bearable. She was thirty years old and had spent nearly a third of her life preparing
rich students in miserable countries for positions of power to which they felt entitled
because of their births. Such was her lot in life. So if the Korasti children of this new
Atlantis needed to know English in order to succeed, and if their parents were willing to
pay outrageous sums for their lessons, then she would fill the role that was expected of
her. But not without the year’s supply of cartridges stuffed inside her toiletry case, not
without a way to take the edge off.
On the way to the apartment complex, they passed through a slum where two lanes of traffic stalled alongside a row of unpainted brick tenements with electrical wiring and plumbing fastened to the outsides of the buildings with what looked like oversized staples. Half-naked Pwekoni children flooded the gaps between the idling vehicles, tapping on the tinted windows as they stared hungrily into the reflections of their own sunburned faces. The post-smoke grogginess had settled over her now, but Talia was still startled by the children’s missing limbs. Here a little finger gone, there a little leg. The ones with crutches seemed to move faster than the ones without, as if they understood how desperate their situations were.

“Why are there so many amputees in this neighborhood?” Talia asked, pressing her face against the glass.

“You can never tell with the Pwekoni,” Sok Torus said. “Some are just more accident-prone than others. Some are superstitious and would rather lose a limb than see a doctor.”

“It’s a shame,” Talia said. “They seem like such sweet kids, too.”

“Yes, well,” Sok Torus said. “Next time I will tell Teev to take the expressway instead.”

Her first night in Atlantis, Talia dreamed a terrible dream. A monster from ancient times—a leviathan, half kraken and half minotaur—rose up out of the sea with its enormous teeth bared, its tentacles groping for anything to sate the hunger of its two thousand-year fast. Worst of all was the noise that sounded from the beast’s throat, a sickly dry heave that carried such force of breath that tree branches shook in its wake and
every bird on the island was torn from the sky. And even after it was over and Talia was sitting up in bed, she could still hear the monster’s discordant gasping, as though, once awoken, not even reality could silence its cries.

She watched the sunrise from the balcony, taking short puffs from her vaporizer to calm her jolted nerves. As the first light of day spread over the city, the roads were empty save for the last rotation of street sweepers, crouching down over their dustpans, finishing their rounds before the early commuters took to the sidewalks. And though she couldn’t make them out clearly from such height, Talia figured they all had to be Pwekoni, old men and shrunken grandmas making a living the only way they could in the economy of this new sea-level Atlantis. She took her last drags and went inside to get ready for work.

Sok Torus had arranged a welcome party to greet her when she arrived at the academy, a chorus of twenty Korasti school children in sea foam green uniforms who began singing English nursery rhymes the moment she stepped through the door. While Talia recovered from the initial surprise, Sok Torus swept in to introduce her to everyone. Talia surveyed the chemically tanned faces of the faculty and understood right away that she had been misled—she wouldn’t just be the head English teacher on staff, she would be the only native English speaker at the academy.

“I do hope you were able to rest up after your journey yesterday,” Sok Torus said. “Your middle school students need to begin English classes A, S, and P. They will have their high school placement exams in four weeks’ time.”

Within an hour, Talia found herself standing in front of a class of twenty thirteen-year-olds, most of whom had been studying English since kindergarten. With no lesson
plan on hand, she tried to fill class time with introductions, but her students didn’t want to talk about themselves. They wanted to know about her. Why had she left America? How old was she? Why wasn’t she married at her age? How much money did she make teaching? Had she come to Atlantis to find a rich husband? She finally had to assign a short essay just to retain some privacy. And as the kids began scrawling inside their yellow notebooks, she paced between the desks examining them closely, wondering if there was any way she could make a positive difference in their lives. So far it seemed doubtful. Too much schooling had turned them into little conformists who were jaded beyond their years. Even the nerds bore the same tribal markers as their more popular peers—the overpowering scent of sunscreen, the two hundred-dollar imported sneakers, the “Sok” in their names like the ubiquitous “von” of European nobility. There was a time when Talia would have worked day and night to try to get through to these kids, but the disappointments of the past eight years had diminished her expectations before they could begin to rise.

“All right, class,” she said with five minutes left. “Go ahead and start packing up your things. We’ll finish the essays next time.”

By the end of the first day, Talia just wanted to go home, curl up on the couch with her vaporizer, and fall sleep in front of the TV. But Sok Torus had asked to see her before she left. She found him seated at his desk with several manila folders spread out in front of him. A tall, thin man in a stylish four-piece suit was sitting cross-legged on the sofa. When Talia came inside, he stood to greet her.
“This is Mr. David Greeley,” Sok Torus said. “He is an American businessman and philanthropist. His foundation has been one of the most active benefactors in improving education opportunities on the island.”

Greeley smiled and stuffed his hand in his pocket before Talia had a chance to shake it. “Mr. Sok Torus exaggerates. Technically, the foundation was endowed by my father just before his passing. I simply administer his estate, look after his company, and do what I can to preserve his legacy.”

“Well,” Talia said. “I’m sure you do a fine job of it.”

There was something awkwardly sweet about the way Greeley looked away from her then. Talia was reminded of some of the first boys she had crushed on in school, the lanky-cute types who would have been popular with the girls if they could have ever brought themselves to talk to one.

“Mr. Greeley is sponsoring a scholarship to help underprivileged students transfer to some of the better schools in the city,” Sok Torus said. “He has offered to pay the tuition and fees to have a student attend classes here.”

“Yes, well,” Greeley said, “as I was explaining just a moment ago, I would prefer it if Ms. Chang would pick the winner from among the finalists. She should have final decision.”

Talia looked down at the children’s headshots accompanying the folders on the desk. “Why me?” she asked. “I mean, I’m honored, but I just started here. I doubt I’m qualified to decide something like this.”
“You’re an impartial judge,” Greeley said. “That’s all I’m asking for. And besides, if the recipient is going to be learning English from you, then you should have some say in the selection process.”

Sok Torus gathered the folders together and handed them over to Talia.

“Normally I would reserve final say so in matters of admission,” he said. “But if Mr. Greeley thinks this is the best way to proceed, then I will leave it in your hands.”

“I promise I won’t let you down,” Talia said. “Either of you.”

She carried the folders to the reception desk and stuffed them snugly inside her purse. There were six or seven finalists from the look of it, Atlantian boys and girls whose real names were printed below their English names in proto-Greek letters that Talia couldn’t understand. She was about to slip through the door when Greeley appeared in the lobby and called after her.

“Just a moment,” he said. “I want…that is, I hope you don’t feel bombarded with this surprise assignment. I never intended to make your first week more difficult than it is.”

“Not at all,” Talia said. “I’m happy to help out with such a worthy cause.”

Greeley glanced at the hallway, then leaned in closer to her.

“Honestly, I just needed to keep Sok Torus from interfering,” he said. “He means well, but if he had it his way, the scholarship would go to some well-bred Korasti boy whose parents are down on their luck. That’s not what the foundation is here for. I need to make sure this money goes to someone truly needy, someone who doesn’t have any opportunities in this world. I hope you understand.”
Talia’s lips parted slightly, and before she could think through a more calculated response, she let out a short laugh. “Believe me,” she said. “I understand.” She brushed her long bangs away from her forehead. “Meeting someone around here who cares about social justice…it’s a real breath of fresh air.”

“I’m glad you feel that way,” Greeley said. “You know, this city can be kind of tricky to get around at first. If you’d ever like someone to show you around, help you get your bearings, give me a call.”

Talia accepted his business card and watched him hurry outside into the peak sunlight of the late afternoon, hooking a pair of silver shades to his face as he jogged across the busy street. Her students were wrong—she hadn’t gone abroad to find a rich husband. The thought had never seriously entered her mind. But that didn’t mean she couldn’t share a meal with David Greeley sometime after work. She was only human, after all, and too young to play the part of the celibate schoolmarm.

One morning before class, Talia was browsing the shelves in the school library, trying to find something she could incorporate into her lesson plans, when she came across the first collection of Atlantian myths ever published in English. Entitled *The Koraseid and Other Legends*, the book was over seven hundred pages long and bound in a thick, watermarked cover with a monochrome illustration of a squid on the front. Talia took it home, thinking that it would help give her a better perspective on the culture. The titular myth, *The Koraseid*, was four hundred pages of softcore pornography and genocide centered on an Atlantian prince named Syraksis and his hundred-year war against various
malignant sea gods. In the climactic chapter, an ally god takes the form of a giant whale and demands that Syraksis sacrifice two hundred virgins as payment for his assistance. In response, Syraksis orders two hundred oyster farmers to offer up their daughters to satisfy the hungry deity. Most obey him without question, but some defy the will of the king. And in the bloody fighting that follows, Syraksis slaughters every last one of the rebels and gloatingly serves up their families—daughters, sons, wives, and all—as a lavish victory feast for the whale god. Thus begins a new era of peace and prosperity for Atlantis, with Sryaksis as revered ruler and the whale as benevolent guardian.

As she began reviewing applications for the Greeley scholarship, Talia tried to keep in mind the historical prejudices inherent in the culture, and make a decision that, in some small way, would help to rectify past wrongs. In all her years of teaching, she had never known any responsibility comparable to that which had been placed in her now. She stayed up late at night reviewing the applications, imagining herself capable of rescuing some poor, underserved rebel child from the wrath of the mighty whale. She arranged to meet David for dinner to go over her decision, and was delighted when he chose a place with a number of vegetarian options and a sizeable smoking section on the patio.

“I made sure to reserve us an outside table,” David said, looking handsome and less business-like in a navy blazer and jeans. “You can imagine how happy I was when you mentioned you smoked vapor too.”

While the chefs behind the conveyor belt loaded plates with individual servings of bean curd and hummus, Talia sat side by side with David at the counter, turning the loose pages in the folder and using her chopsticks to point and gesture.
“Overall, you have some very strong candidates to choose from,” she said. “But there was one girl who stood out above the rest. Her name is Heloise, though I can’t imagine how she wound up with it.”

David laughed. “The explanation is pretty dull, probably,” he said. “In the poorer districts, the teachers assign English names to students on their first day of school. The one who named her ‘Heloise’ probably chose it at random from a list of girls’ names put out by the government. She’s lucky she didn’t end up as a ‘Helga’ or ‘Hortensia.’”

“Typical,” Talia said, shaking her head. “We can only hope that we haven’t found her too late to make a difference.”

“What makes her so special? Compared to the others, I mean.”

“It’s all here in her application,” Talia said. She turned to a paper-clipped stack of papers with a photo of a pale young girl at the top corner. “Her English is passable, but even then her essay was more powerful than any of the others. She wrote about her father dying and having to help her mother look after her brothers. And even with all those responsibilities on her shoulders, she still managed to earn the best grades in her class.”

“Sounds great,” David said, biting into a ginger-infused celery stalk. “Looks like you’ve really put a lot of thought into this.”

“I wasn’t going to half-ass something this important. It’s like you said—Sok Torus means well, but he still sees the Pwekoni as fundamentally beneath him. This country will never get any better as long as people like him are the only ones making the decisions.”

David took a sip of wine and looked at her with sad understanding in his eyes. “I’ve lived on this island long enough to realize,” he said, “that the only way things will
ever really get better is if foreigners like us care enough to make the change happen ourselves.”

Talia smiled and raised her glass. “I’ll drink to that.”

After paying the check, they lingered on the patio working through the rest of the bottle of wine and puffing small clouds of vapor into the air above them. David’s vaporizer emitted a mineral scent like salt or iron, the vapors dissolving in streaks of bright crimson that blended overhead with Talia’s own deep blue.

“What do you take with your water?” Talia asked. “Besides nicotine, I mean.”

David looked up at the converging vapors and covered his smiling mouth with his hand. “Lizoprin,” he said. “Helps me to focus at work. You?”

“Splash of molidoxin, with an alembia chaser. Not exactly street legal, but I’d be a mess without it. Anxiety attacks. Started while I was in Port-au-Prince. The black market cartridges worked better than anything the doctors prescribed, so I stayed with them.”

“I know all about anxiety,” David said. He leaned forward and folded his arms over the table. “They had me on melenefrin in the first grade to keep me from throwing tantrums. I hated school so much, it was the only thing they could do to calm me down.”

“Did you go to school here or in the US?”

“I was born in Chicago. Lived there until I was twelve. My dad decided he was sick of commuting five thousand miles between home and work, so he made us drop everything and follow him to New Sparta. The international school I attended wasn’t much different from my old academy, which is to say I was just as miserable as before.”
“We used to move around all the time when I was younger,” Talia said. “Parents are both professors. Had a hard time finding something on the tenure track. Every couple of years they’d get new jobs in a different state and I’d have to change schools.”

“College was a lifesaver for me.”

“Same here.”

They reached the bottom of the bottle all too quickly and sat hunched forward eyeing other drinks at other tables. In the course of a single meal, Talia had grown comfortable enough around David to let her natural resting face show without fearing that he would ask her what was wrong or if she was okay. With his initial awkwardness subsiding, she saw in his own face a similar weariness that not even the stimulants could mask entirely.

“You mind if I get a drag off yours?” she asked. “I’ve always wanted to try Liz.”

“Sure thing,” he said. “Just go easy. It can make anxiety worse if you’re not careful.”

“Then why do you take it?”

“I’ve got some betazellamine that evens it out.”

Talia sat up straight. “No way,” she said. “You’ve got real Beta-Z in cartridge form? That’s almost impossible to find.”

“I have a really good supplier,” David said.

“Where do you keep your stash?”

“In my apartment.”

Talia swung her purse over her shoulder. “Let’s go.”
In the quiet dark of David’s penthouse, with the blinds drawn and the city’s dull luminance pouring in, they rested side by side on the carpet in their underwear, filling the air above them with different patterns of colored vapor. Vapor with the yellow hue of human plasma, and vapor as dark as burgundy wine. Some that tasted faintly of popcorn and lemon, others that had no taste whatsoever. David knew which ones were safe to mix and which weren’t. The ensuing cocktail brought Talia to a place of such soft disconnect that she barely felt David’s fingers running up and down the side of her arm.

“You have beautiful skin,” he said. And when she didn’t respond after several seconds, he asked, “Have you always wanted to be a teacher?”

Talia laughed. “Have you always wanted to be a philanthropist?”

“I never wanted to do what my dad did,” David said. “So when I finished school and found myself doing exactly what he did, I made a point to find new interests to occupy my time.”

He rolled onto his side and rested his cheek on Talia’s bare stomach. His whiskers were like static electricity, his lips a soft pressure barely noticeable.

“I know they say Beta-Z makes for great for sex,” she said. “But right now I don’t think I could move enough to make it worthwhile.”

“It’s fine. We don’t have to do anything more than this.”

Talia slid her hand up David’s back and brushed her fingers through his hair. Suddenly every sensation was distorted and more intense at the same time. So when she started to get teary-eyed, it was like small butterflies brushing their wings against her face.

“I think we could really make a difference in her life,” she said.
“Who?”

“Heloise. We could do it. We could save her from this place.”

“I know. And we will.”

Talia wiped her eyes, careful not to gouge herself by accident. “I haven’t always been like this,” she said. “I used to love teaching. I used to love my life. I don’t know what happened.”

“Life happened. That’s the way it works.”

With all the energy she could muster, Talia lifted her head and gazed down at the strong curve of David’s shoulders. Moving her fingertips over his skin, she found herself wishing, for the first time in a long time, that she could feel things exactly as they were.

“Life happens in unexpected ways,” she said. “I think it’s happening right now.”

In the days leading up to Heloise’s arrival, Talia floated through work with distracted giddiness, imagining all the ways she could make the school a more welcoming place for the girl. She preemptively lectured the Korasti students about proper classroom conduct, and warned that any teasing or name-calling would be severely punished. One evening she caught a taxi to a department store downtown and filled a wicker basket with all the supplies Heloise would need but might not be able to afford—pencils and notebooks, an algebraic calculator, sunscreen and dark shades for recess. She even started tidying up her classroom more thoroughly than before, picturing how excited and grateful Heloise would be to learn in a clean white classroom without any dirt or cockroaches on the floor. On the Monday morning Heloise was scheduled to start, Talia tied a pink ribbon to the
basket and arrived at school early with the gift cradled in her arms. Sok Torus was waiting for her by the entrance.

“Talia,” he said. “May I speak to you for one moment, please?”

She half-expected to find Heloise waiting on the sofa, and when she stepped into the empty office and Sok Torus closed the door behind him, she let the basket fall to her side and braced herself for the blow.

“What’s happened? Tell me.”

Sok Torus scooted his chair in and folded his hands over the desktop. “I tried to warn you about the Pwekoni,” he said. “I told you they were all set in their ways. It’s one thing to apply for a scholarship, another to go through with the change.”

“What does that mean?”

“First thing this morning we got a call from the foundation. The girl’s parents have changed their mind. They don’t want her attending our type of school.”

Talia closed her eyes and breathed in deeply. Since her night of indulgence with David, she had been trying to cut down on vapor, so there was nothing to stop the first waves of panic from settling over her.

“Are you all right?” Sok Torus asked.

“I’m fine,” Talia said, opening her eyes. “Didn’t anyone try to persuade her parents? They might not have changed their minds if someone explained what an opportunity this is.”

Sok Torus threw out his hands. “It is not my place to scrutinize the foundation,” he said. “I imagine they did everything to make them to reconsider.”
“What if I talk to them instead? They might feel more comfortable if they get to speak with a teacher.”

“That is out of the question.” Sok Torus leaned far back in his chair and exhaled slowly through puckered lips. “On this one I am afraid we will need to bite the bullet. It is unavoidable when dealing with this kind of people.”

With an hour to go before the start of her first class, Talia lingered in a restroom stall, waiting for her vaporizer to finish charging. The light on the cylinder turned green, but Talia didn’t raise it to her lips. Instead she stuffed it back inside her purse and went upstairs to her classroom. She found Heloise’s application folder in the top drawer of her desk. There was no phone number listed, only the address of an apartment building on the far side of town. “I’ve got a family emergency to deal with,” she told one of the native teachers in the lounge. “Do you think you could cover my morning classes for me?” She caught a taxi on the street and watched the clean, bright portion of the city recede behind her.

“Foreign lady be careful, okay,” the driver advised her as they approached the address. “Neighborhood is no good, many bad people about.”

Talia tipped the driver three euros, but didn’t thank him for his concern. She wasn’t worried about being careful right now. As she stepped out onto the cracked and uneven sidewalk, the stench of open sewer was almost overwhelming. She had to cover her face with her sleeve as she passed through the gate into the open courtyard. Shirtless boys with sunburned shoulders kicked a soccer ball back and forth across the pavement. They saw her coming and bolted indoors, leaving the ball to rest where it stopped rolling.
She followed the numbers to the apartment listed on Heloise’s application, a half-section of a duplex with two whitewashed doors arranged side by side with a shared jamb between them. Both apartments together appeared no bigger than a standard-sized American motel room. She knocked repeatedly on both doors until an infant’s shrill cries sounded through the open window. The door on the left-hand side jerked open and a frail Pwekoni of perhaps thirty years of age poked her face through the crack. The contrast between the tanned and peeling portions of her skin was so stark that Talia mistook her initially for a vitiligo sufferer.

“Good morning, ma’am,” Talia said. “Do you speak English?”

The woman coughed into her cupped hand. “English no. No speak.”

“I see. Perhaps one of your children could translate for me? Your daughter maybe?”

Her silver eyes sprang open and she withdrew behind the door like a frightened moray. “No more daughter,” she cried. “No have you more child mine. Go way. Go way now!”

“Ma’am, please, if I could just—”

The door slammed roughly into place and Talia leaned against it. She heard more dry hacking from the other side, and then someone behind her whistled. “Hey, foreign lady!” a voice called out to her. Talia turned around and saw one of the neighbors standing in an open doorway, an elderly little man in blue Nikes clutching a walking stick fashioned from an old pool cue. “You looking for girl who live there, you already too late. She gone last night.”

Talia took several hurried steps toward him. “Gone where?”
“Men they come and take her away. Pay her mother cash euros, say they give the girl job in factory.”

“A factory?” Talia clenched her jaw and slid her purse off her shoulder. Rummaging at the bottom of the pouch, she moved her vaporizer aside and took out her wallet. “I’ll pay you fifty euros if you take me to her,” she said. “Fifty euros cash. Just take me to the girl.”

The old Pwekoni ran a hand over his unshaven chin. “One hundred.”

Talia nodded. “Let’s go.”

The old man’s car was no worse than the taxi she had taken to the neighborhood—several wires wrapped in tape were sticking out from the dashboard, but the ignition worked with a key instead of a screwdriver. For a while they seemed to be circling the same area, moving slowly inward via hidden gaps and alleyways that cut seamlessly through the labyrinthine streets.

“When I was boy, all of this was oyster fields,” the old Pwekoni said. “Sometime I wake up mornings and dream I can still smell them in the air.”

He didn’t say anything more, not until he turned onto a street of tiny shuttered storefronts and pulled up to the curb. “Here are we.”

Talia looked up at the tattered red awning that was the only distinguishing feature of the otherwise drab building. Even the curtain of beads over the doorway seemed to blend in with the gray brick walls and the tepid rain puddles below them. “This is the factory?” she asked. “How is that possible?”
The old man folded the hundred euros into his shirt pocket. “This is place they bring all the children get hired,” he said. “Always they around. Always looking for new worker.”

Alone on the curb, Talia searched for the nearest street sign, spotting it a block up on the corner of the intersection she had passed coming in. She steadied her shaking hands and reached for her phone. Four rings and then the voicemail.

“David,” she said. “I’m about to do something really stupid and dangerous. I hope you’ll understand. I think something terrible might have happened to Heloise. Some men came and took her away from her parents. I’ve tracked them to a building on Lotus Street. The place with the red awning. If you don’t hear back from me in twenty minutes, call the police.”

Even after she ended the call and stood bracing for her entrance, Talia still couldn’t believe that the words on the voicemail had been hers, or that she was actually preparing to pass through the beaded curtain and expose herself to whatever dangers lay on the other side. But the curtain parted for her all the same, the reality or unreality of the danger rendered meaningless compared to safety of a girl she had never met in person.

There were tables draped in red nylon cloth, and there was a counter in the back where beer and wine could be purchased. A calendar on the wall showed a pastoral scene with cylindrical hay bales arranged across a freshly swathed plain. The men chewing steak didn’t look up from their plates, nor did a hostess arrive to greet Talia and show her to a seat. She followed a trail of vapor to a table at the far back of the room, where another patron was sitting alone and smoking, waiting to be served.
“What are you doing here?” she asked, stumbling into the empty chair across from him.

David looked up from the table and let the vaporizer fall from his hand. “I could ask the same of you,” he said.

“I left you a voicemail just now. Didn’t you see it?”

“I don’t have my phone with me.” David drank wine from a clear plastic cup.

Talia noticed his lips were trembling.

“What is this place?” she asked.

“It’s a restaurant.”

“I can see that. But why are you here? And where’s Heloise?”

“Who?”

“Heloise. Our student. The scholarship winner.”

“Oh, right. The girl.” David brought a hand to his face and removed his sunglasses. The eyes behind them were swollen and rimmed by dark circles. “I didn’t plan for this to happen,” he said. “I told myself. This time, I said…this time, you’re going to do good. This time you’re going to send one of them to school. And I wanted to. I really did. But the temptation was just too great. I couldn’t stop myself.”

“Stop yourself from what? What have you done?”

David sat up straight in the chair. He buttoned his coat and ran his fingers through his matted hair. The more presentable he tried to make himself, the more uncomfortable he appeared.
“I have a weakness,” he said. “No, that’s, that’s a poor choice of words. It’s more of a condition, really. A nervous impulse. They think it’s caused by growing up with an overly aggressive father. There have been studies on it. I can show them to you.”

“Studies on what? What are you trying to tell me?”

A server came out from the back holding a large porcelain plate across his arm. He carried it to the table and set it down in front of David. There was nothing on the plate but a steak, a slab of pale gray meat soaking in its own pink jus. No starch, no vegetables, only meat. A scrawny young man in the plain clothes of a street vendor, the server stood over the cooling plate and glared at David impatiently. David glanced from Talia to the server and back again. Then he removed his wallet from his pants pocket. He unfolded a roll of hundred euro notes and handed them off to the server. Talia’s mouth fell open.

There was at least five thousand there.

“Lady want meat too?” the server asked.

“No,” David said. “No meat for lady.”

Talia watched the server return to the kitchen. In doing so, she caught her first clear look at the other patrons—all foreign white men, sitting alone, eyes hidden by sunglasses or concealed under sweatshirt hoods. They were all eating steak, the silence of the room broken only by the clatter of silverware and the perverse moaning with which they savored the blood-rare meat. Seeing them tear into the gray slabs, Talia felt her heartbeat quicken as red juices expanded out and became muddled with the congealing grease on their plates.

“David,” she said. “Where is Heloise?”
David looked down at the costly meal that had been placed before him. He let out a long sigh and covered his lap with his napkin. “I’m not perfect, Talia,” he said. “But my company does a lot of good for the people of this island. I do a lot of good for them. And if I do bad every now and then, well, that’s just the price of progress. In a hundred years, no one will even care.”

Tears began to obscure Talia’s sight. Her breaths came out as spastic gasps as she found herself unable to control her own lungs. “David,” she said. “Where—is—Heloise?”

David cut a line down the center of the steak, revealing marbled layers of medium rare muscle and fat, and a core that was virtually raw. “I have a condition, Talia,” he said, skewering a bite with his fork. “Isn’t it better that I take it out on some nameless Pwekoni girl than on someone I care about?”

Out in the street, Talia ran as far as her lungs would take her and then stood panting and gasping with her shoulder against the wall. She reached for her vaporizer, but couldn’t keep her hands steady enough to ignite it. Her entire body felt seized by some force from outside itself. She bent over and tried to make herself vomit. Her throat made a violent gagging sound, but nothing came up. She tried again, straining the already clenched muscles of her chest and neck. The sound of her nightmare grew more intense, and still nothing came up.
APPENDIX A – PERMISSION TO REPRINT CHAPTER 1

APPENDIX B – PERMISSION TO REPRINT CHAPTER 2

APPENDIX C – PERMISSION TO REPRINT CHAPTER 3

APPENDIX D – PERMISSION TO REPRINT CHAPTER 4


[Email screenshot showing a conversation about permission to reprint the story]
APPENDIX E – PERMISSION TO REPRINT CHAPTER 5