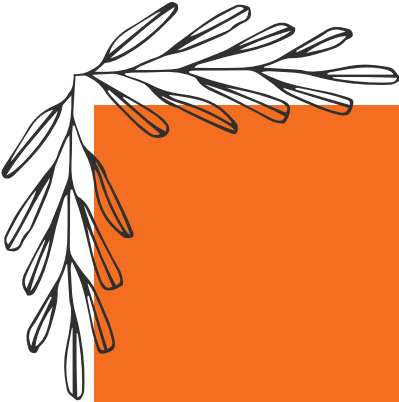




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Gillian Flynn

Sharp Objects

A NOVEL

B\D\W\Y
Broadway Books
NEW YORK

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

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Chapter One

My sweater was new, stinging red and ugly. It was May 12 but the temperature had dipped to the forties, and after four days shivering in my shirtsleeves, I grabbed cover at a tag sale rather than dig through my boxed-up winter clothes. Spring in Chicago.

In my gunny-covered cubicle I sat staring at the computer screen. My story for the day was a limp sort of evil. Four kids, ages two through six, were found locked in a room on the South Side with a couple of tuna sandwiches and a quart of milk. They'd been left three days, flurrying like chickens over the food and feces on the carpet. Their mother had wandered off for a suck on the pipe and just forgotten. Sometimes that's what happens. No cigarette burns, no bone snaps. Just an irretrievable slipping. I'd seen the mother after the arrest: twenty-two-year-old Tammy Davis, blonde and fat, with pink rouge on her cheeks in two perfect circles the size of shot glasses. I could imagine her sitting on a

shambled-down sofa, her lips on that metal, a sharp burst of smoke. Then all was fast floating, her kids way behind, as she shot back to junior high, when the boys still cared and she was the prettiest, a glossy-lipped thirteen-year-old who mouthed cinnamon sticks before she kissed.

A belly. A smell. Cigarettes and old coffee. My editor, esteemed, weary Frank Curry, rocking back in his cracked Hush Puppies. His teeth soaked in brown tobacco saliva.

“Where are you on the story, kiddo?” There was a silver tack on my desk, point up. He pushed it lightly under a yellow thumbnail.

“Near done.” I had three inches of copy. I needed ten.

“Good. Fuck her, file it, and come to my office.”

“I can come now.”

“Fuck her, file it, then come to my office.”

“Fine. Ten minutes.” I wanted my thumb-tack back.

He started out of my cubicle. His tie swayed down near his crotch.

“Preaker?”

“Yes, Curry?”

“Fuck her.”

Frank Curry thinks I’m a soft touch.

Might be because I'm a woman. Might be because I'm a soft touch.

Curry's office is on the third floor. I'm sure he gets panicky-pissed every time he looks out the window and sees the trunk of a tree. Good editors don't see bark; they see leaves—if they can even make out trees from up on the twentieth, thirtieth floor. But for the *Daily Post*, fourth-largest paper in Chicago, relegated to the suburbs, there's room to sprawl. Three floors will do, spreading relentlessly outward, like a spill, unnoticed among the carpet retailers and lamp shops. A corporate developer produced our township over three well-organized years—1961–64—then named it after his daughter, who'd suffered a serious equestrian accident a month before the job was finished. Aurora Springs, he ordered, pausing for a photo by a brand-new city sign. Then he took his family and left. The daughter, now in her fifties and fine except for an occasional tingling in her arms, lives in Florida and returns every few years to take a photo by her namesake sign, just like Pop.

I wrote the story on her last visit. Curry hated it, hates most slice-of-life pieces. He got

smashed off old Chambord while he read it, left his office smelling like raspberries. Curry gets drunk fairly quietly, but often. It's not the reason, though, that he has such a cozy view of the ground. That's just yawning bad luck.

I walked in and shut the door to his office, which isn't how I'd ever imagined my editor's office would look. I craved big oak panels, a window pane in the door—marked Chief—so the cub reporters could watch us rage over First Amendment rights. Curry's office is bland and institutional, like the rest of the building. You could debate journalism or get a Pap smear. No one cared.

"Tell me about Wind Gap." Curry held the tip of a ballpoint pen at his grizzled chin. I could picture the tiny prick of blue it would leave among the stubble.

"It's at the very bottom of Missouri, in the boot heel. Spitting distance from Tennessee and Arkansas," I said, hustling for my facts. Curry loved to drill reporters on any topics he deemed pertinent—the number of murders in Chicago last year, the demographics for Cook County, or, for some reason, the story of my hometown, a topic I preferred to avoid. "It's been around since before the Civil War," I continued. "It's near the Mississippi, so it was

a port city at one point. Now its biggest business is hog butchering. About two thousand people live there. Old money and trash.”

“Which are you?”

“I’m trash. From old money.” I smiled. He frowned.

“And what the hell is going on?”

I sat silent, cataloguing various disasters that might have befallen Wind Gap. It’s one of those crummy towns prone to misery: A bus collision or a twister. An explosion at the silo or a toddler down a well. I was also sulking a bit. I’d hoped—as I always do when Curry calls me into his office—that he was going to compliment me on a recent piece, promote me to a better beat, hell, slide over a slip of paper with a 1 percent raise scrawled on it—but I was unprepared to chat about current events in Wind Gap.

“Your mom’s still there, right, Preaker?”

“Mom. Stepdad.” A half sister born when I was in college, her existence so unreal to me I often forgot her name. Amma. And then Marian, always long-gone Marian.

“Well dammit, you ever talk to them?”

Not since Christmas: a chilly, polite call after administering three bourbons. I’d worried my mother could smell it through the phone lines.

“Not lately.”

“Jesus Christ, Preaker, read the wires sometime. I guess there was a murder last August? Little girl strangled?”

I nodded like I knew. I was lying. My mother was the only person in Wind Gap with whom I had even a limited connection, and she'd said nothing. Curious.

“Now another one's missing. Sounds like it might be a serial to me. Drive down there and get me the story. Go quick. Be there tomorrow morning.”

No way. “We got horror stories here, Curry.”

“Yeah, and we also got three competing papers with twice the staff and cash.” He ran a hand through his hair, which fell into frazzled spikes. “I'm sick of getting slammed out of news. This is our chance to break something. Big.”

Curry believes with just the right story, we'd become the overnight paper of choice in Chicago, gain national credibility. Last year another paper, not us, sent a writer to his hometown somewhere in Texas after a group of teens drowned in the spring floods. He wrote an elegiac but well-reported piece on the nature of water and regret, covered everything from the boys' basketball team,

which lost its three best players, to the local funeral home, which was desperately unskilled in cleaning up drowned corpses. The story won a Pulitzer.

I still didn't want to go. So much so, apparently, that I'd wrapped my hands around the arms of my chair, as if Curry might try to pry me out. He sat and stared at me a few beats with his watery hazel eyes. He cleared his throat, looked at his photo of his wife, and smiled like he was a doctor about to break bad news. Curry loved to bark—it fit his old-school image of an editor—but he was also one of the most decent people I knew.

“Look, kiddo, if you can't do this, you can't do it. But I think it might be good for you. Flush some stuff out. Get you back on your feet. It's a damn good story—we need it. You need it.”

Curry had always backed me. He thought I'd be his best reporter, said I had a surprising mind. In my two years on the job I'd consistently fallen short of expectations. Sometimes strikingly. Now I could feel him across the desk, urging me to give him a little faith. I nodded in what I hoped was a confident fashion.

“I'll go pack.” My hands left sweatprints on the chair.

I had no pets to worry about, no plants to leave with a neighbor. Into a duffel bag, I tucked away enough clothes to last me five days, my own reassurance I'd be out of Wind Gap before week's end. As I took a final glance around my place, it revealed itself to me in a rush. The apartment looked like a college kid's: cheap, transitory, and mostly uninspired. I promised myself I'd invest in a decent sofa when I returned as a reward for the stunning story I was sure to dig up.

On the table by the door sat a photo of a preteen me holding Marian at about age seven. We're both laughing. She has her eyes wide open in surprise, I have mine scrunched shut. I'm squeezing her into me, her short skinny legs dangling over my knees. I can't remember the occasion or what we were laughing about. Over the years it's become a pleasant mystery. I think I like not knowing.

I take baths. Not showers. I can't handle the spray, it gets my skin buzzing, like someone's turned on a switch. So I wadded a flimsy motel towel over the grate in the shower floor, aimed the nozzle at the wall, and sat in the three inches of water that

pooled in the stall. Someone else's pubic hair floated by.

I got out. No second towel, so I ran to my bed and blotted myself with the cheap spongy blanket. Then I drank warm bourbon and cursed the ice machine.

Wind Gap is about eleven hours south of Chicago. Curry had graciously allowed me a budget for one night's motel stay and breakfast in the morning, if I ate at a gas station. But once I got in town, I was staying at my mother's. That he decided for me. I already knew the reaction I'd get when I showed up at her door. A quick, shocked flustering, her hand to her hair, a mismatched hug that would leave me aimed slightly to one side. Talk of the messy house, which wouldn't be. A query about length of stay packaged in niceties.

"How long do we get to have you for, sweetness?" she'd say. Which meant: "When do you leave?"

It's the politeness that I find most upsetting.

I knew I should prepare my notes, jot down questions. Instead I drank more bourbon, then popped some aspirin, turned off the light. Lulled by the wet purr of the air conditioner and the electric plinking of some video game next door, I fell asleep. I was only thirty

miles outside my hometown, but I needed one last night away.

In the morning I inhaled an old jelly doughnut and headed south, the temperature shooting up, the lush forest imposing on both sides. This part of Missouri is ominously flat—miles of unmajestic trees broken only by the thin strip of highway I was on. The same scene repeating itself every two minutes.

You can't spot Wind Gap from a distance; its tallest building is only three stories. But after twenty minutes of driving, I knew it was coming: First a gas station popped up. A group of scraggly teenage boys sat out front, barechested and bored. Near an old pickup, a diapered toddler threw fistfuls of gravel in the air as his mother filled up the tank. Her hair was dyed gold, but her brown roots reached almost to her ears. She yelled something to the boys I couldn't make out as I passed. Soon after, the forest began to thin. I passed a scribble of a strip mall with tanning beds, a gun shop, a drapery store. Then came a lonely cul-de-sac of old houses, meant to be part of a development that never happened. And finally, town proper.

For no good reason, I held my breath as I passed the sign welcoming me to Wind Gap,

the way kids do when they drive by cemeteries. It had been eight years since I'd been back, but the scenery was visceral. Head down that road, and I'd find the home of my grade-school piano teacher, a former nun whose breath smelled of eggs. That path led to a tiny park where I smoked my first cigarette on a sweaty summer day. Take that boulevard, and I'd be on my way to Woodberry, and the hospital.

I decided to head directly to the police station. It squatted at one end of Main Street, which is, true to its word, Wind Gap's main street. On Main Street you will find a beauty parlor and a hardware store, a five-and-dime called Five-and-Dime, and a library twelve shelves deep. You'll find a clothing store called Candy's Casuals, in which you may buy jumpers, turtlenecks, and sweaters that have ducks and schoolhouses on them. Most nice women in Wind Gap are teachers or mothers or work at places like Candy's Casuals. In a few years you may find a Starbucks, which will bring the town what it yearns for: prepackaged, preapproved mainstream hipness. For now, though, there's just a greasy spoon, which is run by a family whose name I can't remember.

Main Street was empty. No cars, no people. A dog loped down the sidewalk, with

no owner calling after it. All the lamp-posts were papered with yellow ribbons and grainy photocopies of a little girl. I parked and peeled off one of the notices, taped crookedly to a stop sign at a child's height. The sign was homemade, "Missing," written at the top in bold letters that may have been filled in by Magic Marker. The photo showed a dark-eyed girl with a feral grin and too much hair for her head. The kind of girl who'd be described by teachers as a "handful." I liked her.

Natalie Jane Keene

Age: 10

Missing since 5/11

Last seen at Jacob J. Garrett Park,
wearing blue-jean shorts, red striped
T-shirt

Tips: 555-7377

I hoped I'd walk into the police station and be informed that Natalie Jane was already found. No harm done. Seems she'd gotten lost or twisted an ankle in the woods or ran away and then thought better of it. I would get in my car and drive back to Chicago and speak to no one.

Turns out the streets were deserted because half the town was out searching the

forest to the north. The station's receptionist told me I could wait—Chief Bill Vickery would be returning for lunch soon. The waiting room had the false homey feel of a dentist's office; I sat in an orange endchair and flipped through a *Redbook*. An air freshener plugged into a nearby outlet hissed out a plastic smell meant to remind me of country breezes. Thirty minutes later I'd gone through three magazines and was starting to feel ill from the scent. When Vickery finally walked in, the receptionist nodded at me and whispered with eager disdain, "Media."

Vickery, a slim fellow in his early fifties, had already sweated through his uniform. His shirt clung to his chest, and his pants puckered out in back where an ass should have been.

"Media?" He stared at me over looming bifocals. "What media?"

"Chief Vickery, I'm Camille Preaker, with the *Daily Post* in Chicago."

"Chicago? Why are you here from Chicago?"

"I'd like to speak with you about the little girls—Natalie Keene and the girl who was murdered last year."

"Jesus H. Christ. How'd you hear about this up there? Jesus Christ."

He looked at the receptionist, then back

to me, as if we'd collaborated. Then he motioned to me to follow. "Hold my calls, Ruth."

The receptionist rolled her eyes.

Bill Vickery walked ahead of me down a wood-paneled hallway checked with cheap framed photos of trout and horses, then into his office, which had no window, which was in fact a tiny square lined with metal files. He sat down, lit a cigarette. Didn't offer me one.

"I don't want this to get out, Miss. I have no intention of letting this get out."

"I'm afraid, Chief Vickery, that there's not too much choice in the matter. Children are being targeted. The public should be aware." It's the line I'd been mouthing on the drive down. It directs fault to the gods.

"What do you care? They're not your kids, they're Wind Gap kids." He stood up, sat back down, rearranged some papers. "I bet I'm pretty safe to say Chicago never cared about Wind Gap kids before." His voice cracked at the end. Vickery sucked on his cigarette, twisted a chunky gold pinky ring, blinked in quick succession. I wondered suddenly if he was going to cry.

"You're right. Probably not. Look, this isn't going to be some sort of exploitive story. It's important. If it makes you feel any better, I'm from Wind Gap." *There you go, Curry. I'm trying.*

He looked back at me. Stared at my face.

“What’s your name?”

“Camille Preaker.”

“How do I not know you?”

“Never got in trouble, sir.” I offered a slight smile.

“Your family’s Preaker?”

“My mother married out of her maiden name about twenty-five years ago. Adora and Alan Crellin.”

“Oh. Them I know.” Them everybody knew. Money was none too common in Wind Gap, not real money. “But I still don’t want you here, Miss Preaker. You do this story and from now on, people will only know us for . . . this.”

“Maybe some publicity would help,” I offered. “It’s helped in other cases.”

Vickery sat quiet for a second, pondering his paper-bag lunch crumpled at the corner of his desk. Smelled like bologna. He murmured something about JonBenét and shit.

“No thanks, Miss Preaker. And no comment. I have no comment on any ongoing investigations. You can quote me.”

“Look, I have the right to be here. Let’s make this easy. You give me some information. Something. Then I’ll stay out of your way for a while. I don’t want to make your job any harder. But I need to do mine.” It was

another little exchange I'd thought up somewhere near St. Louis.

I left the police station with a photocopied map of Wind Gap, on which Chief Vickery had drawn a tiny X to mark where the murdered girl's body was discovered last year.

Ann Nash, age nine, was found on August 27 in Falls Creek, a bumpy, noisy waterway that ran through the middle of the North Woods. Since nightfall on the twenty-sixth, when she went missing, a search party had combed the forest. But it was hunters who came across her just after 5 a.m. She'd been strangled close to midnight with a basic clothesline, looped twice around her neck. Then dumped in the creek, which was low from the long summer drought. The clothesline had snagged on a massive rock, and she'd spent the night drifting along in the lazy stream. The burial was closed coffin. This was all Vickery would give me. It took an hour of questions to get that much.

From the pay phone at the library I dialed the number on the Missing poster. An elderly female voice identified it as the Natalie Keene Hotline, but in the background I could hear a dishwasher churning. The woman informed me that so far as she knew, the search

was still going in the North Woods. Those who wanted to help should report to the main access road and bring their own water. Record temperatures were expected.

At the search site, four blonde girls sat stiffly on a picnic towel spread in the sun. They pointed toward one of the trails and told me to walk until I found the group.

“What are you doing here?” asked the prettiest. Her flushed face had the roundness of a girl barely in her teens and her hair was parted in ribbons, but her breasts, which she aimed proudly outward, were those of a grown woman. A lucky grown woman. She smiled as if she knew me, impossible since she’d have been a preschooler the last time I was in Wind Gap. She looked familiar, though. Maybe the daughter of one of my old schoolmates. The age would be right if someone got knocked up straight out of high school. Not unlikely.

“Just here to help,” I said.

“Right,” she smirked, and dismissed me by turning all her interest to picking the polish off a toenail.

I walked off the crunch of the hot gravel and into the forest, which only felt warmer. The air was jungle wet. Goldenrod and wild sumac bushes brushed my ankles, and fuzzy white cottonwood seeds floated everywhere,

slipping into my mouth, sticking to my arms. When I was a kid we called them fairy dresses, I remembered suddenly.

In the distance people were calling for Natalie, the three syllables rising and falling like song. Another ten minutes of hard hiking and I spotted them: about four dozen people walking in long rows, sifting the brush in front of them with sticks.

"Hello! Any news?" called out a beer-bellied man closest to me. I left the trail and threaded my way through the trees until I reached him.

"Can I help out at all?" I wasn't quite ready to whip out my notebook.

"You can walk beside me here," he said. "We can always use another person. Less ground to cover." We walked silently for a few minutes, my partner occasionally pausing to clear his throat with a wet, rocky cough.

"Sometimes I think we should just burn these woods," he said abruptly. "Seems like nothing good ever happens in them. You a friend of the Keenes?"

"I'm a reporter actually. *Chicago Daily Post*."

"Mmmm. . . . Well how 'bout that. You writing about all this?"

A sudden wail shot through the trees, a girl's scream: "Natalie!" My hands began sweat-

ing as we ran toward the cry. I saw figures tumbling toward us. A teenager with white-blond hair pushed past us onto the trail, her face red and bundled. She was stumbling like a frantic drunk, yelling Natalie's name at the sky. An older man, maybe her father, caught up with her, wrapped her in his arms, and began walking her out of the forest.

"They found her?" my friend called.

A collective head shaking. "She just got spooked, I think," another man called back. "Too much for her. Girls shouldn't be out here anyway, not as things stand." The man looked pointedly at me, took off his baseball cap to wipe his brow, then began sifting the grass again.

"Sad work," my partner said. "Sad time." We moved forward slowly. I kicked a rusted beer can out of my way. Then another. A single bird flew by at eye level, then shot straight up to the treetops. A grasshopper landed suddenly on my wrist. Creepy magic.

"Would you mind if I asked your thoughts on all this?" I pulled out my notebook, wagged it.

"Don't know I could tell you much."

"Just what you think. Two girls in a small town . . ."

"Well, no one knows these are related, right? Unless you know something I don't.

For all we know, Natalie will turn up safe and sound. Hasn't even been two days."

"Are there any theories about Ann?" I asked.

"Some loony, some crazy man musta done it. Some guy rides through town, forgot to take his pills, voices are talking to him. Something like 'at."

"Why do you say that?"

He stopped, pulled a package of chaw from his back pocket, buried a fat pinch in his gumline and worked it until he got the first tiny cut to let the tobacco in. The lining of my mouth began tingling in sympathy.

"Why else would you pull out a dead little girl's teeth?"

"He took her teeth?"

"All but the back part of a baby molar."

After another hour with no results and not much more information, I left my partner, Ronald Kamens ("write my middle initial too, if you will: *J*"), and hiked south toward the spot where Ann's body was found last year. Took fifteen minutes before the sound of Natalie's name drifted away. Ten more minutes and I could hear Falls Creek, the bright cry of water.

It would be hard to carry a child through

these woods. Branches and leaves strangle the pathway, roots bump up from the ground. If Ann was a true girl of Wind Gap, a town that demands utmost femininity in its fairer sex, she'd have worn her hair long down her back. It would have tangled itself in the passing brush. I kept mistaking spiderwebs for glimmering strands of hair.

The grass was still flattened along the point where the body was discovered, raked through for clues. There were a few recent cigarette butts that the idle curious had left behind. Bored kids scaring each other with sightings of a madman trailing bloody teeth.

In the creek, there'd been a row of stones that had snagged the clothesline around Ann's neck, leaving her tethered and floating in the stream like the condemned for half a night. Now, just smooth water rolling over sand. Mr. Ronald J. Kamens had been proud when he told me: The townsfolk had pried out the rocks, loaded them in the back of a pickup, and smashed them just outside town. It was a poignant gesture of faith, as if such destruction would ward off future evil. Seems it didn't work.

I sat down at the edge of the creek, running my palms over the rocky soil. Picked up a smooth, hot stone and pressed it against my cheek. I wondered if Ann had ever come

here when she was alive. Maybe the new generation of Wind Gap kids had found more interesting ways to kill summers. When I was a girl, we swam at a spot just downstream where huge table rocks made shallow pools. Crawdads would skitter around our feet and we'd jump for them, scream if we actually touched one. No one wore swimsuits, it took too much planning. Instead you just rode your bike home in soaked shorts and halters, shaking your head like a wet dog.

Occasionally older boys, equipped with shotguns and stolen beer, would tromp through on their way to shoot flying squirrels or hare. Bloody pieces of meat swung from their belts. Those kids, cocky and pissed and smelling of sweat, aggressively oblivious of our existence, always compelled me. There are different kinds of hunting, I know now. The gentleman hunter with visions of Teddy Roosevelt and big game, who retires from a day in the field with a crisp gin and tonic, is not the hunter I grew up with. The boys I knew, who began young, were blood hunters. They sought that fatal jerk of a shot-spun animal, fleeing silky as water one second, then cracked to one side by their bullet.

When I was still in grammar school, maybe twelve, I wandered into a neighbor boy's hunting shed, a wood-planked shack

where the animals were stripped and split. Ribbons of moist, pink flesh dangled from strings, waiting to be dried for jerky. The dirt floor was rusted with blood. The walls were covered with photographs of naked women. Some of the girls were spreading themselves wide, others were being held down and penetrated. One woman was tied up, her eyes glazed, breasts stretched and veined like grapes, as a man took her from behind. I could smell them all in the thick, gory air.

At home that night, I slipped a finger under my panties and masturbated for the first time, panting and sick.

Ready Player One

Ernest Cline

B\D\W\Y

Broadway Books

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First Mass Market Movie Tie-In Edition



Everyone my age remembers where they were and what they were doing when they first heard about the contest. I was sitting in my hideout watching cartoons when the news bulletin broke in on my video feed, announcing that James Halliday had died during the night.

I'd heard of Halliday, of course. Everyone had. He was the videogame designer responsible for creating the OASIS, a massively multiplayer online game that had gradually evolved into the globally networked virtual reality most of humanity now used on a daily basis. The unprecedented success of the OASIS had made Halliday one of the wealthiest people in the world.

At first, I couldn't understand why the media was making such a big deal of the billionaire's death.

After all, the people of Planet Earth had other concerns. The ongoing energy crisis. Catastrophic climate change. Widespread famine, poverty, and disease. Half a dozen wars. You know: “dogs and cats living together . . . mass hysteria!” Normally, the newsfeeds didn’t interrupt everyone’s interactive sitcoms and soap operas unless something really major had happened. Like the outbreak of some new killer virus, or another major city vanishing in a mushroom cloud. Big stuff like that. As famous as he was, Halliday’s death should have warranted only a brief segment on the evening news, so the unwashed masses could shake their heads in envy when the newscasters announced the obscenely large amount of money that would be doled out to the rich man’s heirs.

But that was the rub. James Halliday had no heirs.

He had died a sixty-seven-year-old bachelor, with no living relatives and, by most accounts, without a single friend. He’d spent the last fifteen years of his life in self-imposed isolation, during which time—if the rumors were to be believed—he’d gone completely insane.

So the real jaw-dropping news that January morning, the news that had everyone from Toronto to Tokyo crapping in their cornflakes, concerned the contents of Halliday’s last will and testament, and the fate of his vast fortune.

Halliday had prepared a short video message, along with instructions that it be released to the world media at the time of his death. He’d also

arranged to have a copy of the video e-mailed to every single OASIS user that same morning. I still remember hearing the familiar electronic chime when it arrived in my inbox, just a few seconds after I saw that first news bulletin.

His video message was actually a meticulously constructed short film titled *Anorak's Invitation*. A famous eccentric, Halliday had harbored a lifelong obsession with the 1980s, the decade during which he'd been a teenager, and *Anorak's Invitation* was crammed with obscure '80s pop culture references, nearly all of which were lost on me the first time I viewed it.

The entire video was just over five minutes in length, and in the days and weeks that followed, it would become the most scrutinized piece of film in history, surpassing even the Zapruder film in the amount of painstaking frame-by-frame analysis devoted to it. My entire generation would come to know every second of Halliday's message by heart.



Anorak's Invitation begins with the sound of trumpets, the opening of an old song called "Dead Man's Party."

The song plays over a dark screen for the first few seconds, until the trumpets are joined by a guitar, and that's when Halliday appears. But he's not a sixty-seven-year-old man, ravaged by time and illness. He looks just as he did on the cover of *Time* magazine back in 2014, a tall, thin, healthy man in his early forties, with unkempt hair and

his trademark horn-rimmed eyeglasses. He's also wearing the same clothing he wore in the *Time* cover photo: faded jeans and a vintage Space Invaders T-shirt.

Halliday is at a high-school dance being held in a large gymnasium. He's surrounded by teenagers whose clothing, hairstyles, and dance moves all indicate that the time period is the late 1980s.* Halliday is dancing, too—something no one ever saw him do in real life. Grinning maniacally, he spins in rapid circles, swinging his arms and head in time with the song, flawlessly cycling through several signature '80s dance moves. But Halliday has no dance partner. He is, as the saying goes, dancing with himself.

A few lines of text appear briefly at the lower left-hand corner of the screen, listing the name of the band, the song's title, the record label, and the year of release, as if this were an old music video airing on MTV: Oingo Boingo, "Dead Man's Party," MCA Records, 1985.

When the lyrics kick in, Halliday begins to lip-synch along, still gyrating: "All dressed up with nowhere to go. Walking with a dead man over my shoulder. Don't run away, it's only me. . . ."

He abruptly stops dancing and makes a cutting motion with his right hand, silencing the music. At the same moment, the dancers and the gymnasium

*Careful analysis of this scene reveals that all of the teenagers behind Halliday are actually extras from various John Hughes teen films who have been digitally cut-and-pasted into the video.

behind him vanish, and the scene around him suddenly changes.

Halliday now stands at the front of a funeral parlor, next to an open casket.* A second, much older Halliday lies inside the casket, his body emaciated and ravaged by cancer. Shiny quarters cover each of his eyelids.†

The younger Halliday gazes down at the corpse of his older self with mock sadness, then turns to address the assembled mourners.‡ Halliday snaps his fingers and a scroll appears in his right hand. He opens it with a flourish and it unfurls to the floor, unraveling down the aisle in front of him. He breaks the fourth wall, addressing the viewer, and begins to read.

“I, James Donovan Halliday, being of sound mind and disposing memory, do hereby make, publish, and declare this instrument to be my last will and testament, hereby revoking any and all wills and codicils by me at any time heretofore made. . . .” He continues reading, faster and faster, plowing through several more paragraphs of legalese, until he’s speaking so rapidly that the words

*His surroundings are actually from a scene in the 1989 film *Heathers*. Halliday appears to have digitally re-created the funeral parlor set and then inserted himself into it.

†High-resolution scrutiny reveals that both quarters were minted in 1984.

‡The mourners are actually all actors and extras from the same funeral scene in *Heathers*. Winona Ryder and Christian Slater are clearly visible in the audience, sitting near the back.

are unintelligible. Then he stops abruptly. “Forget it,” he says. “Even at that speed, it would take me a month to read the whole thing. Sad to say, I don’t have that kind of time.” He drops the scroll and it vanishes in a shower of gold dust. “Let me just give you the highlights.”

The funeral parlor vanishes, and the scene changes once again. Halliday now stands in front of an immense bank vault door. “My entire estate, including a controlling share of stock in my company, Gregarious Simulation Systems, is to be placed in escrow until such time as a single condition I have set forth in my will is met. The first individual to meet that condition will inherit my entire fortune, currently valued in excess of two hundred and forty billion dollars.”

The vault door swings open and Halliday walks inside. The interior of the vault is enormous, and it contains a huge stack of gold bars, roughly the size of a large house. “Here’s the dough I’m putting up for grabs,” Halliday says, grinning broadly. “What the hell. You can’t take it with you, right?”

Halliday leans against the stack of gold bars, and the camera pulls in tight on his face. “Now, I’m sure you’re wondering, what do you have to do to get your hands on all this moolah? Well, hold your horses, kids. I’m getting to that. . . .” He pauses dramatically, his expression changing to that of a child about to reveal a very big secret.

Halliday snaps his fingers again and the vault disappears. In the same instant, Halliday shrinks and morphs into a small boy wearing brown cor-

duroys and a faded *The Muppet Show* T-shirt.* The young Halliday stands in a cluttered living room with burnt orange carpeting, wood-paneled walls, and kitschy late-'70s decor. A 21-inch Zenith television sits nearby, with an Atari 2600 game console hooked up to it.

"This was the first videogame system I ever owned," Halliday says, now in a child's voice. "An Atari 2600. I got it for Christmas in 1979." He plops down in front of the Atari, picks up a joystick, and begins to play. "My favorite game was this one," he says, nodding at the TV screen, where a small square is traveling through a series of simple mazes. "It was called Adventure. Like many early videogames, Adventure was designed and programmed by just one person. But back then, Atari refused to give its programmers credit for their work, so the name of a game's creator didn't actually appear anywhere on the packaging." On the TV screen, we see Halliday use a sword to slay a red dragon, although due to the game's crude low-resolution graphics, this looks more like a square using an arrow to stab a deformed duck.

"So the guy who created Adventure, a man named Warren Robinett, decided to hide his name inside the game itself. He hid a key in one of the game's labyrinths. If you found this key, a small pixel-sized gray dot, you could use it to enter a

*Halliday now looks exactly as he did in a school photo taken in 1980, when he was eight years old.

secret room where Robinett had hidden his name.” On the TV, Halliday guides his square protagonist into the game’s secret room, where the words `CREATEDBYWARRENROBINETT` appear in the center of the screen.

“This,” Halliday says, pointing to the screen with genuine reverence, “was the very first videogame Easter egg. Robinett hid it in his game’s code without telling a soul, and Atari manufactured and shipped Adventure all over the world without knowing about the secret room. They didn’t find out about the Easter egg’s existence until a few months later, when kids all over the world began to discover it. I was one of those kids, and finding Robinett’s Easter egg for the first time was one of the coolest videogaming experiences of my life.”

The young Halliday drops his joystick and stands. As he does, the living room fades away, and the scene shifts again. Halliday now stands in a dim cavern, where light from unseen torches flickers off the damp walls. In the same instant, Halliday’s appearance also changes once again, as he morphs into his famous OASIS avatar, Anorak—a tall, robed wizard with a slightly more handsome version of the adult Halliday’s face (minus the eyeglasses). Anorak is dressed in his trademark black robes, with his avatar’s emblem (a large calligraphic letter “A”) embroidered on each sleeve.

“Before I died,” Anorak says, speaking in a much deeper voice, “I created my own Easter egg, and hid it somewhere inside my most popular videogame—the OASIS. The first person to find my Easter egg will inherit my entire fortune.”

Another dramatic pause.

“The egg is well hidden. I didn’t just leave it lying under a rock somewhere. I suppose you could say that it’s locked inside a safe that is buried in a secret room that lies hidden at the center of a maze located somewhere”—he reaches up to tap his right temple—“up here.

“But don’t worry. I’ve left a few clues lying around to get everyone started. And here’s the first one.” Anorak makes a grand gesture with his right hand, and three keys appear, spinning slowly in the air in front of him. They appear to be made of copper, jade, and clear crystal. As the keys continue to spin, Anorak recites a piece of verse, and as he speaks each line, it appears briefly in flaming subtitles across the bottom of screen:

*Three hidden keys open three secret gates
Wherein the errant will be tested for worthy traits
And those with the skill to survive these straits
Will reach The End where the prize awaits*

As he finishes, the jade and crystal keys vanish, leaving only the copper key, which now hangs on a chain around Anorak’s neck.

The camera follows Anorak as he turns and continues farther into the dark cavern. A few seconds later, he arrives at a pair of massive wooden doors set into the cavern’s rocky wall. These doors are banded with steel, and there are shields and dragons carved into their surfaces. “I couldn’t playtest this particular game, so I worry that I may have hidden my Easter egg a little too well. Made it too

difficult to reach. I'm not sure. If that's the case, it's too late to change anything now. So I guess we'll see."

Anorak throws open the double doors, revealing an immense treasure room filled with piles of glittering gold coins and jewel-encrusted goblets.* Then he steps into the open doorway and turns to face the viewer, stretching out his arms to hold open the giant double doors.†

"So without further ado," Anorak announces, "let the hunt for Halliday's Easter egg begin!" Then he vanishes in a flash of light, leaving the viewer to gaze through the open doorway at the glittering mounds of treasure that lay beyond.

Then the screen fades to black.



At the end of the video, Halliday included a link to his personal website, which had changed drastically on the morning of his death. For over a decade, the only thing posted there had been a short

*Analysis reveals dozens of curious items hidden among the mounds of treasure, most notably: several early home computers (an Apple IIe, a Commodore 64, an Atari 800XL, and a TRS-80 Color Computer 2), dozens of videogame controllers for a variety of game systems, and hundreds of polyhedral dice like those used in old tabletop role-playing games.

†A freeze-frame of this scene appears nearly identical to a painting by Jeff Easley that appeared on the cover of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*, a Dungeons & Dragons rulebook published in 1983.

looping animation that showed his avatar, Anorak, sitting in a medieval library, hunched over a scarred worktable, mixing potions and poring over dusty spellbooks, with a large painting of a black dragon visible on the wall behind him.

But now that animation was gone, and in its place there was a high-score list like those that used to appear in old coin-operated videogames. The list had ten numbered spots, and each displayed the initials JDH—James Donovan Halliday—followed by a score of six zeros. This high-score list quickly came to be known as “the Scoreboard.”

Just below the Scoreboard was an icon that looked like a small leather-bound book, which linked to a free downloadable copy of *Anorak's Almanac*, a collection of hundreds of Halliday's undated journal entries. The *Almanac* was over a thousand pages long, but it contained few details about Halliday's personal life or his day-to-day activities. Most of the entries were his stream-of-consciousness observations on various classic videogames, science-fiction and fantasy novels, movies, comic books, and '80s pop culture, mixed with humorous diatribes denouncing everything from organized religion to diet soda.

The Hunt, as the contest came to be known, quickly wove its way into global culture. Like winning the lottery, finding Halliday's Easter egg became a popular fantasy among adults and children alike. It was a game anyone could play, and at first, there seemed to be no right or wrong way to play it. The only thing *Anorak's Almanac* seemed

to indicate was that a familiarity with Halliday's various obsessions would be essential to finding the egg. This led to a global fascination with 1980s pop culture. Fifty years after the decade had ended, the movies, music, games, and fashions of the 1980s were all the rage once again. By 2041, spiked hair and acid-washed jeans were back in style, and covers of hit '80s pop songs by contemporary bands dominated the music charts. People who had actually been teenagers in the 1980s, all now approaching old age, had the strange experience of seeing the fads and fashions of their youth embraced and studied by their grandchildren.

A new subculture was born, composed of the millions of people who now devoted every free moment of their lives to searching for Halliday's egg. At first, these individuals were known simply as "egg hunters," but this was quickly truncated to the nickname "gunters."

During the first year of the Hunt, being a gunter was highly fashionable, and nearly every OASIS user claimed to be one.

When the first anniversary of Halliday's death arrived, the fervor surrounding the contest began to die down. An entire year had passed and no one had found anything. Not a single key or gate. Part of the problem was the sheer size of the OASIS. It contained thousands of simulated worlds where the keys might be hidden, and it could take a gunter years to conduct a thorough search of any one of them.

Despite all of the "professional" gunters who

boasted on their blogs that they were getting closer to a breakthrough every day, the truth gradually became apparent: No one really even knew exactly what it was they were looking for, or where to start looking for it.

Another year passed.

And another.

Still nothing.

The general public lost all interest in the contest. People began to assume it was all just an outlandish hoax perpetrated by a rich nut job. Others believed that even if the egg really did exist, no one was ever going to find it. Meanwhile, the OASIS continued to evolve and grow in popularity, protected from takeover attempts and legal challenges by the iron-clad terms of Halliday's will and the army of rabid lawyers he had tasked with administering his estate.

Halliday's Easter egg gradually moved into the realm of urban legend, and the ever-dwindling tribe of gunters gradually became the object of ridicule. Each year, on the anniversary of Halliday's death, newscasters jokingly reported on their continued lack of progress. And each year, more gunters called it quits, concluding that Halliday had indeed made the egg impossible to find.

And another year went by.

And another.

Then, on the evening of February 11, 2045, an avatar's name appeared at the top of the Scoreboard, for the whole world to see. After five long years, the Copper Key had finally been found, by

an eighteen-year-old kid living in a trailer park on the outskirts of Oklahoma City.

That kid was me.

Dozens of books, cartoons, movies, and mini-series have attempted to tell the story of everything that happened next, but every single one of them got it wrong. So I want to set the record straight, once and for all.

THE MOUNTAIN BETWEEN US

CHARLES MARTIN

B \ D \ W \ Y

Broadway Books

New York

FOR CHRIS FEREBEE

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

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PRELUDE

Hey . . .

I'm not sure what time it is. This thing should record that. I woke a few minutes ago. It's still dark. I don't know how long I was out.

The snow is spilling in through the windshield. It's frozen across my face. Hard to blink. Feels like dried paint on my cheeks. It just doesn't taste like dried paint.

I'm shivering . . . and it feels like somebody is sitting on my chest. Can't catch my breath. Maybe broke two or three ribs. Might have a collapsed lung.

The wind up here is steady, leaning against the tail of the fuselage . . . or what's left of it. Something above me, maybe a branch, is slapping the Plexiglas. Sounds like fingernails on a chalkboard. And more cold air is coming in behind me. Where the tail used to be.

I can smell gas. I guess both wings were still pretty full of fuel.

I feel like I want to throw up.

A hand is wrapped around mine. The fingers are cold and callused. There's a wedding band, worn thin around the edges. That's Grover.

He was dead before we hit the treetops. I'll never understand how he landed this thing without killing me, too.

When we took off, the ground temperature was in the single digits. Not sure what it is now. Feels colder. Our elevation should be around

11,500. Give or take. We couldn't have fallen more than five hundred feet when Grover dipped the wing. The control panel sits dark, unlit. Dusted in white. Every few minutes the GPS on the dash will flicker, then go black again.

There was a dog here somewhere. All teeth and muscle. Real short hair. About the size of a bread box. Makes angry gurgling sounds when he breathes. Looks like he's jacked up on speed. Wait . . .

"Hey, boy . . . Wait . . . no. Not there. Okay, lick, but don't jump. What's your name? You scared? Yeah . . . me too."

I can't remember his name.

I'm back . . . was I gone long? There's a dog here. Buried between my coat and armpit.

Did I already tell you about him? I can't remember his name.

He's shivering, and the skin around his eyes is quivering. Whenever the wind howls, he jumps up and growls at it.

The memory's foggy. Grover and I were talking, he was flying, maybe banking right, the dash flashed a buffet of blue and green lights, a carpet of black stretched out below us, not a lightbulb for sixty miles in any direction, and . . . there was a woman. Trying to get home to her fiancé and a rehearsal dinner. I'll look.

. . . I found her. Unconscious. Elevated pulse. Eyes are swollen shut. Pupils are dilated. Probably a concussion. Several lacerations across her face. A few will need stitches. Right shoulder is dislocated and left femur is broken. It didn't break the skin, but her leg is angling out and her pant leg is tight. I need to set it . . . once I catch my breath.

. . . It's getting colder. I guess the storm finally caught us. If I don't get us wrapped in something we'll freeze to death before daylight. I'll have to set that leg in the morning.

Rachel . . . I don't know how much time we have, don't know if we'll make it out . . . but . . . I take it all back. I was wrong. I was angry. I never should've said it. You were thinking about us. Not you. I can see that now.

You're right. Right all along. There's always a chance.

Always.

CHAPTER ONE

SALT LAKE CITY AIRPORT
TWELVE HOURS EARLIER

The view was ugly. Gray, dreary, January dragging on. On the TV screen behind me, some guy sitting in a studio in New York used the words “socked in.” I pressed my forehead to the glass. On the tarmac, guys in yellow suits drove trains of luggage that snaked around the planes, leaving snow flurries swirling in their exhaust. Next to me, a tired pilot sat on his flight-weathered leather case, hat in his hand—hoping for a last chance hop home and a night in his own bed.

To the west, clouds covered the runway; visibility near zero, but given the wind, it came and went. Windows of hope. The Salt Lake City airport is surrounded by mountains. Eastward, snowcapped mountains rose above the clouds. Mountains have long been an attraction for me. For a moment, I wondered what was on the other side.

My flight was scheduled to depart at 6:07 p.m., but given delays was starting to look like the red-eye. If at all. Annoyed by the flashing **DELAYED** sign, I moved to a corner on the floor, against a far wall. I spread patient files across my lap and began dictating my reports, diagnoses, and prescriptions into a digital

recorder. Folks I'd seen the week before I left. While I treated adults too, most of the files on my lap belonged to kids. Years ago Rachel, my wife, convinced me to focus on sports medicine in kids. She was right. I hated seeing them limp in, but loved watching them run out.

I had some more work to do, and the battery indicator on my digital recorder was flashing red, so I walked to the store in the terminal and found I could buy two AA batteries for four dollars or twelve for seven. I gave the lady seven dollars, replaced the batteries in my recorder, and slid the other ten into my backpack.

I had just returned from a medical conference in Colorado Springs, where I had been invited to join a panel on "The Intersection of Pediatric Orthopedics and Emergency Medicine." We covered ER procedures and the differing bedside manners needed to treat fearful kids. The venue was beautiful, the conference satisfied several of my continuing ed requirements, and most important, it gave me an excuse to spend four days climbing the Collegiate Peaks near Buena Vista, Colorado. In truth, it was a business trip that satisfied my hiking addiction. Many doctors buy Porsches and big homes and pay for country club memberships they seldom use. I take long runs on the beach and climb mountains when I can get to them.

I'd been gone a week.

My return trip took me from Colorado Springs to Salt Lake for the direct flight home. Airline travel never ceases to amaze me; flying west to end up east. The crowd in the airport had thinned. Most folks were home by this time on a Sunday. Those still in the airport were either at their gate, waiting, or at the bar, hovering over a beer and a basket of nachos or hot wings.

Her walk caught my attention. Long, slender legs; purposeful gait, yet graceful and rhythmic. Comfortable, and confident, in her own skin. She was maybe five foot nine or ten, dark-haired,

and attractive, but not too concerned about it. Maybe thirty. Her hair was short. Think Winona Ryder in *Girl, Interrupted*. Or Julia Ormond in Harrison Ford's remake of *Sabrina*. Not a lot of fuss, yet you could find the same style up and down Manhattan with girls who'd paid a lot of money to look like that. My bet was that she had paid very little. Or she could have paid a lot to make it look like she paid a little.

She walked up, eyed the crowd across the terminal, and then chose a spot ten or fifteen feet away on the floor. I watched her out of the corner of my eye. Dark pantsuit, a leather attaché, and one carry-on. Looked like she was returning from a business overnight. She set down her bags, tied on a pair of Nike running shoes, then, eyeing the terminal, sat on the floor and stretched. Based on the fact that not only her head, but also her chest and stomach could touch her thigh and the floor between her legs, I surmised that she had done that before. Her legs were muscular, like an aerobics instructor's. After she stretched a few minutes, she pulled several yellow legal pads from her attaché, flipped through pages of handwritten notes, and started typing on her laptop. Her fingers moved at the speed of hummingbird wings.

After a few minutes, her laptop beeped. She frowned, stuck her pencil between her teeth, and began eyeballing the wall for an outlet. I was using half. She was holding the swinging end of her laptop's power cord.

"Mind if I share?"

"Sure."

She plugged in and then sat cross-legged with the computer on the floor, surrounded by her legal pads. I continued with my files.

"Follow-up orthopedics consultation dated . . ." I studied my calendar, trying to resurrect the date. "January 23. This is Dr. Ben Payne. Patient's name is Rebecca Peterson, identifying

data follows. Date of birth, 7-6-95, medical record number BMC2453, Caucasian female, star right wing on her soccer team, leading scorer in Florida, highly recruited by teams around the country, at last count she had fourteen Division I offers; surgery three weeks ago, post op was normal, presenting no complications, followed by aggressive physical therapy; presents full range of motion, bend test 127 degrees, strength test shows marked improvement, as does agility. She's good as new, or in her words, better. Rebecca reports movement is pain free, and she is free to resume all activities . . . except skateboarding. She is to stay off the skateboard until she's at least thirty-five."

I turned to the next file. "Initial orthopedics consultation dated January 23. This is Dr. Ben Payne."

I say the same thing each time because in the electronic world in which we live, each recording is separate and, if lost, needs to be identified.

"Patient's name is Rasheed Smith, identifying data follows. Date of birth, 2-19-79, medical record number BMC17437, black male, starting defensive back for the Jacksonville Jaguars and one of the fastest human beings I've ever been around. MRI confirms no tear in the ACL or MCL, recommend aggressive physical therapy and that he stay off the YMCA basketball court until he's finished playing professional football. Range of motion is limited due to pain and tenderness, which should subside given therapy during the off-season. Can resume limited strength and speed training with cessation in pain. Schedule two-week follow-up and call the YMCA and tell them to revoke his membership."

I slid the files into my backpack and noticed she was laughing.

"You a doctor?"

"Surgeon." I held up the manila folders. "Last week's patients."

"You really get to know your patients, don't you?" She shrugged.
"Sorry, I couldn't help but overhear."

I nodded. "Something my wife taught me."

"Which is?"

"That people are more than the sum of their blood pressure plus their pulse divided by their body mass index."

She laughed again. "You're my kind of doctor."

I nodded at her pads. "And you?"

"Columnist." She waved her hand across the papers in front of her. "I write for several different women's magazines."

"What kind of topics do you cover?"

"Fashion, trends, a lot of humor or satire, some relationships, but I'm not Jane Doe and I don't do gossip."

"I can't write my way out of a wet paper bag. How many will you write in a year?"

She weighed her head side to side. "Forty, maybe fifty." She glanced at my recorder. "Most doctors I know loathe those things."

I turned it in my hand. "I'm seldom without it."

"Like an albatross?"

I laughed. "Something like that."

"Take much getting used to?"

"It's grown on me. Now I couldn't live without it."

"Sounds like a story here."

"Rachel . . . my wife, gave it to me. I was driving the moving truck to Jacksonville. Moving our life back home. Joining the staff at the hospital. She was afraid of the schedule. Of finding herself on the couch, a doctor's widow, a gallon of Häagen-Dazs and the Lifeway channel. This . . . was a way to hear the sound of each other's voice, to be together, to not miss the little things . . . between surgery, making rounds, and the sound of my beeper at two a.m. She'd keep it a day or so, speak her

mind . . . or heart, then pass the baton. I'd keep it a day or two, or maybe three, and pass it back."

"Wouldn't a cell phone do the same thing?"

I shrugged. "It's different. Try it sometime and you'll see what I mean."

"How long you been married?"

"We married . . . fifteen years ago this week." I glanced at her hand. A single diamond decorated her left hand. Absent was the wedding band. "You got one coming up?"

She couldn't control the smile. "I'm trying to get home for my rehearsal dinner party tomorrow night."

"Congratulations."

She shook her head and smiled, staring out across the crowd. "I have a million things to do, and yet here I am making notes on a story about a flash-in-the-pan fashion I don't even like."

I nodded. "You're probably a good writer."

A shrug. "They keep me around. I've heard that there are people who buy these magazines just to read my column, though I've never met them." Her charm was magnetic. She asked, "Jacksonville still home?"

"Yep. And you?"

"Atlanta." She handed me her card. *ASHLEY KNOX*.

"Ashley."

"To everyone but my dad, who calls me Asher. He wanted a boy, was mad at my mom when I appeared with the wrong equipment, or lack thereof, so he changed the ending. Instead of ballet and softball he took me to tae kwon do."

"Let me guess . . . you're one of those crazy people who can kick stuff off the top of other people's heads."

She nodded.

"That would explain the stretching and chest to the floor thing."

She nodded again, like she didn't need to impress me.

"What degree?"

She held up three fingers.

"I worked on a guy a few weeks ago, put a few rods and screws in his shin."

"How'd he do it?"

"Kicked his opponent, who blocked it with an elbow. The shin kept going. Sort of folded it the wrong way."

"I've seen that before."

"You say that like you've been cut on."

"I competed a lot in my teens and early twenties. National championships. Several countries. I broke my fair share of bones and joints. There was a time when my orthopedist in Atlanta was on speed dial. So is this trip work, play, or both?"

"I'm returning from a medical conference, where I sat on a panel, and . . ." I smiled. "Got in some climbing on the side."

"Climbing?"

"Mountains."

"Is that what you do when you're not cutting on people?"

I laughed. "I have two hobbies. Running is one . . . it's how I met Rachel. Started in high school. Tough habit to break. When we moved back home we bought a condo on the beach so we could chase the tide in and out. The second is climbing mountains, something we started while attending medical school in Denver. Well, I attended, she kept me sane. Anyway, there are fifty-four peaks in Colorado higher than 14,000 feet. Locals call them 'fourteeners.' There's an unofficial club of folks who have climbed them all. We started checking them off in medical school."

"How many have you climbed?"

"Twenty. Just added Mt. Princeton. 14,197 feet. It's one of the Collegiate Peaks."

She thought about that a minute. “That’s almost three miles above sea level.”

I nodded. “Close, but not quite.”

“How long does something like that take?”

“Normally a day or less, but conditions this time of year make it a bit”—I shifted my head back and forth—“tougher.”

She laughed. “You need oxygen?”

“No, but acclimating helps.”

“Was it covered in snow and ice?”

“Yes.”

“And was it bitter cold, snowing and blowing like crazy?”

“I’ll bet you’re a good journalist.”

“Well . . . was it?”

“At times.”

“Did you make it up and down without dying?”

I laughed. “Evidently.”

One eyebrow rose above the other. “So, you’re one of those people?”

“What type is that?”

“The ‘man versus wild’ type.”

I shook my head. “Weekend warrior. I’m most at home at sea level.”

She stared up and down the rows of people. “Your wife’s not with you?”

“Not this time.”

My stomach growled. The aroma from the California Pizza Kitchen wafted down the terminal. I stood. “You mind watching my stuff?”

“Sure.”

“Be right back.”

I returned with a Caesar salad and a plate-sized pepperoni pizza just as the loudspeaker cackled.

“Folks, if we can load quickly, we might beat this storm.

There aren't too many of us, so all zones, all passengers, please board Flight 1672 to Atlanta."

The eight gates around me read *DELAYED*. Frustrated faces populated the seats and walls. A mom and dad ran the length of the terminal hollering over their shoulders at two boys dragging Star Wars suitcases and plastic lightsabers.

I grabbed my pack and my food, and then followed seven other passengers—including Ashley—toward the plane. I found my seat and buckled in, the attendants cross-checked, and we began backing up. It was the fastest load I'd ever seen.

The plane stopped, the pilot got on the intercom: "Folks, we're in line for the deicer, and if we can get them over here, we might beat this storm. By the way, there's plenty of room up front. As a matter of fact, if you're not in first class, it's your own fault. We've got room for everyone."

Everyone moved.

The only remaining seat placed me next to Ashley. She looked up and smiled as she was buckling her belt. "Think we'll get out of here?"

I stared out the window. "Doubtful."

"Pessimist, are you?"

"I'm a doctor. That makes me an optimist with realistic notions."

"Good point."

We sat for thirty minutes while the attendants served us most anything we asked for. I drank spicy tomato juice. Ashley drank Cabernet.

The pilot came on again. His tone did not encourage me. "Folks . . . as you all know, we were trying to beat this storm."

I heard the past tense.

"The controllers in the tower tell us we've got about an hour's window to make it out before the storm closes in. . . ."

Everyone breathed a collective sigh. Maybe there was hope.

“But the ground crew just informed me that one of our two deicing trucks is inoperative. Which means we have one truck attempting to service all the planes on the runway, and ours is the twentieth in line. Long story short, we’re not getting out of here tonight.”

Groans echoed around the plane.

Ashley unbuckled and shook her head. “You got to be kidding me.”

A large man off to my left muttered, “Son of a . . .”

The pilot continued, “Our folks will meet you at the end of the gate. If you’d like a hotel voucher, please see Mark, who’s wearing the red coat and flak jacket. Once you reclaim your baggage, our shuttle will take you to the hotel. Folks, I’m really sorry.”

We walked back into the terminal and watched as each of the DELAYED signs changed to CANCELED.

I spoke for everyone in the terminal. “That’s not good.”

I walked to the counter. The female attendant stood staring at a computer screen, shaking her head. Before I opened my mouth, she turned toward the television, which was tuned to the weather channel. “I’m sorry, there’s nothing I can do.”

Four screens over my shoulder showed a huge green blob moving east-southeast from Washington, Oregon, and northern California. The ticker at the bottom of the screen called for snow, ice, single-digit temperatures, and wind chills in the negatives. A couple to my left embraced in a passionate kiss. Smiling. An unscheduled day added to their vacation.

Mark began handing out hotel vouchers and ushering people toward baggage claim. I had one carry-on—a small daypack that doubled as my briefcase—and one checked bag in the belly of the plane. We were all headed to baggage claim whether we liked it or not.

I walked toward the baggage claim and lost Ashley when she stopped at the Natural Snacks store. I found a place near the conveyor belt and looked around. Through the sliding glass doors, I saw the lights of the private airport less than a mile away. Painted on the side of the closest hangar, in huge letters, was one word: CHARTERS.

The lights were on in one of the hangars. My bag appeared. I hefted it atop my free shoulder and bumped into Ashley, who was waiting on hers. She eyed it.

“You weren’t kidding when you said you got in some climbing on the side. Looks like you’re climbing Everest. You really need all that?”

My bag is an orangish Osprey 70 backpack, and it’s got a few miles on it. I use it as a suitcase because it works, but its main function is best served hiking and it fits me like a glove. It was stuffed with all my overnight and cold-weather hiking gear for my climbs in the Collegiate Peaks. Sleeping bag, Therm-a-Rest pad, Jetboil stove—maybe the most underappreciated and most valuable piece of equipment I own, next to my sleeping bag—a couple of Nalgene bottles, a few layers of polypropylene, and several other odds and ends that help me stay alive and comfortable when sleeping above ten or eleven thousand feet. There was also a dark blue pin-striped suit, a handsome blue tie that Rachel gave me, and a pair of Johnston & Murphy’s, which I wore once, for the panel.

“I know my limitations, and I’m not made for Everest. I get pretty sick above fifteen thousand. I’m okay below that. These”—I hefted the pack—“are just the essentials. Good idea to have along.”

She spotted her bag and turned to run it down, then turned back, a pained expression on her face. Apparently the idea of missing her wedding was starting to sink in, bleeding away her

charm. She extended her hand. Her grip was firm yet warm.
“Great to meet you. Hope you can get home.”

“Yeah, you—”

She never heard me. She turned, threw her bag over her shoulder, and headed toward the taxi lane where a hundred people stood in line.

Big Little Lies

by Liane Moriarty



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1.

That doesn't sound like a school trivia night," said Mrs. Patty Ponder to Marie Antoinette. "That sounds like a riot."

The cat didn't respond. She was dozing on the couch and found school trivia nights to be trivial.

"Not interested, eh? Let them eat cake! Is that what you're thinking? They do eat a lot of cake, don't they? All those cake stalls. Goodness me. Although I don't think any of the mothers ever actually eat them. They're all so sleek and skinny, aren't they? Like you."

Marie Antoinette sneered at the compliment. The "let them eat cake" thing had grown old a long time ago, and she'd recently heard one of Mrs. Ponder's grandchildren say it was meant to be "let them eat brioche" and also that Marie Antoinette never said it in the first place.

Mrs. Ponder picked up her television remote and turned down the volume on *Dancing with the Stars*. She'd turned it up loud earlier because of the sound of the heavy rain, but the downpour had eased now.

She could hear people shouting. Angry hollers crashed through the quiet, cold night air. It was somehow hurtful for Mrs. Ponder to hear, as if all that rage were directed at her. (Mrs. Ponder had grown up with an angry mother.)

“Goodness me. Do you think they’re arguing over the capital of Guatemala? Do you know the capital of Guatemala? No? I don’t either. We should Google it. Don’t sneer at me.”

Marie Antoinette sniffed.

“Let’s go see what’s going on,” said Mrs. Ponder briskly. She was feeling nervous and therefore behaving briskly in front of the cat, the same way she’d once done with her children when her husband was away and there were strange noises in the night.

Mrs. Ponder heaved herself up with the help of her walker. Marie Antoinette slid her slippery body comfortably in between Mrs. Ponder’s legs (she wasn’t falling for the brisk act) as she pushed the walker down the hallway to the back of the house.

Her sewing room looked straight out onto the school yard of Pirriwee Public.

“Mum, are you mad? You can’t live this close to a primary school,” her daughter had said when she was first looking at buying the house.

But Mrs. Ponder loved to hear the crazy babble of children’s voices at intervals throughout the day, and she no longer drove, so she couldn’t care less that the street was jammed with those giant, truck-like cars they all drove these days, with women in big sunglasses leaning across their steering wheels to call out terribly urgent information about Harriett’s ballet and Charlie’s speech therapy.

Mothers took their mothering so seriously now. Their frantic little faces. Their busy little bottoms strutting into the school in their tight gym gear. Ponytails swinging. Eyes fixed on the mobile phones held in the palms of their hands like compasses. It made Mrs. Ponder laugh. Fondly though. Her three daughters, although older, were exactly the same. And they were all so pretty.

“How are you this morning?” she always called out if she was on the front porch with a cup of tea or watering the front garden as they went by.

“Busy, Mrs. Ponder! Frantic!” they always called back, trotting along, yanking their children’s arms. They were pleasant and friendly and just a touch condescending because they couldn’t help it. She was so old! They were so busy!

The fathers, and there were more and more of them doing the school run these days, were different. They rarely hurried, strolling past with a measured casualness. No big deal. All under control. That was the message. Mrs Ponder chuckled fondly at them too.

But now it seemed the Pirriwee Public parents were misbehaving. She got to the window and pushed aside the lace curtain. The school had recently paid for a window guard after a cricket ball had smashed the glass and nearly knocked out Marie Antoinette. (A group of Year 3 boys had given her a hand-painted apology card, which she kept on her fridge.)

There was a two-story sandstone building on the other side of the playground with an event room on the second level and a big balcony with ocean views. Mrs. Ponder had been there for a few functions: a talk by a local historian, a lunch hosted by the Friends of the Library. It was quite a beautiful room. Sometimes ex-students had their wedding receptions there. That’s where they’d be having the school trivia night. They were raising funds for SMART Boards, whatever they were. Mrs. Ponder had been invited as a matter of course. Her proximity to the school gave her a funny sort of honorary status, even though she’d never had a child or grandchild attend. She’d said no thank you to the school trivia night invitation. She thought school events without the children in attendance were pointless.

The children had their weekly school assembly in the same room. Each Friday morning, Mrs. Ponder set herself up in the sewing room with a cup of English Breakfast and a ginger-nut biscuit. The sound of the children singing floating down from the second floor of the building always made her weep. She'd never believed in God, except when she heard children singing.

There was no singing now.

Mrs. Ponder could hear a lot of bad language. She wasn't a prude about bad language—her eldest daughter swore like a trooper—but it was upsetting and disconcerting to hear someone maniacally screaming that particular four-letter word in a place that was normally filled with childish laughter and shouts.

"Are you all drunk?" she said.

Her rain-splattered window was at eye level with the entrance doors to the building, and suddenly people began to spill out. Security lights illuminated the paved area around the entrance like a stage set for a play. Clouds of mist added to the effect.

It was a strange sight.

The parents at Pirriwee Public had a baffling fondness for costume parties. It wasn't enough that they should have an ordinary trivia night; she knew from the invitation that some bright spark had decided to make it an "Audrey and Elvis" trivia night, which meant that the women all had to dress up as Audrey Hepburn and the men had to dress up as Elvis Presley. (That was another reason Mrs. Ponder had turned down the invitation. She'd always abhorred costume parties.) It seemed that the most popular rendition of Audrey Hepburn was the *Breakfast at Tiffany's* look. All the women were wearing long black dresses, white gloves and pearl chokers. Meanwhile, the men had mostly chosen to pay tribute to the Elvis of the latter years. They were all wearing shiny white

jumpsuits, glittery gemstones and plunging necklines. The women looked lovely. The poor men looked perfectly ridiculous.

As Mrs. Ponder watched, one Elvis punched another across the jaw. He staggered back into an Audrey. Two Elvises grabbed him from behind and pulled him away. An Audrey buried her face in her hands and turned aside, as though she couldn't bear to watch. Someone shouted, "Stop this!"

Indeed. What would your beautiful children think?

"Should I call the police?" wondered Mrs. Ponder out loud, but then she heard the wail of a siren in the distance, at the same time as a woman on the balcony began to scream and scream.

Gabrielle: It wasn't like it was just the mothers, you know. It wouldn't have happened without the dads. I guess it *started* with the mothers. We were the main players, so to speak. The mums. I can't stand the word "mum." It's a frumpy word. "Mom" is better. With an *o*. It sounds skinnier. We should change to the American spelling. I have body-image issues, by the way. Who doesn't, right?

Bonnie: It was all just a terrible misunderstanding. People's feelings got hurt, and then everything just spiraled out of control. The way it does. All conflict can be traced back to someone's feelings getting hurt, don't you think? Divorce. World wars. Legal action. Well, maybe not every legal action. Can I offer you an herbal tea?

Stu: I'll tell you exactly why it happened: *Women don't let things go*. Not saying the blokes don't share part of the

blame. But if the girls hadn't gotten their knickers in a knot . . . And that might sound sexist, but it's not, it's just a fact of life. Ask any man—not some new-age, artsy-fartsy, I-wear-moisturizer type, I mean a real man—ask a real man, then he'll tell you that women are like the Olympic athletes of grudges. You should see my wife in action. And she's not even the worst of them.

Miss Barnes: Helicopter parents. Before I started at Pirriwee Public, I thought it was an exaggeration, this thing about parents being overly involved with their kids. I mean, my mum and dad loved me, they were, like, *interested* in me when I was growing up in the nine-ties, but they weren't, like, *obsessed* with me.

Mrs. Lipmann: It's a tragedy, and deeply regrettable, and we're all trying to move forward. I have no further comment.

Carol: I blame the Erotic Book Club. But that's just me.

Jonathan: There was nothing erotic about the Erotic Book Club, I'll tell you that for free.

Jackie: You know what? I see this as a feminist issue.

Harper: Who said it was a feminist issue? What the heck? I'll tell you what started it: the *incident* at the kindergarten orientation day.

Graeme: My understanding was that it all goes back to the stay-at-home mums battling it out with the career

mums. What do they call it? The Mummy Wars. My wife wasn't involved. She doesn't have time for that sort of thing.

Thea: You journalists are just loving the French-nanny angle. I heard someone on the radio today talking about the "French maid," which Juliette was certainly not. Renata had a housekeeper as well. Lucky for some. I have four children, and no staff to help out! Of course, I don't have a problem *per se* with working mothers, I just wonder why they bothered having children in the first place.

Melissa: You know what I think got everyone all hot and bothered? The head lice. Oh my gosh, don't let me get started on the head lice.

Samantha: The head lice? What did that have to do with anything? Who told you that? I bet it was Melissa, right? That poor girl suffered post-traumatic stress disorder after her kids kept getting reinfected. Sorry. It's not funny. It's not funny at all.

Detective-Sergeant Adrian Quinlan: Let me be clear: This is not a circus. This is a murder investigation.

2.

Six Months Before the Trivia Night

Forty. Madeline Martha Mackenzie was forty years old today. “I am forty,” she said out loud as she drove. She drew the word out in slow motion, like a sound effect. *“Fooorty.”*

She caught the eye of her daughter in the rearview mirror. Chloe grinned and imitated her mother. “I am five. *Fiiiive.*”

“Forty!” trilled Madeline like an opera singer. “Tra la la la!”

“Five!” trilled Chloe.

Madeline tried a rap version, beating out the rhythm on the steering wheel. “I’m forty, yeah, forty—”

“That’s enough now, Mummy,” said Chloe firmly.

“Sorry,” said Madeline.

She was taking Chloe to her kindergarten—“Let’s Get Kindy Ready!”—orientation. Not that Chloe required any orientation before starting school next January. She was already very firmly oriented at Pirriwee Public. At this morning’s drop-off Chloe had been busy taking charge of her brother, Fred, who was two years older but often seemed younger. “Fred, you forgot to put your book bag in the basket! That’s it. In there. Good boy.”

Fred had obediently dropped his book bag in the appropriate basket before running off to put Jackson in a headlock. Madeline had pretended not to see the headlock. Jackson probably deserved

it. Jackson's mother, Renata, hadn't seen it either, because she was deep in conversation with Harper, both of them frowning earnestly over the stress of educating their gifted children. Renata and Harper attended the same weekly support group for parents of gifted children. Madeline imagined them all sitting in a circle, wringing their hands while their eyes shone with secret pride.

While Chloe was busy bossing the other children around at orientation (her gift was bossiness, she was going to run a corporation one day), Madeline was going to have coffee and cake with her friend Celeste. Celeste's twin boys were starting school next year too, so they'd be running amuck at orientation. (Their gift was shouting. Madeline had a headache after five minutes in their company.) Celeste always bought exquisite and very expensive birthday presents, so that would be nice. After that, Madeline was going to drop Chloe off with her mother-in-law, and then have lunch with some friends before they all rushed off for school pickup. The sun was shining. She was wearing her gorgeous new Dolce & Gabbana stilettos (bought online, thirty percent off). It was going to be a lovely, lovely day.

"Let the Festival of Madeline begin!" her husband, Ed, had said this morning when he brought her coffee in bed. Madeline was famous for her fondness of birthdays and celebrations of all kinds. Any excuse for champagne.

Still. Forty.

As she drove the familiar route to the school, she considered her magnificent new age. Forty. She could still feel "forty" the way it felt when she was fifteen. Such a colorless age. Marooned in the middle of your life. Nothing would matter all that much

when you were forty. You wouldn't have real feelings when you were forty, because you'd be safely cushioned by your frumpy forty-ness.

Forty-year-old woman found dead. Oh dear.

Twenty-year-old woman found dead. Tragedy! Sadness! Find that murderer!

Madeline had recently been forced to do a minor shift in her head when she heard something on the news about a woman dying in her forties. *But, wait, that could be me! That would be sad! People would be sad if I was dead! Devastated, even. So there, age-obsessed world. I might be forty, but I am cherished.*

On the other hand, it was probably perfectly natural to feel sadder over the death of a twenty-year-old than a forty-year-old. The forty-year-old had enjoyed twenty years more of life. That's why, if there was a gunman on the loose, Madeline would feel obligated to throw her middle-aged self in front of the twenty-year-old. Take a bullet for youth. It was only fair.

Well, she would, if she could be sure it was a nice young person. Not one of those insufferable ones, like the child driving the little blue Mitsubishi in front of Madeline. She wasn't even bothering to hide the fact that she was using her mobile phone while she drove, probably *texting* or updating her Facebook status.

See! This kid wouldn't have even noticed the loose gunman! She would have been staring vacantly at her phone, while Madeline sacrificed her life for her! It was infuriating.

The little car appeared to be jammed with young people. At least three in the back, their heads bobbing about, hands gesticulating. Was that somebody's foot waving about? It was a tragedy waiting to happen. They all needed to concentrate. Just last week, Madeline had been having a quick coffee after her ShockWave

class and was reading a story in the paper about how all the young people were killing themselves by sending texts while they drove. *On my way. Nearly there!* These were their last foolish (and often misspelled) words. Madeline had cried over the picture of one teenager's grief-stricken mother, absurdly holding up her daughter's mobile phone to the camera as a warning to readers.

"Silly little idiots," she said out loud as the car weaved dangerously into the next lane.

"Who is an idiot?" said her daughter from the backseat.

"The girl driving the car in front of me is an idiot because she's driving her car and using her phone at the same time," said Madeline.

"Like when you need to call Daddy when we're running late?" said Chloe.

"I only did that one time!" protested Madeline. "And I was very careful and very quick! And I'm *forty* years old!"

"Today," said Chloe knowledgeably. "You're forty years old today."

"Yes! Also, I made a quick call, I didn't send a text! You have to take your eyes off the road to text. Texting while driving is illegal and naughty, and you must promise to never ever do it when you're a teenager."

Her voice quivered at the thought of Chloe being a teenager and driving a car.

"But you're allowed to make a quick phone call?" checked Chloe.

"No! That's illegal too," said Madeline.

"So that means you broke the law," said Chloe with satisfaction. "Like a *robber*."

Chloe was currently in love with the idea of robbers. She

was definitely going to date bad boys one day. Bad boys on motorcycles.

“Stick with the nice boys, Chloe!” said Madeline after a moment. “Like Daddy. Bad boys don’t bring you coffee in bed, I’ll tell you that for free.”

“What are you babbling on about, woman?” sighed Chloe. She’d picked this phrase up from her father and imitated his weary tone perfectly. They’d made the mistake of laughing the first time she did it, so she’d kept it up, and said it just often enough, and with perfect timing, so that they couldn’t help but keep laughing.

This time Madeline managed not to laugh. Chloe currently trod a very fine line between adorable and obnoxious. Madeline probably trod the same line herself.

Madeline pulled up behind the little blue Mitsubishi at a red light. The young driver was *still* looking at her mobile phone. Madeline banged on her car horn. She saw the driver glance in her rearview mirror, while all her passengers craned around to look.

“Put down your phone!” she yelled. She mimicked texting by jabbing her finger in her palm. “It’s illegal! It’s dangerous!”

The girl stuck her finger up in the classic up-yours gesture.

“Right!” Madeline pulled on her emergency brake and put on her hazard lights.

“What are you doing?” said Chloe.

Madeline undid her seat belt and threw open the car door.

“But we’ve got to go to orientation!” said Chloe in a panic. “We’ll be late! Oh, *calamity!*”

“Oh, calamity” was a line from a children’s book that they used to read to Fred when he was little. The whole family said it now. Even Madeline’s parents had picked it up, and some of Madeline’s friends. It was a very contagious phrase.

"It's all right," said Madeline. "This will only take a second. I'm saving young lives."

She stalked up to the girl's car on her new stilettos and banged on the window.

The window slid down, and the driver metamorphosed from a shadowy silhouette into a real young girl with white skin, sparkly nose ring and badly applied, clumpy mascara. She looked up at Madeline with a mixture of aggression and fear. "What is your *problem*?" Her mobile phone was still held casually in her left hand.

"Put down that phone! You could kill yourself and your friends!" Madeline used the exact same tone she used on Chloe when she was being extremely naughty. She reached in the car, grabbed the phone and tossed it to the openmouthed girl in the passenger seat. "OK? Just stop it!"

She could hear their gales of laughter as she walked back to her SUV. She didn't care. She felt pleasantly stimulated. A car pulled up behind hers. Madeline smiled, lifted her hand apologetically and hurried back to be in her car before the lights changed.

Her ankle turned. One second it was doing what an ankle was meant to do, and the next it was flipping out at a sickeningly wrong angle. She fell heavily on one side. Oh, calamity.

That was almost certainly the moment the story began.

With the ungainly flip of an ankle.

THE
MAGICIAN'S LAND

A Novel

LEV GROSSMAN



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CHAPTER 1

The letter had said to meet in a bookstore.

It wasn't much of a night for it: early March, drizzling and cold but not quite cold enough for snow. It wasn't much of a bookstore either. Quentin spent fifteen minutes watching it from a bus shelter at the edge of the empty parking lot, rain drumming on the plastic roof and making the asphalt shine in the streetlights. Not one of your charming, quirky bookstores, with a ginger cat on the windowsill and a shelf of rare signed first editions and an eccentric, bewhiskered proprietor behind the counter. This was just another strip-mall outpost of a struggling chain, squeezed in between a nail salon and a Party City, twenty minutes outside Hackensack off the New Jersey Turnpike.

Satisfied, Quentin crossed the parking lot. The enormous bearded cashier didn't look up from his phone when the door jingled. Inside you could still hear the noise of cars on the wet road, like long strips of paper tearing, one after another. The only unexpected touch was a wire birdcage in one corner, but where you would have expected a parrot or a cockatoo inside there was a fat blue-black bird instead. That's how un-charming this store was: it had a crow in a cage.

Quentin didn't care. It was a bookstore, and he felt at home in bookstores, and he hadn't had that feeling much lately. He was going to enjoy it. He pushed his way back through the racks of greeting cards and cat calendars, back to where the actual books were, his glasses steaming up and his coat dripping on the thin carpet. It didn't matter where

you were, if you were in a room full of books you were at least halfway home.

The store should have been empty, coming up on nine o'clock on a cold rainy Thursday night, but instead it was full of people. They browsed the shelves silently, each one on his or her own, slowly wandering the aisles like sleepwalkers. A jewel-faced girl with a pixie cut was reading Dante in Italian. A tall boy with large curious eyes who couldn't have been older than sixteen was absorbed in a Tom Stoppard play. A middle-aged black man with elfin cheekbones stood staring at the biographies through thick, iridescent glasses. You would almost have thought they'd come there to buy books. But Quentin knew better.

He wondered if it would be obvious, if he would know right away, or if there would be a trick to it. If they'd make him guess. He was getting to be a pretty old dog—he'd be thirty this year—but this particular game was new to him.

At least it was warm inside. He took off his glasses and wiped them with a cloth. He'd just gotten them a couple of months ago, the price of a lifetime of reading fine print, and they were still an unfamiliar presence on his face: a windshield between him and the world, always slipping down his nose and getting smudged when he pushed them up again. When he put them back on he noticed a sharp-featured young woman, girl-next-door pretty, if you happened to live next door to a grad student in astrophysics. She was standing in a corner paging through a big, expensive architectural-looking volume. Piranesi drawings: vast shadowy vaults and cellars and prisons, haunted by great wooden engines.

Quentin knew her. Her name was Plum. She felt him watching her and looked up, raising her eyebrows in mild surprise, as if to say *you're kidding—you're in on this thing too?*

He shook his head once, very slightly, and looked away, keeping his face carefully blank. Not to say *no, I'm not in on this, I just come here for the novelty coffee mugs and their trenchant commentary on the little ironies of everyday life*. What he meant was: *let's pretend we don't know each other*.

It was looking like he had some time to kill so he joined the browsers, scanning the spines for something to read. The Fillory books were there, of course, shelved in the young adult section, repackaged and rebranded

with slick new covers that made them look like supernatural romance novels. But Quentin couldn't face them right now. Not tonight, not here. He took down a copy of *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* instead and spent ten contented minutes at a checkpoint in gray 1950s Berlin.

"Attention, Bookbumpers patrons!" the cashier said over the PA, though the store was small enough that Quentin could hear his unamplified voice perfectly clearly. "Attention! Bookbumpers will be closing in five minutes! Please make your final selections!"

He put the book back. An old woman in a beret that looked like she'd knitted it herself bought a copy of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and let herself out into the night. So not her. The skinny kid who'd been camped out cross-legged in the graphic novels section, reading them to rags, left without buying anything. So not him either. A tall, bluff-looking guy with Cro-Magnon hair and a face like a stump who'd been furiously studying the greeting cards, pretty clearly overthinking his decision, finally bought one. But he didn't leave.

At nine o'clock exactly the big cashier closed the door and locked it with a final, fateful jingle, and suddenly Quentin was all nerves. He was on a carnival ride, and the safety bar had dropped, and now it was too late to get off. He took a deep breath and frowned at himself, but the nerves didn't go away. The bird shuffled its feet in the seeds and droppings on the bottom of its cage and squawked once. It was a lonely kind of squawk, the kind you'd hear if you were out by yourself on a rainy moor, lost, with darkness closing in fast.

The cashier walked to the back of the store—he had to excuse himself past the guy with the cheekbones—and opened a gray metal door marked STAFF ONLY.

"Through here."

He sounded bored, like he did this every night, which for all Quentin knew he did. Now that he was standing up Quentin could see that he really was huge—six foot four or five and deep-chested. Not pumped, but with broad shoulders and that aura of slow inexorability that naturally enormous men have. His face was noticeably asymmetrical: it bulged out on one side as if he'd been slightly overinflated. He looked like a gourd.

Quentin took the last spot in line. He counted eight others, all of them looking around cautiously and taking exaggerated care not to jostle one another, as if they might explode on contact. He worked a tiny revelation charm to make sure there was nothing weird about the door—he made an OK sign with his thumb and forefinger and held it up to one eye like a monocle.

“No magic,” the cashier said. He snapped his fingers at Quentin. “Guy. Hey. No spells. No magic.”

Heads turned.

“Sorry?”

Quentin played dumb. Nobody called him Your Majesty anymore, but he didn’t think he was ready to answer to *guy* yet. He finished his inspection. It was a door and nothing more.

“Cut it out. No magic.”

Pushing his luck, Quentin turned and studied the clerk. Through the lens he could see something small shining in his pocket, a talisman that might have been related to sexual performance. The rest of him shone too, as if he were covered in phosphorescent algae. Weird.

“Sure.” He dropped his hands and the lens vanished. “No problem.”

Someone rapped on the windowpane. A face appeared, indistinct through the wet glass. The cashier shook his head, but whoever it was rapped again, harder.

He sighed.

“What the shit.”

He unlocked the front door and after a whispered argument let in a man in his twenties, dripping wet, red-faced but otherwise sportscaster-handsome, wearing a windbreaker that was way too light for the weather. Quentin wondered where he’d managed to get a sunburn in March.

They all filed into the back room. It was darker than Quentin expected, and bigger too; real estate must come cheap out here on the turnpike. There were steel shelves crammed full of books flagged with fluorescent-colored stickies; a couple of desks in one corner, the walls in front of them shingled with shift schedules and taped-up *New Yorker* cartoons; stacks of cardboard shipping boxes; a busted couch; a busted

armchair; a mini-fridge—it must have doubled as the break room. Half of it was just wasted space. The back wall was a steel shutter that opened onto a loading dock.

A handful of other people were coming in through another door in the left-hand wall, looking just as wary. Quentin could see another bookstore behind them, a nicer one, with old lamps and oriental rugs. Probably a ginger cat too. He didn't need magic to know that it wasn't a door at all but a portal to somewhere else, some arbitrary distance away. There—he caught a telltale hairline seam of green light along one edge. The only thing behind that wall in reality was Party City.

Who were they all? Quentin had heard rumors about dog-and-pony shows like this before, gray-market cattle calls, work for hire, but he'd never seen one himself. He definitely never thought he'd go to one, not in a million years. He never thought it would come to that. Stuff like this was for people on the fringes of the magical world, people scrambling to get in, or who'd lost their footing somehow and slipped out of the bright warm center of things, all the way out to the cold margins of the real world. All the way out to a strip mall in Hackensack in the rain. Things like this weren't for people like him.

Except now they were. It had come to that. He was one of them, these were his people. Six months ago he'd been a king in a magic land, another world, but that was all over. He'd been kicked out of Fillory, and he'd been kicked around a fair bit since then, and now he was just another striver, trying to scramble back in, up the slippery slope, back toward the light and the warmth.

Plum and the man with the iridescent glasses sat on the couch. Red Face took the busted armchair. Pixie Cut and the teenage Stoppard reader sat on boxes. The rest of them stood—there were twelve, thirteen, fourteen in all. The cashier shut the gray door behind them, cutting off the last of the noise from the outside world, and snuffed out the portal.

He'd brought the birdcage with him; now he placed it on top of a cardboard box and opened it to let the crow out. It looked around, shaking first one foot then the other the way birds do.

"Thank you all for coming," it said. "I will be brief."

That was unexpected. Judging from the ripple of surprise that ran through the room, he wasn't the only one. You didn't see a lot of talking birds on Earth, that was more of a Fillorian thing.

"I'm looking for an object," the bird said. "I will need help taking it from its present owners."

The bird's glossy feathers shone darkly in the glow of the hanging lights. Its voice echoed in the half-empty stockroom. It was a soft, mild-mannered voice, not hoarse at all like you'd expect from a crow. It sounded incongruously human—however it was producing speech, it had nothing to do with its actual vocal apparatus. But that was magic for you.

"So stealing," an Indian guy said. Not like it bothered him, he just wanted clarification. He was older than Quentin, forty maybe, balding and wearing an unbelievably bad multicolored wool sweater.

"Theft," the bird said. "Yes."

"Stealing back, or stealing?"

"What is the difference?"

"I would merely like to know whether we are the bad guys or the good guys. Which of you has a rightful claim on the object?"

The bird cocked its head thoughtfully.

"Neither party has an entirely valid claim," it said. "But if it makes a difference our claim is superior to theirs."

That seemed to satisfy the Indian guy, though Quentin wondered if he would have had a problem either way.

"Who are you?" somebody called out. The bird ignored that.

"What is the object?" Plum asked.

"You'll be told after you've accepted the job."

"Where is it?" Quentin asked.

The bird shifted its weight back and forth.

"It is in the northeastern United States of America." It half spread its wings in what might have been a bird-shrug.

"So you don't know," Quentin said. "So finding it is part of the job."

The bird didn't deny it. Pixie Cut scooted forward, which wasn't easy on the broken-backed couch, especially in a skirt that short. Her hair was black with purple highlights, and Quentin noticed a couple of

blue star tattoos peeking out of her sleeves, the kind you got in a safe house. He wondered how many more she had underneath. He wondered what she'd done to end up here.

"So we're finding and we're stealing and I'm guessing probably doing some fighting in between. What kind of resistance are you expecting?"

"Can you be more specific?"

"Security, how many people, who are they, how scary. Is that specific enough?"

"Yes. We are expecting two."

"Two magicians?"

"Two magicians, plus some civilian staff. Nothing out of the ordinary, as far as I know."

"As far as you know!" The red-faced man guffawed loudly. He seemed on further examination to be a little insane.

"I do know that they have been able to place an incorporate bond on the object. The bond will have to be broken, obviously."

A stunned silence followed this statement, then somebody made an exasperated noise. The tall man who'd been shopping for greeting cards snorted as if to say *can you believe this shit?*

"Those are supposed to be unbreakable," Plum said coolly.

"You're wasting our time!" Iridescent Glasses said.

"An incorporate bond has never been broken," the bird said, not at all bothered—or were its feathers just slightly ruffled? "But we believe that it is theoretically possible, with the right skills and the right resources. We have all the skills we need in this room."

"What about the resources?" Pixie Cut asked.

"The resources can be obtained."

"So that's also part of the job," Quentin said. He ticked them off on his fingers. "Obtaining the resources, finding the object, breaking the bond, taking the object, dealing with the current owners. Correct?"

"Yes. Payment is two million dollars each, cash or gold. A hundred thousand tonight, the rest once we have the object. Make your decisions now. Bear in mind that if you say no you will find yourself unable to discuss tonight's meeting with anyone else."

Satisfied that it had made its case, the bird fluttered up to perch on top of its cage.

It was more than Quentin had expected. There were probably easier and safer ways in this world for a magician to earn two million dollars, but there weren't many that were this quick, or that were right in front of him. Even magicians needed money sometimes, and this was one of those times. He had to get back into the swim of things. He had work to do.

"If you're not interested, please leave now," the cashier said. Evidently he was the bird's lieutenant. He might have been in his mid-twenties. His black beard covered his chin and neck like brambles.

The Cro-Magnon guy stood up.

"Good luck." He turned out to have a thick German accent. "You gonna need this, huh?"

He skimmed the greeting card into the middle of the room and left. It landed face up: GET WELL SOON. Nobody picked it up.

About a third of the room shuffled out with him, off in search of other pitches and better offers. Maybe this wasn't the only show in town tonight. But it was the only one Quentin knew about, and he didn't leave. He watched Plum, and Plum watched him. She didn't leave either. They were in the same boat—she must be scrabbling too.

The red-faced guy stood against the wall by the door.

"See ya!" he said to each person as they passed him. "Buh-bye!"

When everybody who was going to leave had left the cashier closed the door again. They were down to eight: Quentin, Plum, Pixie, Red Face, Iridescent Glasses, the teenager, the Indian guy, and a long-faced woman in a flowing dress with a lock of white hair over her forehead; the last two had come in through the other door. The room felt even quieter than it had before, and strangely empty.

"Are you from Fillory?" Quentin asked the bird.

That got some appreciative laughter, though he wasn't joking, and the bird didn't laugh. It didn't answer him either. Quentin couldn't read its face; like all birds, it had only one expression.

"Before we go any further each of you must pass a simple test of magical strength and skill," the bird said. "Lionel here"—it meant the

cashier—"is an expert in probability magic. Each of you will play a hand of cards with him. If you beat him you will have passed the test."

There were some disgruntled noises at this new revelation, followed by another round of discreet mutual scoping-out. From the reaction Quentin gathered that this wasn't standard practice.

"What's the game?" Plum asked.

"The game is Push."

"You must be joking," Iridescent Glasses said, disgustedly. "You really don't know anything, do you?"

Lionel had produced a pack of cards and was shuffling and bridging it fluently, without looking, his face blank.

"I know what I require," the bird said stiffly. "I know that I am offering a great deal of money for it."

"Well, I didn't come here to play games."

The man stood up.

"Well why the fuck did you come here?" Pixie asked brightly.

"You may leave at any time," the bird said.

"Maybe I will."

He walked to the door, pausing with his hand on the knob, as if he were expecting somebody to stop him. Nobody did. The door shut after him.

Quentin watched Lionel shuffle. The man obviously knew how to handle a deck; the cards leapt around obligingly in his large hands, neatly and cleanly, the way they did for a pro. He thought about the entrance exam he'd taken to get into Brakebills, what was it, thirteen years ago now? He hadn't been too proud to take a test then. He sure as hell wasn't now.

And he used to be a bit of a pro at this himself. Cards were stage magic, close-up magic. This was where he started out.

"All right," Quentin said. He got up, flexing his fingers. "Let's do it."

He dragged a desk chair over noisily and sat down opposite Lionel. As a courtesy Lionel offered him the deck. Quentin took it.

He stuck to a basic shuffle, trying not to look too slick. The cards were stiff but not brand new. They had the usual industry-standard anti-manipulation charms on them, nothing he hadn't seen before. It felt

good to have them in his hands. He was back on familiar ground. Without being obvious about it, he got a look at a few face cards and put them where they wouldn't go to waste. It had been a while, a long while, but this was a game he knew something about. Back in the day Push had been a major pastime among the Physical Kids.

It was a childishly simple game. Push was a lot like War—high card wins—with some silly added twists to break ties (toss cards into a hat; once you get five in, score it like a poker hand; etc.). But the rules weren't the point; the point of Push was to cheat. There was a lot of strange magic in cards: a shuffled deck wasn't a fixed thing, it was a roiling cloud of possibilities, and nothing was ever certain till the cards were actually played. It was like a box with a whole herd of Schrödinger's cats in it. With a little magical know-how you could alter the order in which your cards came out; with a little more you could guess what your opponent was going to play before she played it; with a bit more you could play cards that by all the laws of probability rightfully belonged to your opponent, or in the discard pile, or in some other deck entirely.

Quentin handed back the cards, and the game began.

They started slow, trading off low cards, easy tricks, both holding serve. Quentin counted cards automatically, though there was a limit to how much good it could do—when magicians played the cards had a way of changing sides, and cards you thought were safely deceased and out of play had a way of coming back to life. He'd been curious what caliber of talent got involved in these kinds of operations, and he was revising his estimates sharply upward. It was obvious he wasn't going to overwhelm Lionel with brute force.

Quentin wondered where he'd trained. Brakebills, probably, same as he had; there was a precise, formal quality to his magic that you didn't see coming out of the safe houses. Though there was something else too: it had a cold, sour, alien tang to it—Quentin could almost taste it. He wondered if Lionel was quite as human as he looked.

There were twenty-six tricks in a hand of Push, and halfway through neither side had established an advantage. But on the fourteenth trick Quentin overreached—he burned some of his strength to force a king to the top of his deck, only to waste it on a deuce from Lionel. The

mismatch left him off balance, and he lost the next three tricks in a row. He clawed back two more by stealing cards from the discard pile, but the preliminaries were over. From here on out it was going to be a dogfight.

The room narrowed to just the table. It had been a while since Quentin had seen his competitive spirit, but it was rousing itself from its long slumber. He wasn't going to lose this thing. That wasn't going to happen. He bore down. He could feel Lionel probing, trying to shove cards around within the unplayed deck, and he shoved back. They blew all four aces in as many tricks, all-out, hammer and tongs. For kicks Quentin split his concentration and used a simple spell to twitch the sex amulet out of Lionel's pocket and onto the floor. But if that distracted Lionel he didn't show it.

Probability fields began to fluctuate crazily around them—invisible, but you could see secondary effects from them in the form of minor but very unlikely chance occurrences. Their hair and clothes stirred in impalpable breezes. A card tossed to one side might land on its edge and balance there, or spin in place on one corner. A mist formed above the table, and a single flake of snow sifted down out of it. The onlookers backed away a few steps. Quentin beat a jack of hearts with the king, then lost the next trick with the exact same cards reversed. He played a deuce—and Lionel swore under his breath when he realized he was somehow holding the extra card with the rules of poker on it.

Reality was softening and melting in the heat of the game. On the second-to-last trick Lionel played the queen of spades, and Quentin frowned—did her face look the slightest bit like Julia's? Either way there was no such thing as a one-eyed queen, let alone one with a bird on her shoulder. He spent his last king against it, or he thought he did: when he laid it down it had become a jack, a suicide jack at that, which again there was no such card, especially not one with white hair like his own.

Even Lionel looked surprised. Something must be twisting the cards—it was like there was some invisible third player at the table who was toying with both of them. With his next and last card it became clear that Lionel had lost all control over his hand because he turned

over a queen of no known suit, a Queen of Glass. Her face was translucent cellophane, sapphire-blue. It was Alice, to the life.

“What the shit,” Lionel said, shaking his head.

What the shit was right. Quentin clung to his nerve. The sight of Alice’s face shook him, it froze his gut, but it also stiffened his resolve. It reminded him what he was doing here. He was not going to panic. In fact he was going to take advantage of this—Alice was going to help him. The essence of close-up magic is misdirection, and with Lionel distracted Quentin pulled a king of clubs out of his boot with numb fingers and slapped it down. He tried to ignore the gray suit the king wore, and the branch that was sprouting in front of his face.

It was over. Game and match. Quentin sat back and took a deep, shaky breath.

“Good,” the bird said simply. “Next.”

Lionel didn’t look happy, but he didn’t say anything either, just crouched down and collected his amulet from under the table. Quentin got up and went to stand against the wall with others, his knees weak, his heart still racing, revving past the red line.

He was happy to get out of the game with a win, but he’d thought he would. He hadn’t thought he’d see his long-lost ex-girlfriend appear on a face card. What just happened? Maybe someone here knew more about him than they should. Maybe they were trying to throw him off his game. But who? Who would bother? Nobody cared if he won or lost, not anymore. As far as he knew the only person who cared right now was Quentin.

Maybe he was doing it himself—maybe his own subconscious was reaching up from below and warping his spellwork. Or was it Alice herself, wherever she was, whatever she was, watching him and having a little fun? Well, let her have it. He was focused on the present, that was what mattered. He had work to do. He was getting his life back together. The past had no jurisdiction here. Not even Alice.

The red-faced guy won his game with no signs of anything out of the ordinary. So did the Indian guy. The woman with the shock of white hair went out early, biting her lip as she laid down a blatantly impossible five deuces in a row, followed by a joker, then a *Go Directly to Jail!* card

from Monopoly. The kid got a bye for some reason—the bird didn't make him play at all. Plum got a bye too. Pixie passed faster than any of them, either because she was that strong or because Lionel was getting tired.

When it was all over Lionel handed the woman who'd lost a brick of hundred-dollar bills for her trouble. He handed another one to the red-faced man.

"Thank you for your time," the bird said.

"Me?" The man stared down at the money in his hand. "But I passed!"

"Yes," Lionel said. "But you got here late. And you seem like kind of an asshole."

The man's face got even redder than it already was.

"Go ahead," Lionel said. He spread his arms. "Make a move."

The man's face twitched, but he wasn't so angry or so crazy that he couldn't read the odds.

"Fuck you!" he said.

That was his move. He slammed the door behind him.

Quentin dropped into the armchair the man had just vacated, even though it was damp from his wet windbreaker. He felt limp and wrung out. He hoped the testing was over with, he wouldn't have trusted himself to cast anything right now. Counting him there were only five left: Quentin, Plum, Pixie, the Indian guy, and the kid.

This all seemed a hell of a lot more real than it had half an hour ago. It wasn't too late, he could still walk away. He hadn't seen any deal-breakers yet, but he hadn't seen a lot to inspire confidence either. This could be his way back in, or it could be the road to somewhere even worse. He'd spent enough time already on things that went nowhere and left him with nothing. He could walk out, back into the rainy night, back into the cold and the wet.

But he didn't. It was time to turn things around. He was going to make this work. It wasn't like he had a lot of better offers.

"You think this is going to be enough?" Quentin asked the bird. "Just five of us?"

"Six, with Lionel. And yes. In fact I would say that it is exactly right."

"Well, don't keep us in suspense," Pixie said. "What's the target?"

The bird didn't keep them in suspense.

"The object we are looking for is a suitcase. Brown leather, average size, manufactured 1937, monogrammed *RCJ*. The make is Louis Vuitton."

It actually had a pretty credible French accent.

"Fancy," she said. "What's in it?"

"I do not know."

"You don't know?" It was the first time the teenage boy had spoken. "Why the hell do you want it then?"

"In order to find out."

"Huh. What do the initials stand for?"

"Rupert John Chatwin," the bird said crisply.

The kid looked confused. His lips moved.

"I don't get it," he said. "Wouldn't the *C* come last?"

"It's a monogram, dumbass," Pixie said. "The last name goes in the middle."

The Indian guy was rubbing his chin.

"Chatwin." He was trying to place the name. "Chatwin. But isn't that—?"

It sure is, Quentin thought, though he didn't say anything. He didn't move a muscle. It sure as hell is.

Chatwin: that name chilled him even more than the night and the rain and the bird and the cards had. By rights he should have gone the rest of his life without hearing it again. It had no claim on him anymore, and vice versa. He and the Chatwins were through.

Except it seemed that they weren't. He'd said good-bye and buried them and mourned them—the Chatwins, Fillory, Plover, Whitespire—but there must still be some last invisible unbroken strand connecting them to him. Something deeper than mourning. The wound had healed, but the scar wouldn't fade, not quite. Quentin felt like an addict who'd just caught the faintest whiff of his drug of choice, the pure stuff, after a long time sober, and he felt his imminent relapse coming on with a mixture of despair and anticipation.

That name was a message—a hot signal flare shot up into the night, sent specifically for him, across time and space and darkness and rain, all the way from the bright warm center of the world.

Rudyard Kipling

THE JUNGLE
BOOKS

EDITED

WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

BY DANIEL KARLIN

PENGUIN BOOKS

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Preface

The demands made by a work of this nature upon the generosity of specialists are very numerous, and the Editor would be wanting in all title to the generous treatment he has received were he not willing to make the fullest possible acknowledgment of his indebtedness.

His thanks are due in the first place to the scholarly and accomplished Bahadur Shah, baggage elephant 174 on the Indian Register, who, with his amiable sister Pudmini,¹ most courteously supplied the history of 'Toomai of the Elephants' and much of the information contained in 'Servants of the Queen'. The adventures of Mowgli were collected at various times and in various places from a multitude of informants, most of whom desire to preserve the strictest anonymity. Yet, at this distance, the Editor feels at liberty to thank a Hindu gentleman of the old rock, an esteemed resident of the upper slopes of Jakko, for his convincing if somewhat caustic estimate of the national characteristics of his caste – the Presbytes.² Sahi, a savant of infinite research and industry, a member of the recently disbanded Seeonee Pack, and an artist well known at most of the local fairs of Southern India, where his muzzled dance with his master attracts the youth, beauty, and culture of many villages, have contributed most valuable data on people, manners, and customs.³ These have been freely drawn upon, in the stories of 'Tiger-Tiger!' 'Kaa's Hunting', and 'Mowgli's Brothers'. For the outlines of 'Rikki-tikki-tavi' the Editor stands indebted to one of the leading herpetologists of Upper India, a fearless and independent investigator who, resolving 'not to live but know', lately sacrificed his life through over-application to the study of our Eastern Thanatophidia.⁴ A happy accident of travel enabled the Editor, when a passenger on the *Empress of India*,⁵ to be of some slight assistance to a fellow-voyager.⁶ How richly his poor services were repaid, readers of the 'White Seal' may judge for themselves.

❧ Mowgli's Brothers ❧

Now Chil¹ the Kite brings home the night
That Mang² the Bat sets free –
The herds are shut in byre and hut
For loosed till dawn are we.
This is the hour of pride and power,
Talon and tush and claw.
Oh hear the call! – Good hunting all
That keep the Jungle Law!

Night-Song in the Jungle

It was seven o'clock of a very warm evening in the Seonee hills³ when Father Wolf woke up from his day's rest, scratched himself, yawned, and spread out his paws one after the other to get rid of the sleepy feeling in their tips. Mother Wolf lay with her big gray nose dropped across her four tumbling, squealing cubs, and the moon shone into the mouth of the cave where they all lived. 'Augrh!' said Father Wolf, 'it is time to hunt again'; and he was going to spring down hill when a little shadow with a bushy tail crossed the threshold and whined: 'Good luck go with you, O Chief of the Wolves; and good luck and strong white teeth go with the noble children, that they may never forget the hungry in this world.'

It was the jackal – Tabaqui, the Dish-licker⁴ – and the wolves of India despise Tabaqui because he runs about making mischief; and telling tales, and eating rags and pieces of leather from the village rubbish-heaps. But they are afraid of him too, because Tabaqui, more than anyone else in the jungle, is apt to go mad,⁵ and then he forgets that he was ever afraid of anyone, and runs through the forest biting everything in his way. Even the tiger runs and hides when little Tabaqui goes mad, for madness is the most disgraceful thing that can overtake a wild creature. We call it

The Jungle Book

hydrophobia, but they call it *dewanee* – the madness – and run.

‘Enter, then, and look,’ said Father Wolf, stiffly; ‘but there is no food here.’

‘For a wolf, no,’ said Tabaqui; ‘but for so mean a person as myself a dry bone is a good feast. Who are we, the Gidur-log⁶ [the jackal people], to pick and choose?’ He scuttled to the back of the cave, where he found the bone of a buck with some meat on it, and sat cracking the end merrily.

‘All thanks for this good meal,’ he said, licking his lips. ‘How beautiful are the noble children! How large are their eyes! And so young too! Indeed, indeed, I might have remembered that the children of kings are men from the beginning.’

Now, Tabaqui knew as well as anyone else that there is nothing so unlucky as to compliment children to their faces; and it pleased him to see Mother and Father Wolf look uncomfortable.

Tabaqui sat still, rejoicing in the mischief that he had made, and then he said spitefully:

‘Shere Khan,⁷ the Big One, has shifted his hunting-grounds. He will hunt among these hills for the next moon, so he has told me.’⁸

Shere Khan was the tiger who lived near the Waingunga River,⁹ twenty miles away.

‘He has no right!’ Father Wolf began angrily – ‘By the Law of the Jungle he has no right to change his quarters without due warning. He will frighten every head of game within ten miles, and I – I have to kill for two, these days.’

‘His mother did not call him Lungri¹⁰ [the Lame One] for nothing,’ said Mother Wolf, quietly. ‘He has been lame in one foot from his birth. That is why he has only killed cattle.’¹¹ Now the villagers of the Waingunga are angry with him, and he has come here to make *our* villagers angry. They will scour the jungle for him when he is far away, and we and our children must run when the grass is set alight. Indeed, we are very grateful to Shere Khan!’

‘Shall I tell him of your gratitude?’ said Tabaqui.

‘Out!’ snapped Father Wolf. ‘Out and hunt with thy master. Thou hast done harm enough for one night.’

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'I go,' said Tabaqui, quietly. 'Ye can hear Shere Khan below in the thickets. I might have saved myself the message.'

Father Wolf listened, and below in the valley¹² that ran down to a little river, he heard the dry, angry, snarly, singsong whine of a tiger who has caught nothing and does not care if all the jungle knows it.

'The fool!' said Father Wolf. 'To begin a night's work with that noise! Does he think that our buck are like his fat Wain-gunga bullocks?'

'H'sh. It is neither bullock nor buck he hunts tonight,' said Mother Wolf. 'It is Man.' The whine had changed to a sort of humming purr that seemed to come from every quarter of the compass. It was the noise that bewilders woodcutters and gipsies sleeping in the open, and makes them run sometimes into the very mouth of the tiger.

'Man!' said Father Wolf, showing all his white teeth. 'Faugh! Are there not enough beetles and frogs in the tanks that he must eat Man, and on our ground too!'

The Law of the Jungle, which never orders anything without a reason, forbids every beast to eat Man except when he is killing to show his children how to kill, and then he must hunt outside the hunting-grounds of his pack or tribe. The real reason for this is that man-killing means, sooner or later, the arrival of white men on elephants, with guns, and hundreds of brown men with gongs and rockets and torches. Then everybody in the jungle suffers. The reason the beasts give among themselves is that Man is the weakest and most defenceless of all living things, and it is unsportsmanlike to touch him. They say too – and it is true – that man-eaters become mangy,¹³ and lose their teeth.

The purr grew louder, and ended in the full-throated 'Aaarh!' of the tiger's charge.

Then there was a howl – an untigerish howl – from Shere Khan. 'He has missed,' said Mother Wolf. 'What is it?'

Father Wolf ran out a few paces and heard Shere Khan muttering and mumbling savagely, as he tumbled about in the scrub.

'The fool has had no more sense than to jump at a wood-

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cutters' camp-fire, and has burned his feet,' said Father Wolf, with a grunt. 'Tabaqui is with him.'

'Something is coming uphill,' said Mother Wolf, twitching one ear. 'Get ready.'

The bushes rustled a little in the thicket, and Father Wolf dropped with his haunches under him, ready for his leap. Then, if you had been watching, you would have seen the most wonderful thing in the world – the wolf checked in mid-spring. He made his bound before he saw what it was he was jumping at, and then he tried to stop himself. The result was that he shot up straight into the air for four or five feet, landing almost where he left ground.

'Man!' he snapped. 'A man's cub. Look!'

Directly in front of him, holding on by a low branch, stood a naked brown baby who could just walk – as soft and as dimpled a little atom as ever came to a wolf's cave at night. He looked up into Father Wolf's face, and laughed.

'Is that a man's cub?' said Mother Wolf. 'I have never seen one. Bring it here.'

A wolf accustomed to moving his own cubs can, if necessary, mouth an egg without breaking it, and though Father Wolf's jaws closed right on the child's back not a tooth even scratched the skin, as he laid it down among the cubs.

'How little! How naked, and – how bold!' said Mother Wolf, softly. The baby was pushing his way between the cubs to get close to the warm hide. 'Ahai! He is taking his meal with the others. And so this is a man's cub. Now, was there ever a wolf that could boast of a man's cub among her children?'

'I have heard now and again of such a thing, but never in our Pack or in my time,' said Father Wolf. 'He is altogether without hair, and I could kill him with a touch of my foot. But see, he looks up and is not afraid.'

The moonlight was blocked out of the mouth of the cave, for Shere Khan's great square head and shoulders were thrust into the entrance. Tabaqui, behind him, was squeaking: 'My lord, my lord, it went in here!'

'Shere Khan does us great honour,' said Father Wolf, but his eyes were very angry. 'What does Shere Khan need?'

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'My quarry. A man's cub went this way,' said Shere Khan. 'Its parents have run off. Give it to me.'

Shere Khan had jumped at a woodcutters' camp-fire, as Father Wolf had said, and was furious from the pain of his burned feet. But Father Wolf knew that the mouth of the cave was too narrow for a tiger to come in by. Even where he was, Shere Khan's shoulders and fore paws were cramped for want of room, as a man's would be if he tried to fight in a barrel.

'The Wolves are a free people,' said Father Wolf. 'They take orders from the Head of the Pack, and not from any striped cattle-killer. The man's cub is ours – to kill if we choose.'

'Ye choose and ye do not choose! What talk is this of choosing? By the bull that I killed, am I to stand nosing into your dog's den for my fair dues? It is I, Shere Khan, who speak!'

The tiger's roar filled the cave with thunder. Mother Wolf shook herself clear of the cubs and sprang forward, her eyes, like two green moons in the darkness, facing the blazing eyes of Shere Khan.

'And it is I, Raksha [The Demon],¹⁴ who answer. The man's cub is mine, Lungri – mine to me! He shall not be killed. He shall live to run with the Pack and to hunt with the Pack; and in the end, look you, hunter of little naked cubs – frog-eater – fish-killer – he shall hunt *thee*! Now get hence, or by the Sambhur that I killed (*I eat no starved cattle*), back thou goest to thy mother, burned beast of the jungle, lamer than ever thou camest into the world! Go!'

Father Wolf looked on amazed. He had almost forgotten the days when he won Mother Wolf in fair fight from five other wolves, when she ran in the Pack and was not called The Demon for compliment's sake. Shere Khan might have faced Father Wolf, but he could not stand up against Mother Wolf, for he knew that where he was she had all the advantage of the ground, and would fight to the death. So he backed out of the cave-mouth growling, and when he was clear he shouted:

'Each dog barks in his own yard! We will see what the Pack will say to this fostering of man-cubs. The cub is mine, and to my teeth he will come in the end, O bush-tailed thieves!'

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Mother Wolf threw herself down panting among the cubs, and Father Wolf said to her gravely:

‘Shere Khan speaks this much truth. The cub must be shown to the Pack. Wilt thou still keep him, Mother?’

‘Keep him!’ she gasped. ‘He came naked, by night, alone and very hungry; yet he was not afraid! Look, he has pushed one of my babes to one side already. And that lame butcher would have killed him and would have run off to the Waingunga while the villagers here hunted through all our lairs in revenge! Keep him? Assuredly I will keep him. Lie still, little frog. O thou Mowgli – for Mowgli the Frog¹⁵ I will call thee – the time will come when thou wilt hunt Shere Khan as he has hunted thee.’

‘But what will our Pack say?’ said Father Wolf.

The Law of the Jungle lays down very clearly that any wolf may, when he marries, withdraw from the Pack he belongs to; but as soon as his cubs are old enough to stand on their feet he must bring them to the Pack Council, which is generally held once a month at full moon, in order that the other wolves may identify them. After that inspection the cubs are free to run where they please, and until they have killed their first buck no excuse is accepted if a grown wolf of the Pack kills one of them. The punishment is death where the murderer can be found; and if you think for a minute you will see that this must be so.

Father Wolf waited till his cubs could run a little, and then on the night of the Pack Meeting took them and Mowgli and Mother Wolf to the Council Rock – a hilltop covered with stones and boulders where a hundred wolves could hide. Akela,¹⁶ the great gray Lone Wolf, who led all the Pack by strength and cunning, lay out at full length on his rock, and below him sat forty or more wolves of every size and colour, from badger-coloured veterans who could handle a buck alone, to young black three-year-olds who thought they could. The Lone Wolf had led them for a year now. He had fallen twice into a wolf-trap in his youth, and once he had been beaten and left for dead; so he knew the manners and customs of men. There was very little talking at the rock. The cubs tumbled over each other in the centre of the circle where their mothers and

Mowgli's Brothers

fathers sat, and now and again a senior wolf would go quietly up to a cub, look at him carefully, and return to his place on noiseless feet. Sometimes a mother would push her cub far out into the moonlight, to be sure that he had not been overlooked. Akela from his rock would cry: 'Ye know the Law – ye know the Law. Look well, O Wolves!' and the anxious mothers would take up the call: 'Look – look well, O Wolves!'

At last – and Mother Wolf's neck-bristles lifted as the time came – Father Wolf pushed 'Mowgli the Frog', as they called him, into the centre, where he sat laughing and playing with some pebbles that glistened in the moonlight.

Akela never raised his head from his paws, but went on with the monotonous cry: 'Look well!' A muffled roar came up from behind the rocks – the voice of Shere Khan crying: 'The cub is mine. Give him to me. What have the Free People to do with a man's cub?' Akela never even twitched his ears: all he said was: 'Look well, O Wolves! What have the Free People to do with the orders of any save the Free People? Look well!'

There was a chorus of deep growls, and a young wolf in his fourth year flung back Shere Khan's question to Akela: 'What have the Free People to do with a man's cub?' Now the Law of the Jungle lays down that if there is any dispute as to the right of a cub to be accepted by the Pack, he must be spoken for by at least two members of the Pack who are not his father and mother.

'Who speaks for this cub?' said Akela. 'Among the Free People who speaks?' There was no answer, and Mother Wolf got ready for what she knew would be her last fight, if things came to fighting.

Then the only other creature who is allowed at the Pack Council – Baloo, the sleepy brown bear¹⁷ who teaches the wolf cubs the Law of the Jungle: old Baloo, who can come and go where he pleases because he eats only nuts and roots and honey¹⁸ – rose up on his hind quarters and grunted.

'The man's cub – the man's cub?' he said. 'I speak for the man's cub. There is no harm in a man's cub. I have no gift of words, but I speak the truth. Let him run with the Pack, and be entered with the others. I myself will teach him.'

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'We need yet another,' said Akela. 'Baloo has spoken, and he is our teacher for the young cubs. Who speaks beside Baloo?'

A black shadow dropped down into the circle. It was Bagheera the Black Panther,¹⁹ inky black all over, but with the panther markings showing up in certain lights like the pattern of watered silk. Everybody knew Bagheera, and nobody cared to cross his path; for he was as cunning as Tabaqui, as bold as the wild buffalo, and as reckless as the wounded elephant. But he had a voice as soft as wild honey dripping from a tree, and a skin softer than down.

'O Akela, and ye the Free People,' he purred, 'I have no right in your assembly; but the Law of the Jungle says that if there is a doubt which is not a killing matter in regard to a new cub, the life of that cub may be bought at a price. And the Law does not say who may or may not pay that price. Am I right?'

'Good! good!' said the young wolves, who are always hungry. 'Listen to Bagheera. The cub can be bought for a price. It is the Law.'

'Knowing that I have no right to speak here, I ask your leave.'

'Speak then,' cried twenty voices.

'To kill a naked cub is shame. Besides, he may make better sport for you when he is grown. Baloo has spoken in his behalf. Now to Baloo's word I will add one bull, and a fat one, newly killed, not half a mile from here, if ye will accept the man's cub according to the Law. Is it difficult?'

There was a clamour of scores of voices, saying: 'What matter? He will die in the winter rains. He will scorch in the sun. What harm can a naked frog do us? Let him run with the Pack. Where is the bull, Bagheera? Let him be accepted.' And then came Akela's deep bay, crying: 'Look well – look well, O Wolves!'

Mowgli was still deeply interested in the pebbles, and he did not notice when the wolves came and looked at him one by one. At last they all went down the hill for the dead bull, and only Akela, Bagheera, Baloo, and Mowgli's own wolves were left. Shere Khan roared still in the night, for he was very angry that Mowgli had not been handed over to him.

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'Ay, roar well,' said Bagheera, under his whiskers; 'for the time comes when this naked thing will make thee roar to another tune, or I know nothing of man.'

'It was well done,' said Akela. 'Men and their cubs are very wise. He may be a help in time.'

'Truly, a help in time of need; for none can hope to lead the Pack for ever,' said Bagheera.

Akela said nothing. He was thinking of the time that comes to every leader of every pack when his strength goes from him and he gets feebler and feebler, till at last he is killed by the wolves and a new leader comes up – to be killed in his turn.

'Take him away,' he said to Father Wolf, 'and train him as befits one of the Free People.'

And that is how Mowgli was entered into the Seeonee wolf-pack for the price of a bull and on Baloo's good word.

Now you must be content to skip ten or eleven whole years, and only guess at all the wonderful life that Mowgli led among the wolves, because if it were written out it would fill ever so many books. He grew up with the cubs, though they, of course, were grown wolves almost before he was a child, and Father Wolf taught him his business, and the meaning of things in the jungle, till every rustle in the grass, every breath of the warm night air, every note of the owls above his head, every scratch of a bat's claws as it roosted for a while in a tree, and every splash of every little fish jumping in a pool, meant just as much to him as the work of his office means to a business man. When he was not learning he sat out in the sun and slept, and ate and went to sleep again; when he felt dirty or hot he swam in the forest pools; and when he wanted honey (Baloo told him that honey and nuts were just as pleasant to eat as raw meat) he climbed up for it, and that Bagheera showed him how to do. Bagheera would lie out on a branch and call, 'Come along, Little Brother,' and at first Mowgli would cling like the sloth, but afterward he would fling himself through the branches almost as boldly as the gray ape. He took his place at the Council Rock, too, when the Pack met, and there he discovered that if he stared hard at any wolf, the wolf would be forced to

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drop his eyes,²⁰ and so he used to stare for fun. At other times he would pick the long thorns out of the pads of his friends, for wolves suffer terribly from thorns and burs in their coats. He would go down the hillside into the cultivated lands by night, and look very curiously at the villagers in their huts, but he had a mistrust of men because Bagheera showed him a square box with a drop-gate so cunningly hidden in the jungle that he nearly walked into it, and told him that it was a trap. He loved better than anything else to go with Bagheera into the dark warm heart of the forest, to sleep all through the drowsy day, and at night see how Bagheera did his killing. Bagheera killed right and left as he felt hungry, and so did Mowgli – with one exception. As soon as he was old enough to understand things, Bagheera told him that he must never touch cattle²¹ because he had been bought into the Pack at the price of a bull's life. 'All the jungle is thine,' said Bagheera, 'and thou canst kill everything that thou art strong enough to kill; but for the sake of the bull that bought thee thou must never kill or eat any cattle young or old. That is the Law of the Jungle.' Mowgli obeyed faithfully.

And he grew and grew strong as a boy must grow who does not know that he is learning any lessons, and who has nothing in the world to think of except things to eat.

Mother Wolf told him once or twice that Shere Khan was not a creature to be trusted, and that some day he must kill Shere Khan; but though a young wolf would have remembered that advice every hour, Mowgli forgot it because he was only a boy – though he would have called himself a wolf if he had been able to speak in any human tongue.

Shere Khan was always crossing his path in the jungle, for as Akela grew older and feebler the lame tiger had come to be great friends with the younger wolves of the Pack, who followed him for scraps, a thing Akela would never have allowed if he had dared to push his authority to the proper bounds. Then Shere Khan would flatter them and wonder that such fine young hunters were content to be led by a dying wolf and a man's cub. 'They tell me,' Shere Khan would say, 'that at Council ye dare not look him between the eyes'; and the young wolves would growl and bristle.

Mowgli's Brothers

Bagheera, who had eyes and ears everywhere, knew something of this, and once or twice he told Mowgli in so many words that Shere Khan would kill him some day; and Mowgli would laugh and answer: 'I have the Pack and I have thee; and Baloo, though he is so lazy, might strike a blow or two for my sake. Why should I be afraid?'

It was one very warm day that a new notion came to Bagheera – born of something that he had heard. Perhaps Sahi²² the Porcupine had told him; but he said to Mowgli when they were deep in the jungle, as the boy lay with his head on Bagheera's beautiful black skin: 'Little Brother, how often have I told thee that Shere Khan is thy enemy?'

'As many times as there are nuts on that palm,' said Mowgli, who, naturally, could not count.²³ 'What of it? I am sleepy, Bagheera, and Shere Khan is all long tail and loud talk – like Mor the Peacock.'

'But this is no time for sleeping. Baloo knows it; I know it; the Pack know it; and even the foolish, foolish deer know. Tabaqui had told thee, too.'

'Ho! ho!' said Mowgli. 'Tabaqui came to me not long ago with some rude talk that I was a naked man's cub and not fit to dig pig-nuts; but I caught Tabaqui by the tail and swung him twice against a palm-tree to teach him better manners.'

'That was foolishness; for though Tabaqui is a mischief-maker, he would have told thee of something that concerned thee closely. Open those eyes, Little Brother. Shere Khan dare not kill thee in the jungle;²⁴ but remember, Akela is very old, and soon the day comes when he cannot kill his buck, and then he will be leader no more. Many of the wolves that looked thee over when thou wast brought to the Council first are old too, and the young wolves believe, as Shere Khan has taught them, that a man-cub has no place with the Pack. In a little time thou wilt be a man.'

'And what is a man that he should not run with his brothers?' said Mowgli. 'I was born in the jungle. I have obeyed the Law of the Jungle, and there is no wolf of ours from whose paws I have not pulled a thorn. Surely they are my brothers!'

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Bagheera stretched himself at full length and half shut his eyes. 'Little Brother,' said he, 'feel under my jaw.'

Mowgli put up his strong brown hand, and just under Bagheera's silky chin, where the giant rolling muscles were all hid by the glossy hair, he came upon a little bald spot.

'There is no one in the jungle that knows that I, Bagheera, carry that mark – the mark of the collar; and yet, Little Brother, I was born among men, and it was among men that my mother died – in the cages of the King's Palace at Oodeypore.²⁵ It was because of this that I paid the price for thee at the Council when thou wast a little naked cub. Yes, I too was born among men. I had never seen the jungle. They fed me behind bars from an iron pan till one night I felt that I was Bagheera – the Panther – and no man's plaything, and I broke the silly lock with one blow of my paw and came away; and because I had learned the ways of men, I became more terrible in the jungle than Shere Khan. Is it not so?'

'Yes,' said Mowgli; 'all the jungle fear Bagheera – all except Mowgli.'

'Oh, *thou* art a man's cub,' said the Black Panther, very tenderly; 'and even as I returned to my jungle, so thou must go back to men at last – to the men who are thy brothers – if thou art not killed in the Council.'

'But why – but why should any wish to kill me?' said Mowgli.

'Look at me,' said Bagheera; and Mowgli looked at him steadily between the eyes. The big panther turned his head away in half a minute.

'*That* is why,' he said, shifting his paw on the leaves. 'Not even I can look thee between the eyes, and I was born among men, and I love thee, Little Brother. The others they hate thee because their eyes cannot meet thine; because thou art wise; because thou hast pulled out thorns from their feet – because thou art a man.'

'I did not know these things,' said Mowgli, sullenly; and he frowned under his heavy black eyebrows.

'What is the Law of the Jungle? Strike first and then give tongue. By thy very carelessness they know that thou art a man.'

Mowgli's Brothers

But be wise. It is in my heart that when Akela misses his next kill – and at each hunt it costs him more to pin the buck – the Pack will turn against him and against thee. They will hold a jungle Council at the Rock, and then – and then – I have it!’ said Bagheera, leaping up. ‘Go thou down quickly to the men’s huts in the valley, and take some of the Red Flower which they grow there, so that when the time comes thou mayest have even a stronger friend than I or Baloo or those of the Pack that love thee. Get the Red Flower.’

By Red Flower Bagheera meant fire, only no creature in the jungle will call fire by its proper name. Every beast lives in deadly fear of it, and invents a hundred ways of describing it.

‘The Red Flower?’ said Mowgli. ‘That grows outside their huts in the twilight. I will get some.’

‘There speaks the man’s cub,’ said Bagheera, proudly. ‘Remember that it grows in little pots. Get one swiftly, and keep it by thee for time of need.’

‘Good!’ said Mowgli. ‘I go. But art thou sure, O my Bagheera’ – he slipped his arm round the splendid neck, and looked deep into the big eyes – ‘art thou sure that all this is Shere Khan’s doing?’

‘By the Broken Lock that freed me, I am sure, Little Brother.’

‘Then, by the Bull that bought me, I will pay Shere Khan full tale for this, and it may be a little over,’ said Mowgli; and he bounded away.

‘That is a man. That is all a man,’ said Bagheera to himself, lying down again. ‘Oh, Shere Khan, never was a blacker hunting than that frog-hunt of thine ten years ago!’

Mowgli was far and far through the forest, running hard, and his heart was hot in him. He came to the cave as the evening mist rose, and drew breath, and looked down the valley. The cubs were out, but Mother Wolf, at the back of the cave, knew by his breathing that something was troubling her frog.

‘What is it, Son?’ she said.

‘Some bat’s chatter of Shere Khan,’ he called back. ‘I hunt among the ploughed fields tonight’; and he plunged downward through the bushes, to the stream at the bottom of the valley.

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There he checked, for he heard the yell of the Pack hunting, heard the bellow of a hunted Sambhur,²⁶ and the snort as the buck turned at bay. Then there were wicked, bitter howls from the young wolves: 'Akela! Akela! Let the Lone Wolf show his strength. Room for the leader of the Pack! Spring, Akela!'

The Lone Wolf must have sprung and missed his hold, for Mowgli heard the snap of his teeth and then a yelp as the Sambhur knocked him over with his fore foot.

He did not wait for anything more, but dashed on; and the yells grew fainter behind him as he ran into the crop-lands where the villagers lived.

'Bagheera spoke truth,' he panted, as he nestled down in some cattle-fodder by the window of a hut. 'Tomorrow is one day both for Akela and for me.'

Then he pressed his face close to the window and watched the fire on the hearth. He saw the husbandman's wife get up and feed it in the night with black lumps; and when the morning came and mists were all white and cold, he saw the man's child pick up a wicker pot plastered inside with earth, fill it with lumps of red-hot charcoal, put it under his blanket, and go out to tend the cows in the byre.

'Is that all?' said Mowgli. 'If a cub can do it, there is nothing to fear'; so he strode round the corner and met the boy, took the pot from his hand, and disappeared into the mist while the boy howled with fear.

'They are very like me,' said Mowgli, blowing into the pot, as he had seen the woman do. 'This thing will die if I do not give it things to eat'; and he dropped twigs and dried bark on the red stuff. Half-way up the hill he met Bagheera with the morning dew shining like moonstones on his coat.

'Akela has missed,' said the Panther. 'They would have killed him last night, but they needed thee also. They were looking for thee on the hill.'

'I was among the ploughed lands. I am ready. See!' Mowgli held up the fire-pot.

'Good! Now, I have seen men thrust a dry branch into that stuff, and presently the Red Flower blossomed at the end of it. Art thou not afraid?'

Mowgli's Brothers

‘No. Why should I fear? I remember now – if it is not a dream – how, before I was a Wolf, I lay beside the Red Flower, and it was warm and pleasant.’

All that day Mowgli sat in the cave tending his fire-pot and dipping dry branches into it to see how they looked. He found a branch that satisfied him, and in the evening when Tabaqui came to the cave and told him rudely enough that he was wanted at the Council Rock, he laughed till Tabaqui ran away. Then Mowgli went to the Council, still laughing.

Akela the Lone Wolf lay by the side of his rock as a sign that the leadership of the Pack was open, and Shere Khan with his following of scrap-fed wolves walked to and fro openly being flattered. Bagheera lay close to Mowgli, and the fire-pot was between Mowgli’s knees. When they were all gathered together, Shere Khan began to speak – a thing he would never have dared to do when Akela was in his prime.

‘He has no right,’ whispered Bagheera. ‘Say so. He is a dog’s son. He will be frightened.’

Mowgli sprang to his feet. ‘Free People,’ he cried, ‘does Shere Khan lead the Pack? What has a tiger to do with our leadership?’

‘Seeing that the leadership is yet open, and being asked to speak –’ Shere Khan began.

‘By whom?’ said Mowgli. ‘Are we *all* jackals, to fawn on this cattle-butcher? The leadership of the Pack is with the Pack alone.’

There were yells of ‘Silence, thou man’s cub!’ ‘Let him speak. He has kept our Law’; and at last the seniors of the Pack thundered: ‘Let the Dead Wolf speak.’ When a leader of the Pack has missed his kill, he is called the Dead Wolf as long as he lives, which is not long.²⁷

Akela raised his old head wearily:

‘Free People, and ye too, jackals of Shere Khan, for twelve seasons²⁸ I have led ye to and from the kill, and in all that time not one has been trapped or maimed. Now I have missed my kill. Ye know how that plot was made. Ye know how ye brought me up to an untried buck to make my weakness known. It was cleverly done. Your right is to kill me here on the Council

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Rock, now. Therefore, I ask, who comes to make an end of the Lone Wolf? For it is my right, by the Law of the Jungle, that ye come one by one.'

There was a long hush, for no single wolf cared to fight Akela to the death. Then Shere Khan roared: 'Bah! what have we to do with this toothless fool? He is doomed to die! It is the man-cub who has lived too long. Free People, he was my meat from the first. Give him to me. I am weary of this man-wolf folly. He has troubled the jungle for ten seasons. Give me the man-cub, or I will hunt here always, and not give you one bone. He is a man, a man's child, and from the marrow of my bones I hate him!'

Then more than half the Pack yelled: 'A man! a man! What has a man to do with us? Let him go to his own place.'

'And turn all the people of the villages against us?' clamoured Shere Khan. 'No; give him to me. He is a man, and none of us can look him between the eyes.'

Akela lifted his head again, and said: 'He has eaten our food. He has slept with us. He has driven game for us. He has broken no word of the Law of the Jungle.'

'Also, I paid for him with a bull when he was accepted. The worth of a bull is little, but Bagheera's honour is something that he will perhaps fight for,' said Bagheera, in his gentlest voice.

'A bull paid ten years ago!' the Pack snarled. 'What do we care for bones ten years old?'

'Or for a pledge?' said Bagheera, his white teeth bared under his lip. 'Well are ye called the Free People!'

'No man's cub can run with the people of the jungle,' howled Shere Khan. 'Give him to me!'

'He is our brother in all but blood,' Akela went on; 'and ye would kill him here! In truth, I have lived too long. Some of ye are eaters of cattle, and of others I have heard that, under Shere Khan's teaching, ye go by dark night and snatch children from the villager's door-step.²⁹ Therefore I know ye to be cowards, and it is to cowards I speak. It is certain that I must die, and my life is of no worth, or I would offer that in the man-cub's place. But for the sake of the Honour of the Pack –

Mowgli's Brothers

a little matter that by being without a leader ye have forgotten – I promise that if ye let the man-cub go to his own place, I will not, when my time comes to die, bare one tooth against ye. I will die without fighting. That will at least save the Pack three lives. More I cannot do; but if ye will, I can save ye the shame that comes of killing a brother against whom there is no fault – a brother spoken for and bought into the Pack according to the Law of the Jungle.'

'He is a man – a man – a man!' snarled the Pack; and most of the wolves began to gather round Shere Khan, whose tail was beginning to switch.

'Now the business is in thy hands,' said Bagheera to Mowgli. 'We can do no more except fight.'

Mowgli stood upright – the fire-pot in his hands. Then he stretched out his arms, and yawned in the face of the Council; but he was furious with rage and sorrow, for, wolf-like, the wolves had never told him how they hated him. 'Listen you!' he cried. 'There is no need for this dog's jabber. Ye have told me so often tonight that I am a man (and indeed I would have been a wolf with you to my life's end), that I feel your words are true. So I do not call ye my brothers any more, but *sag*³⁰ [dogs], as a man should. What ye will do, and what ye will not do, is not yours to say. That matter is with *me*; and that we may see the matter more plainly, I, the man, have brought here a little of the Red Flower which ye, dogs, fear.'

He flung the fire-pot on the ground, and some of the red coals lit a tuft of dried moss that flared up, as all the Council drew back in terror before the leaping flames.

Mowgli thrust his dead branch into the fire till the twigs lit and crackled, and whirled it above his head among the cowering wolves.

'Thou art the master,' said Bagheera, in an undertone. 'Save Akela from the death. He was ever thy friend.'

Akela, the grim old wolf who had never asked for mercy in his life, gave one piteous look at Mowgli as the boy stood all naked, his long black hair tossing over his shoulders in the light of the blazing branch that made the shadows jump and quiver.

'Good!' said Mowgli, staring round slowly.³¹ 'I see that ye

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are dogs. I go from you to my own people – if they be my own people. The Jungle is shut to me, and I must forget your talk and your companionship; but I will be more merciful than ye are. Because I was all but your brother in blood, I promise that when I am a man among men I will not betray ye to men as ye have betrayed me.’ He kicked the fire with his foot, and the sparks flew up. ‘There shall be no war between any of us in the Pack.³² But here is a debt to pay before I go.’ He strode forward to where Shere Khan sat blinking stupidly at the flames, and caught him by the tuft on his chin. Bagheera followed in case of accidents. ‘Up, dog!’ Mowgli cried. ‘Up, when a man speaks, or I will set that coat ablaze!’

Shere Khan’s ears lay flat back on his head, and he shut his eyes, for the blazing branch was very near.

‘This cattle-killer said he would kill me in the Council because he had not killed me when I was a cub. Thus and thus, then, do we beat dogs when we are men. Stir a whisker, Lungri, and I ram the Red Flower down thy gullet!’ He beat Shere Khan over the head with the branch, and the tiger whimpered and whined in an agony of fear.

‘Pah! Singed jungle-cat – go now! But remember when next I come to the Council Rock, as a man should come, it will be with Shere Khan’s hide on my head. For the rest, Akela goes free to live as he pleases. Ye will *not* kill him, because that is not my will. Nor do I think that ye will sit here any longer, lolling out your tongues as though ye were somebodies, instead of dogs whom I drive out – thus! Go!’ The fire was burning furiously at the end of the branch, and Mowgli struck right and left round the circle, and the wolves ran howling with the sparks burning their fur. At last there were only Akela, Bagheera, and perhaps ten wolves that had taken Mowgli’s part. Then something began to hurt Mowgli inside him, as he had never been hurt in his life before, and he caught his breath and sobbed, and the tears ran down his face.

‘What is it? What is it?’ he said. ‘I do not wish to leave the jungle, and I do not know what this is. Am I dying, Bagheera?’

‘No, Little Brother. That is only tears such as men use,’ said Bagheera. ‘Now I know thou art a man, and a man’s cub no

Mowgli's Brothers

longer. The Jungle is shut indeed to thee henceforward. Let them fall, Mowgli. They are only tears.' So Mowgli sat and cried as though his heart would break; and he had never cried in all his life before.

'Now,' he said, 'I will go to men. But first I must say farewell to my mother'; and he went to the cave where she lived with Father Wolf, and he cried on her coat, while the four cubs howled miserably.

'Ye will not forget me?' said Mowgli.

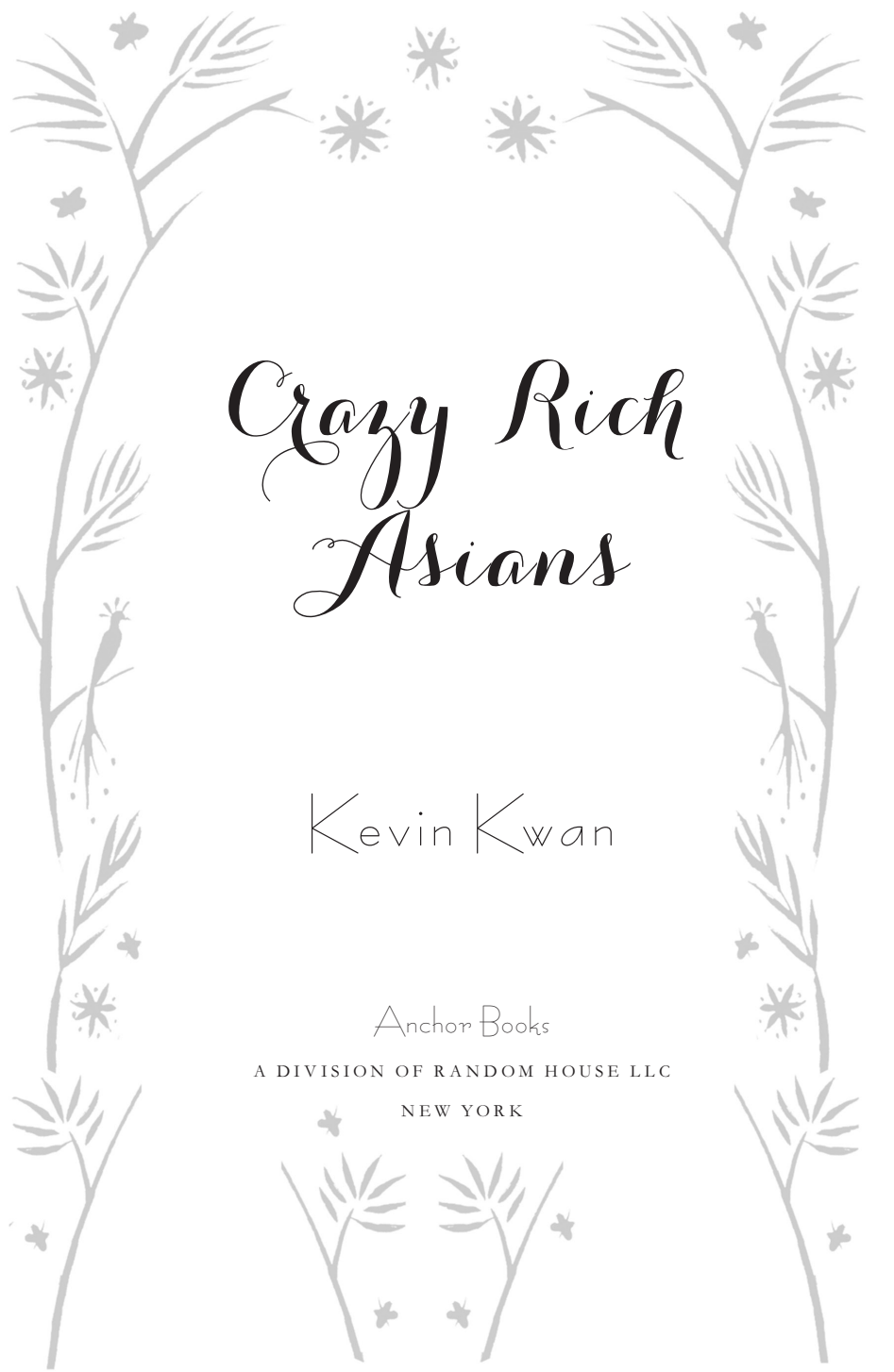
'Never while we can follow a trail,' said the cubs. 'Come to the foot of the hill when thou art a man, and we will talk to thee; and we will come into the crop-lands to play with thee³³ by night.'

'Come soon!' said Father Wolf. 'Oh, wise little frog, come again soon; for we be old, thy mother and I.'

'Come soon,' said Mother Wolf, 'little naked son of mine; for, listen, child of man, I loved thee more than ever I loved my cubs.'

'I will surely come,' said Mowgli; 'and when I come it will be to lay out Shere Khan's hide upon the Council Rock. Do not forget me! Tell them in the jungle never to forget me!'

The dawn was beginning to break when Mowgli went down the hillside alone,³⁴ to meet those mysterious things that are called men.



Crazy Rich Asians

Kevin Kwan

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Part Two

*I did not tell half of what I saw,
for no one would have believed me.*

MARCO POLO, 1324

2

Rachel and Nick

•

TYERSALL PARK

As Peik Lin's car approached the porte cochere of Tyersall Park, Nick bounded down the front steps toward them. "I was worried you'd gotten lost," he said, opening the car door.

"We did get a bit lost, actually," Rachel replied, getting out of the car and staring up at the majestic façade before her. Her stomach felt like it had been twisted in a vise, and she smoothed out the creases on her dress nervously. "Am I really late?"

"No, it's okay. I'm sorry, were my directions confusing?" Nick asked, peering into the car and smiling at Peik Lin. "Peik Lin—thanks so much for giving Rachel a lift."

"Of course," Peik Lin murmured, still rather stunned by her surroundings. She longed to get out of the car and explore this colossal estate, but something told her to remain in her seat. She paused for a moment, thinking Nick might invite her in for a drink, but no invitation seemed to be forthcoming. Finally she said as nonchalantly as possible, "This is quite a place—is it your grandmother's?"

“Yes,” Nick replied.

“Has she lived here a long time?” Peik Lin couldn’t resist trying to find out more as she craned her neck, trying to get a better look.

“Since she was a young girl,” Nick said.

Nick’s answer surprised Peik Lin, as she assumed that the house would have belonged to his grandfather. Now what she really wanted to ask was, *Who on earth is your grandmother?* But she didn’t want to risk seeming too nosy. “Well, you two have a great time,” Peik Lin said, winking at Rachel and mouthing the words *Call me later!* Rachel gave her friend a quick smile.

“Good night, and get home safe,” Nick said, patting the roof of the car.

As Peik Lin’s car drove off, Nick turned to Rachel, looking a little sheepish. “I hope it’s okay . . . but it’s not just the family. My grandmother decided to have a small party, all arranged at the last minute, apparently, because her *tan hua* flowers are going to bloom tonight.”

“She’s throwing a party because her flowers are in bloom?” Rachel asked, not quite following.

“Well, these are very rare flowers that bloom extremely infrequently, sometimes once every decade, sometimes even longer than that. They only bloom at night, and the whole thing only lasts for a few hours. It’s quite something to witness.”

“Sounds cool, but now I’m feeling *really* underdressed for the occasion,” Rachel said pensively, eyeing the fleet of limousines that lined the driveway.

“Not at all—you look absolutely perfect,” Nick told her. He could sense her trepidation and tried to reassure her, placing his hand on the small of her back and guiding her toward the

front doors. Rachel felt the warm, radiating energy from his muscled arm and instantly felt better. Her knight in shining armor was at her side, and everything would be just fine.

As they entered the house, the first thing that caught Rachel's eye was the dazzling mosaic tiles in the grand foyer. She stood transfixed for a few moments by the intricate black, blue, and coral pattern before realizing that they were not alone. A tall, spindly Indian man stood silently in the middle of the foyer next to a circular stone table clustered with pots of enormous white-and-purple phalaenopsis orchids. The man bowed ceremoniously to Rachel and presented her with a hammered silver bowl filled with water and pale pink rose petals. "For your refreshment, miss," he said.

"Do I drink this?" Rachel whispered to Nick.

"No, no, it's for washing your hands," Nick instructed. Rachel dipped her fingers into the cool scented water before wiping them on the soft terry cloth that was proffered, feeling awed (and a little silly) by the ritual.

"Everyone's upstairs in the living room," Nick said, leading her toward the carved stone staircase. Rachel saw something out of the corner of her eye and let out a quick gasp. By the side of the staircase lurked a huge tiger.

"It's stuffed, Rachel." Nick laughed. The tiger stood as if about to pounce, mouth open in a ferocious growl.

"I'm sorry, it looked so real," Rachel said, recovering herself.

"It *was* real. It's a native Singaporean tiger. They used to roam this area until the late nineteenth century, but they were hunted into extinction. My great-grandfather shot this one when it ran into the house and hid under the billiard table, or so the story goes."

“Poor guy,” Rachel said, reaching out to stroke the tiger’s head gingerly. Its fur felt surprisingly brittle, as if a patch might fall off at any minute.

“It used to scare the hell out of me when I was little. I never dared go near the foyer at night, and I had dreams that it would come alive and attack me while I was sleeping,” Nick said.

“You grew up here?” Rachel asked in surprise.

“Yes, until I was about seven.”

“You never told me you lived in a palace.”

“This isn’t a palace. It’s just a big house.”

“Nick, where I come from, this is a palace,” Rachel said, gazing up at the cast-iron and glass cupola soaring above them. As they climbed the stairs, the murmur of party chatter and piano keys wafted down toward them. When they reached the landing to the second floor, Rachel almost had to rub her eyes in disbelief. *Sweet Jesus*. She felt momentarily giddy, as if she had been transported back in time to another era, to the grand lounge of a twenties ocean liner en route from Venice to Istanbul, perhaps.

The “living room,” as Nick so modestly called it, was a gallery that ran along the entire northern end of the house, with art deco divans, wicker club chairs, and ottomans casually grouped into intimate seating areas. A row of tall plantation doors opened onto the wraparound veranda, inviting the view of verdant parklands and the scent of night-blooming jasmine into the room, while at the far end a young man in a tuxedo played on the Bösendorfer grand piano. As Nick led her into the space, Rachel found herself reflexively trying to ignore her surroundings, even though all she wanted to do was study every exquisite detail: the exotic potted palms in massive *Qianlong* dragon jardinieres that anchored the space, the

scarlet-shaded opaline glass lamps that cast an amber glow over the lacquered teak surfaces, the silver- and lapis lazuli-filigreed walls that shimmered as she moved about the room. Every single object seemed imbued with a patina of timeless elegance, as if it had been there for more than a hundred years, and Rachel didn't dare to touch anything. The glamorous guests, however, appeared completely at ease lounging on the shantung silk ottomans or mingling on the veranda while a retinue of white-gloved servants in deep-olive batik uniforms circulated with trays of cocktails.

"Here comes Astrid's mother," Nick muttered. Before Rachel had a moment to collect herself, a stately-looking lady approached them, wagging a finger at Nick.

"Nicky, you naughty boy, why didn't you tell us you were back? We thought you weren't coming till next week, and you just missed Uncle Harry's birthday dinner at Command House!" The woman looked like a middle-aged Chinese matron, but she spoke in the sort of clipped English accent straight out of a Merchant Ivory film. Rachel couldn't help but notice how her tightly permed black hair fittingly resembled the Queen of England's.

"So sorry, I thought you and Uncle Harry would be in London at this time of the year. *Dai gu cheh*, this is my girlfriend Rachel Chu. Rachel, this is my auntie Felicity Leong."

Felicity nodded at Rachel, boldly scanning her up and down.

"So nice to meet you," Rachel said, trying not to be unnerved by her hawklike gaze.

"Yes of course," Felicity said, turning quickly to Nick and asking, almost sternly, "Do you know when your daddy gets in?"

"Not a clue," he replied. "Is Astrid here yet?"

"Aiyah, you know that girl is always late!" At that moment, his aunt noticed an elderly Indian woman in a gold and peacock-blue sari being helped up the stairs. "Dear Mrs. Singh, when did you get back from Udaipur?" she screeched, pouncing on the woman as Nick guided Rachel out of the way.

"Who is that lady?" Rachel asked.

"That's Mrs. Singh, a family friend who used to live down the street. She's the daughter of a maharaja, and one of the most fascinating people I know. She was great friends with Nehru. I'll introduce you later, when my aunt isn't breathing down our necks."

"Her sari is absolutely stunning," Rachel remarked, gazing at the elaborate gold stitching.

"Yes, isn't it? I hear she flies all her saris back to New Delhi to be specially cleaned," Nick said as he tried to escort Rachel toward the bar, unwittingly steering straight into the path of a very posh-looking middle-aged couple. The man had a pompadour of Brylcreemed black hair and thick, oversize tortoiseshell glasses, while his wife wore a classic gold-buttoned red-and-white Chanel suit.

"Uncle Dickie, Auntie Nancy, meet my girlfriend Rachel Chu," Nick said. "Rachel, this is my uncle and his wife, from the T'sien side of the family," he explained.

"Ah Rachel, I've met your grandfather in Taipei . . . Chu Yang Chung, isn't it?" Uncle Dickie asked.

"Er . . . actually, no. My family isn't from Taipei," Rachel stammered.

"Oh. Where are they from, then?"

"Guangdong originally, and nowadays California."

Uncle Dickie looked a bit taken aback, while his well-coiffed

wife grasped his arm tightly and continued. "Oh, we know California very well. Northern California, actually."

"Yes, that's where I'm from," Rachel replied politely.

"Ah, well then, you must know the Gettys? Ann is a great friend of mine," Nancy effused.

"Um, are you referring to the Getty Oil family?"

"Is there any other?" Nancy asked, perplexed.

"Rachel's from Cupertino, not San Francisco, Auntie Nancy. And that's why I need to introduce her to Francis Leong over there, who I hear is going to Stanford this fall," Nick cut in, quickly moving Rachel along. The next thirty minutes became a blur of nonstop greetings, as Rachel was introduced to assorted family and friends. There were aunts and uncles and cousins aplenty, there was the distinguished though diminutive Thai ambassador, there was a man Nick introduced as the sultan of some unpronounceable Malay state, along with his two wives in elaborately bejeweled head scarves.

All this time, Rachel had noticed one woman who seemed to command the attention of the room. She was very slim and aristocratic-looking with snow-white hair and ramrod-straight posture, dressed in a long white silk cheongsam with deep purple piping along the collar, sleeves, and hemline. Most of the guests orbited around her paying tribute, and when she at last came toward them, Rachel noticed for the first time Nick's resemblance to her. Nick had earlier informed Rachel that while his grandmother spoke English perfectly well, she preferred to speak in Chinese and was fluent in four dialects—Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien, and Teochew. Rachel decided to greet her in Mandarin, the only dialect she spoke, but before Nick could make proper introductions, she bowed her head nervously at the stately lady and

said, "It is such a pleasure to meet you. Thank you for inviting me to your beautiful home."

The woman looked at her quizzically and replied slowly in Mandarin, "It is a pleasure to meet you too, but you are mistaken, this is not my house."

"Rachel, this is my great-aunt Rosemary," Nick explained hurriedly.

"And you'll have to forgive me, my Mandarin is really quite rusty," Great-aunt Rosemary added in her Vanessa Redgrave English.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Rachel said, her cheeks flushing bright red. She could feel all eyes in the room upon her, amused by her faux pas.

"No need to apologize." Great-aunt Rosemary smiled graciously. "Nick has told me quite a bit about you, and I was so looking forward to meeting you."

"He has?" Rachel said, still flustered.

Nick put his arm around Rachel and said, "Here, come meet my grandmother." They walked across the room, and on the sofa closest to the veranda, flanked by a spectacled man smartly attired in a white linen suit and a strikingly beautiful lady, sat a shrunken woman. Shang Su Yi had steel-gray hair held in place by an ivory headband, and she was dressed simply in a rose-colored silk blouse, tailored cream trousers, and brown loafers. She was older and frailer than Rachel had expected, and though her features were partially obscured by a thick pair of tinted bifocals, her regal countenance was unmistakable. Standing completely still behind Nick's grandmother were two ladies in immaculate matching gowns of iridescent silk.

Nick addressed his grandmother in Cantonese. "Ah Ma, I'd like you to meet my friend Rachel Chu, from America."

"So nice to meet you!" Rachel blurted in English, completely forgetting her Mandarin.

Nick's grandmother peered up at Rachel for a moment. "Thank you for coming," she replied haltingly, in English, before turning swiftly to resume her conversation in Hokkien with the lady at her side. The man in the white linen suit smiled quickly at Rachel, but then he too turned away. The two ladies swathed in silk stared inscrutably at Rachel, and she smiled back at them tensely.

"Let's get some punch," Nick said, steering Rachel toward a table where a uniformed waiter wearing white cotton gloves was serving punch out of a huge Venetian glass punch bowl.

"Oh my God, that had to be the most awkward moment of my life! I think I really annoyed your grandmother," Rachel whispered.

"Nonsense. She was just in the middle of another conversation, that's all," Nick said soothingly.

"Who were those two women in matching silk dresses standing like statues behind her?" Rachel asked.

"Oh, those are her lady's maids."

"Excuse me?"

"Her lady's maids. They never leave her side."

"Like ladies-in-waiting? They look so elegant."

"Yes, they're from Thailand, and they were trained to serve in the royal court."

"Is this a common thing in Singapore? Importing royal maids from Thailand?" Rachel asked incredulously.

"I don't believe so. This service was a special lifetime gift to my grandmother."

"A gift? From whom?"

"The King of Thailand. Though it was the last one, not

Bhumibol the current king. Or was it the one before that? Anyway, he was apparently a great friend of my grandmother's. He decreed that she must only be waited on by court-trained ladies. So there has been a constant rotation ever since my grandmother was a young woman."

"Oh," Rachel said, stupefied. She took the glass of punch from Nick and noticed that the fine etching on the Venetian glassware perfectly matched the intricate fretwork pattern on the ceiling. She leaned against the back of a sofa for support, suddenly feeling overwhelmed. There was too much for her to take in—the army of white-gloved servants hovering about, the confusion of new faces, the mind-blowing opulence. Who knew that Nick's family would turn out to be these extremely grand people? And why didn't he prepare her for all this a little more?

Rachel felt a gentle tap on her shoulder. She turned around to see Nick's cousin holding a sleepy toddler. "Astrid!" she cried, delighted to see a friendly face at last. Astrid was adorned in the chicest outfit Rachel had ever seen, quite different from how she had remembered her in New York. So this was Astrid in her natural habitat.

"Hello, hello!" Astrid said cheerily. "Cassian, this is Auntie Rachel. Say hi to Auntie Rachel?" Astrid gestured. The child stared at Rachel for a moment, before burying his head shyly into his mother's shoulder.

"Here, let me take this big boy out of your hands!" Nick grinned, lifting a squirming Cassian out of Astrid's arms, and then deftly handing her a glass of punch.

"Thanks, Nicky," Astrid said as she turned to Rachel. "How are you finding Singapore so far? Having a good time?"

"A great time! Although tonight's been a bit . . . overwhelming."

"I can only imagine," Astrid said with a knowing glint in her eye.

"No, I'm not sure you can," Rachel said.

A melodious peel rang through the room. Rachel turned to see an elderly woman in a white cheongsam top and black silk trousers playing a small silver xylophone by the stairs.*

"Ah, the dinner gong," Astrid said. "Come, let's eat."

"Astrid, how is it that you always seem to arrive *just* when the food is ready?" Nick remarked.

"Choco-cake!" little Cassian muttered.

"No, Cassian, you already had your dessert," Astrid replied firmly.

The crowd began to make a beeline for the stairs, passing the woman with the xylophone. As they approached her, Nick gave the woman a big bear hug and exchanged a few words in Cantonese. "This is Ling Cheh, the woman who pretty much raised me from birth," he explained. "She has been with our family since 1948."

"*Wah, nay gor nuay pang yau gum laeng, ah! Faa! di git fun!*" Ling Cheh commented, grasping Rachel's hand gently. Nick grinned, blushing a little. Rachel didn't understand Cantonese, so she just smiled, while Astrid quickly translated. "Ling Cheh just teased Nick about how pretty his lady friend is." As they proceeded down the stairs, she whispered to Rachel, "She also ordered him to marry you soon!" Rachel simply giggled.

* These "black and white amahs," nowadays a fast-disappearing group in Singapore, are professional domestic servants who hailed from China. They were usually confirmed spinsters who took vows of chastity and spent their entire lives caring for the families they served. (Quite often, they were the ones who actually raised the children.) They were known for their trademark uniform of white blouse and black pants, and their long hair that was always worn in a neat bun at the nape of the neck.

A buffet supper had been set up in the conservatory, an elliptical-shaped room with dramatic frescoed walls of what appeared from a distance to be a dreamy, muted Oriental scene. On closer inspection, Rachel noticed that while the mural did evoke classical Chinese mountainscapes, the details seemed to be pure Hieronymus Bosch, with strange, lurid flowers climbing up the walls and iridescent phoenixes and other fantastical creatures hiding in the shadows. Three enormous round tables gleamed with silver chafing dishes, and arched doorways opened onto a curved colonnaded terrace where white wrought-iron bistro tables lit with tall votives awaited the diners. Cassian continued to squirm in Nick's arms, wailing even louder, "I want choco-cake!"

"I think what he really wants is S-L-E-E-P," his mother commented. She tried to take her son back from Nick, but the child began to whimper.

"I sense a crying fit on the way. Let's take him to the nursery," Nick offered. "Rachel, why don't you get started? We'll be back in a minute."

Rachel marveled at the sheer variety of food that had been laid out. One table was filled with Thai delicacies, another with Malaysian cuisine, and the last with classic Chinese dishes. As usual, she was a bit at a loss when confronted with a huge buffet. She decided to start one cuisine at a time and began at the Chinese table with a small helping of E-fu noodles and seared scallops in ginger sauce. She came upon a tray of exotic-looking golden wafers folded into little top hats. "What in the world are these?" she wondered aloud.

"That's *kueh pie tee*, a *nyonya* dish. Little tarts filled with jicama, carrots, and shrimp. Try one," a voice behind her said. Rachel looked around and saw the dapper man in the white linen suit who had been sitting next to Nick's grandmother.

He bowed in a courtly manner and introduced himself. “We never met properly. I’m Oliver T’sien, Nick’s cousin.” Yet another Chinese relative with a British accent, but his sounded even plummier than the rest.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Rachel—”

“Yes, I know. Rachel Chu, of Cupertino, Palo Alto, Chicago, and Manhattan. You see, your reputation precedes you.”

“Does it?” Rachel asked, trying not to sound too surprised.

“It certainly does, and I must say you’re much more fetching than I was led to believe.”

“Really, by whom?”

“Oh, you know, the whispering gallery. Don’t you know how much the tongues have been wagging since you’ve arrived?” he said mischievously.

“I had no clue,” Rachel said a little uneasily, walking out onto the terrace with her plate, looking for Nick or Astrid but not seeing them anywhere. She noticed one of Nick’s aunts—the lady in the Chanel suit—looking toward her expectantly.

“There’s Dickie and Nancy,” Oliver said. “Don’t look now—I think they’re waving to you. God help us. Let’s start our own table, shall we?” Before Rachel could answer, Oliver grabbed her plate from her hand and walked it over to a table at the far end of the terrace.

“Why are you avoiding them?” Rachel asked.

“I’m not avoiding them. I’m helping *you* avoid them. You can thank me later.”

“Why?” Rachel pressed on.

“Well, first of all, they are insufferable name-droppers, always going on and on about their latest cruise on Rupert and Wendi’s yacht or their lunch with some deposed European royal, and second, they aren’t exactly on your team.”

“What team? I didn’t realize I was on any team.”

“Well, like it or not, you *are*, and Dickie and Nancy are here tonight precisely to spy for the opposition.”

“Spying?”

“Yes. They mean to pick you apart like a rotting carcass and serve you up as an *amuse-bouche* the next time they’re invited to dine in the Home Counties.”

Rachel had no idea what to make of his outlandish statement. This Oliver seemed like a character straight out of an Oscar Wilde play. “I’m not sure I follow,” she finally said.

“Don’t worry, you will. Just give it another week—I’d peg you for a quick study.”

Rachel assessed Oliver for a minute. He looked to be in his mid-thirties, with short, meticulously combed hair and small round tortoiseshell glasses that only accentuated his longish face. “So how exactly are you related to Nick?” she asked. “There seem to be so many different branches of the family.”

“It’s really quite simple, actually. There are three branches—the T’siens, the Youngs, and the Shangs. Nick’s grandfather James Young and my grandmother Rosemary T’sien are brother and sister. You met her earlier tonight, if you recall? You mistook her for Nick’s grandmother.”

“Yes, of course. But that would mean that you and Nick are second cousins.”

“Right. But here in Singapore, since extended families abound, we all just say we’re ‘cousins’ to avoid confusion. None of that ‘third cousins twice removed’ rubbish.”

“So Dickie and Nancy are your uncle and aunt.”

“Correct. Dickie is my father’s older brother. But you do know that in Singapore, anyone you’re introduced to who’s one generation older should be called ‘Uncle or Auntie,’ even

though they might not be related at all. It's considered the polite thing."

"Well, shouldn't you be calling your relatives 'Uncle Dickie' and 'Auntie Nancy' then?"

"Technically, yes, but I personally feel that the honorific should be earned. Dickie and Nancy have never given a flying fuck about me, so why should I bother?"

Rachel raised her eyebrows. "Well, thanks for the crash course on the T'siens. Now, how about the third branch?"

"Ah yes, the Shangs."

"I don't think I've met any of them yet."

"Well, none of them are here, of course. We're not supposed to *ever* talk about them, but the imperial Shangs flee to their grand country estates in England every April and stay until September, to avoid the hottest months. But not to worry, I think my cousin Cassandra Shang will be back for the wedding next week, so you will get a chance to bask in her incandescence."

Rachel grinned at his florid remark—this Oliver was such a trip. "And how are they related exactly?"

"Here's where it gets interesting. Pay attention. So my grandmother's eldest daughter, Aunt Mabel T'sien, was married off to Nick's grandmother's younger brother Alfred Shang."

"Married off? Does that mean it was an arranged marriage?"

"Yes, very much so, plotted by my grandfather T'sien Tsai Tay and Nick's great-grandfather Shang Loong Ma. Good thing they actually liked each other. But it was quite a masterstroke, because it strategically bound together the T'siens, the Shangs, and the Youngs."

"What for?" Rachel asked.

“Oh come on, Rachel, don’t play the naïf with me. For the *money*, of course. It joined together three family fortunes and kept everything neatly locked up.”

“Who’s getting locked up? Are they finally locking you up, Ollie?” Nick said, as he approached the table with Astrid.

“They haven’t been able to pin anything on me yet, Nicholas,” Oliver retorted. He turned to Astrid and his eyes widened. “Holy Mary Mother of Tilda Swinton, look at those earrings! Wherever did you get them?”

“Stephen Chia’s . . . they’re VBH,” Astrid said, knowing he would want to know who the designer was.

“Of course they are. Only Bruce could have dreamed up something like that. They must have cost *at least* half a million dollars. I wouldn’t have thought they were quite your style, but they do look fabulous on you. Hmm . . . you still can surprise me after all these years.”

“You know I try, Ollie, I try.”

Rachel stared with renewed wonder at the earrings. Did Oliver really say half a million dollars? “How’s Cassian doing?” she asked.

“It was a bit of a struggle at first, but now he’ll sleep till dawn,” Astrid replied.

“And where is that errant husband of yours, Astrid? Mr. Bedroom Eyes?” Oliver asked.

“Michael’s working late tonight.”

“What a pity. That company of his really keeps him toiling away, don’t they? Seems like ages since I’ve seen Michael—I’m beginning to take it quite personally. Though the other day I could have *sworn* I saw him walking up Wyndham Street in Hong Kong with a little boy. At first I thought it was Michael and Cassian, but then the little boy turned around and he

wasn't nearly as cute as Cassian, so I knew I had to be hallucinating."

"Obviously," Astrid said as calmly as she could, feeling like she had just been punched in the gut. "Were you in Hong Kong before this, Ollie?" she asked, her brain furiously trying to ascertain whether Oliver had been in Hong Kong at the same time as Michael's last "business trip."

"I was there last week. I've been shuttling between Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Beijing for the past month for work."

Michael was supposedly in Shenzhen then. He could have easily taken a train to Hong Kong, Astrid thought.

"Oliver is the Asian art and antiquities expert for Christie's in London," Nick explained to Rachel.

"Yes, except that it's no longer very efficient for me to be based in London. The Asian art market is heating up like you wouldn't believe."

"I hear that every new Chinese billionaire is trying to get their hands on a Warhol these days," Nick remarked.

"Well, yes there are certainly quite a few wannabe Saatchis around, but I'm dealing more with the ones trying to buy back the great antiquities from European and American collectors. Or, as they like to say, stuff stolen by the foreign devils," Oliver said.

"It wasn't truly *stolen*, was it?" Nick asked.

"Stolen, smuggled, sold off by philistines, isn't it all the same? Whether the Chinese want to admit it or not, the true connoisseurship of Asian art was outside of China for much of the last century, so that's where a lot of the museum-quality pieces ended up—in Europe and America. The demand was there. The moneyed Chinese didn't really appreciate what they had. With the exception of a few families, no one bothered to

collect Chinese art and antiquities, not with any real discernment, anyway. They wanted to be modern and sophisticated, which meant emulating the Europeans. Why, even in this house there's probably more French art deco than there are Chinese pieces. Thank God there are some fabulous signed Ruhlmann pieces, but if you think about it, it's a pity that your great-grandfather went mad for art deco when he could have been snapping up all the imperial treasures coming out of China."

"You mean the antiques that were in the Forbidden City?" Rachel asked.

"Absolutely! Did you know that in 1913, the imperial family of China actually tried to *sell* their entire collection to the banker J. P. Morgan?" Oliver said.

"Come on!" Rachel was incredulous.

"It's true. The family was so hard up, they were willing to let all of it go for four million dollars. All the priceless treasures, collected over a span of five centuries. It's quite a sensational story—Morgan received the offer by telegram, but he died a few days later. Divine intervention was the only thing that prevented the most irreplaceable treasures of China from ending up in the Big Apple."

"Imagine if that had actually happened," Nick remarked, shaking his head.

"Yes indeed. It would be a loss greater than the Elgin Marbles going to the British Museum. But thankfully the tide has turned. The Mainland Chinese are finally interested in buying back their own heritage, and they only want the best," Oliver said. "Which reminds me, Astrid—are you still looking for more *Huangbuali*? Because I know of an important Han dynasty puzzle table coming up for auction next week in Hong

THE GIRL IN THE SPIDER'S WEB

David Lagercrantz

Translated from the Swedish by George Goulding



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Wrange tried to concentrate on the game, but he was not managing too well. Fortunately this punk girl was going to be easy pickings. She wasn't bad, as it turned out—she probably spent a lot of time playing—but what good was that? He toyed with her a little, and she was bound to be impressed. Who knows, maybe he could even get her to come home with him afterwards. True, she looked stropic, and Wrange did not go in for stropic girls, but she had nice tits and he might be able to take out his frustrations on her. It had been a disaster of a morning. The news that Balder had been murdered had floored him.

It wasn't grief that he felt: it was fear. Wrange really did try hard to convince himself that he had done the right thing. What did the goddamn professor expect when he treated him as if he didn't exist? But of course it wouldn't look good that Wrange had sold him down the river. He consoled himself with the thought that an idiot like Balder must have made thousands of enemies, but deep down he knew: the one event was linked to the other, and that scared him to death.

Ever since Balder had started working at Solifon, Wrange had been afraid that the drama would take a frightening new turn, and here he was now, wishing that it would all go away.

That must have been why he went into town this morning on a compulsive spree to buy a load of designer clothes, and had ended up here at the chess club. Chess still managed to distract him, and the fact was that he was feeling better already. He felt like he was in control and smart enough to keep on fooling them all. Look at how he was playing.

This girl was not half bad. In fact there was something unorthodox and creative in her play, and she would probably be able to teach most people in here a thing or two. It was just that he, Arvid Wrangé, was crushing her. His play was so brilliant and sophisticated that she had not even noticed he was on the brink of trapping her queen. Stealthily he moved his positions forward and snapped it up without sacrificing more than a knight. In a flirty, casual tone bound to impress her he said, "Sorry, baby. Your queen is down."

But he got nothing in return, no smile, not a word, nothing. The girl upped the tempo, as if she wanted to put a quick end to her humiliation, and why not? He'd be happy to keep the process short and take her out for two or three drinks before he pulled her. Maybe he would not be very nice to her in bed. The chances were that she would still thank him afterwards. A miserable cunt like her would be unlikely to have had a fuck for a long time and would be totally unused to guys like him, cool guys who played at this level. He decided to show off a bit and explain some higher chess theory. But he never got the chance. Something on the board did not feel quite right. His game began to run into some sort of resistance he could not understand. For a while he persuaded himself that it was only his imagination, perhaps the result of a few careless moves. If only he concentrated he would be able to put things right, and so he mobilized his killer instinct.

But the situation just got worse.

He felt trapped—however hard he tried to regain the initiative she hit back—and in the end he had no choice but to acknowledge that the balance of power had shifted, and shifted irreversibly. How crazy was that? He had taken her queen, but instead of building on that advantage he had landed in a fatally weak position. Surely she had not deliberately sacrificed her queen so early in the game? That would be impossible—the sort of thing you read about in books, it doesn't happen in your local chess club in Vasastan, and it's definitely not something that pierced punk chicks with attitude problems do, especially not to great players like him. Yet there was no escape.

In four or five moves he would be beaten and so he saw no alternative but to knock over his king with his index finger and mumble congratulations. Even though he would have liked to serve up some excuses, something told him that that would make matters worse. He had a sneaking feeling that his defeat was not just down to bad luck, and almost against his will he began to feel frightened again. Who the hell was she?

Cautiously he looked her in the eye and now she no longer looked like a stropic, insecure nobody. Now she seemed cold—like a predator eyeing its prey. He felt deeply ill at ease, as if the defeat on the chessboard were but a prelude to something much, much worse. He glanced towards the door.

"You're not going anywhere," she said.

"Who are you?" he said.

"Nobody special."

"So we haven't met before?"

"Not exactly."

"But nearly, is that it?"

"We've met in your nightmares, Arvid."

"Is this some kind of joke?"

“Not really.”

“What do you mean?”

“What do you think I mean?”

“How should I know?”

He could not understand why he was so scared.

The Underground Railroad



A NOVEL

**Colson
Whitehead**



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THE first time Caesar approached Cora about running north, she said no.

This was her grandmother talking. Cora's grandmother had never seen the ocean before that bright afternoon in the port of Ouidah and the water dazzled after her time in the fort's dungeon. The dungeon stored them until the ships arrived. Dahomeyan raiders kidnapped the men first, then returned to her village the next moon for the women and children, marching them in chains to the sea two by two. As she stared into the black doorway, Ajarry thought she'd be reunited with her father, down there in the dark. The survivors from her village told her that when her father couldn't keep the pace of the long march, the slavers stove in his head and left his body by the trail. Her mother had died years before.

Cora's grandmother was sold a few times on the trek to the fort, passed between slavers for cowrie shells and glass beads. It was hard to say how much they paid for her in Ouidah as she was part of a bulk purchase, eighty-eight human souls for sixty crates of rum and gunpowder, the price arrived upon after the standard haggling in Coast English. Able-bodied men and childbearing women fetched more than juveniles, making an individual accounting difficult.

The *Nanny* was out of Liverpool and had made two previous stops along the Gold Coast. The captain staggered his

purchases, rather than find himself with cargo of singular culture and disposition. Who knew what brand of mutiny his captives might cook up if they shared a common tongue. This was the ship's final port of call before they crossed the Atlantic. Two yellow-haired sailors rowed Ajarry out to the ship, humming. White skin like bone.

The noxious air of the hold, the gloom of confinement, and the screams of those shackled to her contrived to drive Ajarry to madness. Because of her tender age, her captors did not immediately force their urges upon her, but eventually some of the more seasoned mates dragged her from the hold six weeks into the passage. She twice tried to kill herself on the voyage to America, once by denying herself food and then again by drowning. The sailors stymied her both times, versed in the schemes and inclinations of chattel. Ajarry didn't even make it to the gunwale when she tried to jump overboard. Her simpering posture and piteous aspect, recognizable from thousands of slaves before her, betrayed her intentions. Chained head to toe, head to toe, in exponential misery.

Although they had tried not to get separated at the auction in Ouidah, the rest of her family was purchased by Portuguese traders from the frigate *Vivilia*, next seen four months later drifting ten miles off Bermuda. Plague had claimed all on board. Authorities lit the ship on fire and watched her crackle and sink. Cora's grandmother knew nothing about the ship's fate. For the rest of her life she imagined her cousins worked for kind and generous masters up north, engaged in more forgiving trades than her own, weaving or spinning, nothing in the fields. In her stories, Isay and Sidoo and the rest somehow bought their way out of bondage and lived as free men and women in the City of Pennsylvania, a place she had overheard two white men discuss once. These fantasies

gave Ajarry comfort when her burdens were such to splinter her into a thousand pieces.

The next time Cora's grandmother was sold was after a month in the pest house on Sullivan's Island, once the physicians certified her and the rest of the *Nanny's* cargo clear of illness. Another busy day on the Exchange. A big auction always drew a colorful crowd. Traders and procurers from up and down the coast converged on Charleston, checking the merchandise's eyes and joints and spines, wary of venereal distemper and other afflictions. Onlookers chewed fresh oysters and hot corn as the auctioneers shouted into the air. The slaves stood naked on the platform. There was a bidding war over a group of Ashanti studs, those Africans of renowned industry and musculature, and the foreman of a limestone quarry bought a bunch of pickaninnies in an astounding bargain. Cora's grandmother saw a little boy among the gawkers eating rock candy and wondered what he was putting in his mouth.

Just before sunset an agent bought her for two hundred and twenty-six dollars. She would have fetched more but for that season's glut of young girls. His suit was made of the whitest cloth she had ever seen. Rings set with colored stone flashed on his fingers. When he pinched her breasts to see if she was in flower, the metal was cool on her skin. She was branded, not for the first or last time, and fettered to the rest of the day's acquisitions. The coffle began their long march south that night, staggering behind the trader's buggy. The *Nanny* by that time was en route back to Liverpool, full of sugar and tobacco. There were fewer screams belowdecks.

You would have thought Cora's grandmother cursed, so many times was she sold and swapped and resold over the next few years. Her owners came to ruin with startling frequency. Her first master got swindled by a man who sold a device that cleaned cotton twice as fast as Whitney's gin. The

diagrams were convincing, but in the end Ajarry was another asset liquidated by order of the magistrate. She went for two hundred and eighteen dollars in a hasty exchange, a drop in price occasioned by the realities of the local market. Another owner expired from dropsy, whereupon his widow held an estate sale to fund a return to her native Europe, where it was clean. Ajarry spent three months as the property of a Welshman who eventually lost her, three other slaves, and two hogs in a game of whist. And so on.

Her price fluctuated. When you are sold that many times, the world is teaching you to pay attention. She learned to quickly adjust to the new plantations, sorting the nigger breakers from the merely cruel, the layabouts from the hard-working, the informers from the secret-keepers. Masters and mistresses in degrees of wickedness, estates of disparate means and ambition. Sometimes the planters wanted nothing more than to make a humble living, and then there were men and women who wanted to own the world, as if it were a matter of the proper acreage. Two hundred and forty-eight, two hundred and sixty, two hundred and seventy dollars. Wherever she went it was sugar and indigo, except for a stint folding tobacco leaves for one week before she was sold again. The trader called upon the tobacco plantation looking for slaves of breeding age, preferably with all their teeth and of pliable disposition. She was a woman now. Off she went.

She knew that the white man's scientists peered beneath things to understand how they worked. The movement of the stars across the night, the cooperation of humors in the blood. The temperature requirements for a healthy cotton harvest. Ajarry made a science of her own black body and accumulated observations. Each thing had a value and as the value changed, everything else changed also. A broken calabash was worth less than one that held its water, a hook that

kept its catfish more prized than one that relinquished its bait. In America the quirk was that people were things. Best to cut your losses on an old man who won't survive a trip across the ocean. A young buck from strong tribal stock got customers into a froth. A slave girl squeezing out pups was like a mint, money that bred money. If you were a thing—a cart or a horse or a slave—your value determined your possibilities. She minded her place.

Finally, Georgia. A representative of the Randall plantation bought her for two hundred and ninety-two dollars, in spite of the new blankness behind her eyes, which made her look simpleminded. She never drew a breath off Randall land for the rest of her life. She was home, on this island in sight of nothing.

Cora's grandmother took a husband three times. She had a predilection for broad shoulders and big hands, as did Old Randall, although the master and his slave had different sorts of labor in mind. The two plantations were well-stocked, ninety head of nigger on the northern half and eighty-five head on the southern half. Ajarry generally had her pick. When she didn't, she was patient.

Her first husband developed a hankering for corn whiskey and started using his big hands to make big fists. Ajarry wasn't sad to see him disappear down the road when they sold him to a sugarcane estate in Florida. She next took up with one of the sweet boys from the southern half. Before he passed from cholera he liked to share stories from the Bible, his former master being more liberal-minded when it came to slaves and religion. She enjoyed the stories and parables and supposed that white men had a point: Talk of salvation could give an African ideas. Poor sons of Ham. Her last husband had his ears bored for stealing honey. The wounds gave up pus until he wasted away.

Ajarry bore five children by those men, each delivered in the same spot on the planks of the cabin, which she pointed to when they misstepped. That's where you came from and where I'll put you back if you don't listen. Teach them to obey her and maybe they'll obey all the masters to come and they will survive. Two died miserably of fever. One boy cut his foot while playing on a rusted plow, which poisoned his blood. Her youngest never woke up after a boss hit him in the head with a wooden block. One after another. At least they were never sold off, an older woman told Ajarry. Which was true—back then Randall rarely sold the little ones. You knew where and how your children would die. The child that lived past the age of ten was Cora's mother, Mabel.

Ajarry died in the cotton, the bolls bobbing around her like whitecaps on the brute ocean. The last of her village, keeled over in the rows from a knot in her brain, blood pouring from her nose and white froth covering her lips. As if it could have been anywhere else. Liberty was reserved for other people, for the citizens of the City of Pennsylvania bustling a thousand miles to the north. Since the night she was kidnapped she had been appraised and reappraised, each day waking upon the pan of a new scale. Know your value and you know your place in the order. To escape the boundary of the plantation was to escape the fundamental principles of your existence: impossible.

It was her grandmother talking that Sunday evening when Caesar approached Cora about the underground railroad, and she said no.

Three weeks later she said yes.

This time it was her mother talking.

Kong.” Oliver turned to Astrid, noticing that she had a far-away look on her face. “Earth to Astrid?”

“Oh . . . sorry, I got distracted for a moment,” Astrid said, suddenly flustered. “You were saying something about Hong Kong?”

THE LOOMING TOWER

Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11

Lawrence Wright



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The Martyr

IN A FIRST-CLASS STATEROOM on a cruise ship bound for New York from Alexandria, Egypt, a frail, middle-aged writer and educator named Sayyid Qutb experienced a crisis of faith. "Should I go to America as any normal student on a scholarship, who only eats and sleeps, or should I be special?" he wondered. "Should I hold on to my Islamic beliefs, facing the many sinful temptations, or should I indulge those temptations all around me?" It was November 1948. The new world loomed over the horizon, victorious, rich, and free. Behind him was Egypt, in rags and tears. The traveler had never been out of his native country. Nor had he willingly left now.

The stern bachelor was slight and dark, with a high, sloping forehead and a paintbrush moustache somewhat narrower than the width of his nose. His eyes betrayed an imperious and easily slighted nature. He always evoked an air of formality, favoring dark three-piece suits despite the searing Egyptian sun. For a man who held his dignity so close, the prospect of returning to the classroom at the age of forty-two may have seemed demeaning. And yet, as a child from a mud-walled village in Upper Egypt, he had already surpassed the modest goal he had set for himself of becoming a respectable member of the civil service. His literary and social criticism had made him one of his country's most popular writers. It had also earned the fury of King Farouk, Egypt's dissolute monarch, who had signed an order for his arrest. Powerful and sympathetic friends hastily arranged his departure.

At the time, Qutb (his name is pronounced *kuh-tub*) held a comfortable post as a supervisor in the Ministry of Education. Politically, he was a fervent Egyptian nationalist and anti-communist, a stance that placed him in the mainstream of the vast bureaucratic middle class. The ideas that would give birth to what would be called Islamic fundamentalism were not yet completely formed in his mind; indeed, he would later say that he was not even a very religious man before he began this journey, although he had memorized the Quran by the age of ten, and his writing had recently taken a turn toward more conservative themes. Like many of his compatriots, he was radicalized by the British occupation and contemptuous of the jaded King Farouk's complicity. Egypt was racked by anti-British protests and seditious political factions bent on running the foreign troops out of the country—and perhaps the king as well. What made this unimposing, midlevel government clerk particularly dangerous was his blunt and potent commentary. He had never gotten to the front rank of the contemporary Arab literary scene, a fact that galled him throughout his career; and yet from the government's point of view, he was becoming an annoyingly important enemy.

He was Western in so many ways—his dress, his love of classical music and Hollywood movies. He had read, in translation, the works of Darwin and Einstein, Byron and Shelley, and had immersed himself in French literature, especially Victor Hugo. Even before his journey, however, he worried about the advance of an all-engulfing Western civilization. Despite his erudition, he saw the West as a single cultural entity. The distinctions between capitalism and Marxism, Christianity and Judaism, fascism and democracy were insignificant by comparison with the single great divide in Qutb's mind: Islam and the East on the one side, and the Christian West on the other.

America, however, stood apart from the colonialist adventures that had characterized Europe's relations with the Arab world. At the end of the Second World War, America straddled the political chasm between the colonizers and the colonized. Indeed, it was tempting to imagine America as the anticolonial paragon: a subjugated nation that had broken free and triumphantly outstripped

its former masters. The country's power seemed to lie in its values, not in European notions of cultural superiority or privileged races and classes. And because America advertised itself as an immigrant nation, it had a permeable relationship with the rest of the world. Arabs, like most other peoples, had established their own colonies inside America, and the ropes of kinship drew them closer to the ideals that the country claimed to stand for.

And so, Qutb, like many Arabs, felt shocked and betrayed by the support that the U.S. government had given to the Zionist cause after the war. Even as Qutb was sailing out of Alexandria's harbor, Egypt, along with five other Arab armies, was in the final stages of losing the war that established Israel as a Jewish state within the Arab world. The Arabs were stunned, not only by the determination and skill of the Israeli fighters but by the incompetence of their own troops and the disastrous decisions of their leaders. The shame of that experience would shape the Arab intellectual universe more profoundly than any other event in modern history. "I hate those Westerners and despise them!" Qutb wrote after President Harry Truman endorsed the transfer of a hundred thousand Jewish refugees into Palestine. "All of them, without any exception: the English, the French, the Dutch, and finally the Americans, who have been trusted by many."

THE MAN IN THE STATEROOM had known romantic love, but mainly the pain of it. He had written a thinly disguised account of a failed relationship in a novel; after that, he turned his back on marriage. He said that he had been unable to find a suitable bride from the "dishonorable" women who allowed themselves to be seen in public, a stance that left him alone and unconsolated in middle age. He still enjoyed women—he was close to his three sisters—but sexuality threatened him, and he had withdrawn into a shell of disapproval, seeing sex as the main enemy of salvation.

The dearest relationship he had ever enjoyed was that with his mother, Fatima, an illiterate but pious woman, who had sent her precocious son to Cairo to study. His father died in 1933, when Qutb was twenty-seven. For the next three years he taught in

various provincial posts until he was transferred to Helwan, a prosperous suburb of Cairo, and he brought the rest of his family to live with him there. His intensely conservative mother never entirely settled in; she was always on guard against the creeping foreign influences that were far more apparent in Helwan than in the little village she came from. These influences must have been evident in her sophisticated son as well.

As he prayed in his stateroom, Sayyid Qutb was still uncertain of his own identity. Should he be "normal" or "special"? Should he resist temptations or indulge them? Should he hang on tightly to his Islamic beliefs or cast them aside for the materialism and sinfulness of the West? Like all pilgrims, he was making two journeys: one outward, into the larger world, and another inward, into his own soul. "I have decided to be a true Muslim!" he resolved. But almost immediately he second-guessed himself. "Am I being truthful or was that just a whim?"

His deliberations were interrupted by a knock on the door. Standing outside his stateroom was a young girl, whom he described as thin and tall and "half-naked." She asked him in English, "Is it okay for me to be your guest tonight?"

Qutb responded that his room was equipped with only one bed.

"A single bed can hold two people," she said.

Appalled, he closed the door in her face. "I heard her fall on the wooden floor outside and realized that she was drunk," he recalled. "I instantly thanked God for defeating my temptation and allowing me to stick to my morals."

This is the man, then—decent, proud, tormented, self-righteous—whose lonely genius would unsettle Islam, threaten regimes across the Muslim world, and beckon to a generation of rootless young Arabs who were looking for meaning and purpose in their lives and would find it in jihad.

QUTB ARRIVED in New York Harbor in the middle of the most prosperous holiday season the country had ever known. In the postwar boom, everybody was making money—Idaho potato

farmers, Detroit automakers, Wall Street bankers—and all this wealth spurred confidence in the capitalist model, which had been so brutally tested during the recent Depression. Unemployment seemed practically un-American; officially, the rate of joblessness was under 4 percent, and practically speaking, anyone who wanted a job could get one. Half of the world's total wealth was now in American hands.

The contrast with Cairo must have been especially bitter as Qutb wandered through the New York City streets, festively lit with holiday lights, the luxurious shop windows laden with appliances that he had only heard about—television sets, washing machines—technological miracles spilling out of every department store in stupefying abundance. Brand-new office towers and apartments were shouldering into the gaps in the Manhattan skyline between the Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building. Downtown and in the outer boroughs, vast projects were under way to house the immigrant masses.

It was fitting, in such a buoyant and confident environment, unprecedented in its mix of cultures, that the visible symbol of a changed world order was arising: the new United Nations complex overlooking the East River. The United Nations was the most powerful expression of the determined internationalism that was the legacy of the war, and yet the city itself already embodied the dreams of universal harmony far more powerfully than did any single idea or institution. The world was pouring into New York because that was where the power was, and the money, and the transforming cultural energy. Nearly a million Russians were in the city, half a million Irish, and an equal number of Germans—not to mention the Puerto Ricans, the Dominicans, the Poles, and the largely uncounted and often illegal Chinese laborers who had also found refuge in the welcoming city. The black population of the city had grown by 50 percent in only eight years, to 700,000, and they were refugees as well, from the racism of the American South. Fully a fourth of the 8 million New Yorkers were Jewish, many of whom had fled the latest European catastrophe. Hebrew letters covered the signs for the shops and factories on the Lower East Side, and Yiddish was commonly heard on the streets. That

would have been a challenge for the middle-aged Egyptian who hated the Jews but, until he left his country, had never met one. For many New Yorkers, perhaps for most of them, political and economic oppression was a part of their heritage, and the city had given them sanctuary, a place to earn a living, to raise a family, to begin again. Because of that, the great emotion that fueled the exuberant city was hopefulness, whereas Cairo was one of the capitals of despair.

At the same time, New York was miserable—overfull, grouchy, competitive, frivolous, picketed with No Vacancy signs. Snoring alcoholics blocked the doorways. Pimps and pickpockets prowled the midtown squares in the ghoulish neon glow of burlesque houses. In the Bowery, flophouses offered cots for twenty cents a night. The gloomy side streets were crisscrossed with clotheslines. Gangs of snarling delinquents roamed the margins like wild dogs. For a man whose English was rudimentary, the city posed unfamiliar hazards, and Qutb's natural reticence made communication all the more difficult. He was desperately homesick. "Here in this strange place, this huge workshop they call 'the new world,' I feel as though my spirit, thoughts, and body live in loneliness," he wrote to a friend in Cairo. "What I need most here is someone to talk to," he wrote another friend, "to talk about topics other than dollars, movie stars, brands of cars—a real conversation on the issues of man, philosophy, and soul."

Two days after Qutb arrived in America, he and an Egyptian acquaintance checked into a hotel. "The black elevator operator liked us because we were closer to his color," Qutb reported. The operator offered to help the travelers find "entertainment." "He mentioned examples of this 'entertainment,' which included perversions. He also told us what happens in some of these rooms, which may have pairs of boys or girls. They asked him to bring them some bottles of Coca-Cola, and didn't even change their positions when he entered! 'Don't they feel ashamed?' we asked. He was surprised. 'Why? They are just enjoying themselves, satisfying their particular desires.' "

This experience, among many others, confirmed Qutb's view that sexual mixing led inevitably to perversion. America itself had

just been shaken by a lengthy scholarly report titled *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, by Alfred Kinsey and his colleagues at the University of Indiana. Their eight-hundred-page treatise, filled with startling statistics and droll commentary, shattered the country's leftover Victorian prudishness like a brick through a stained-glass window. Kinsey reported that 37 percent of the American men he sampled had experienced homosexual activity to the point of orgasm, nearly half had engaged in extramarital sex, and 69 percent had paid for sex with prostitutes. The mirror that Kinsey held up to America showed a country that was frantically lustful but also confused, ashamed, incompetent, and astoundingly ignorant. Despite the evidence of the diversity and frequency of sexual activity, this was a time in America when sexual matters were practically never discussed, not even by doctors. One Kinsey researcher interviewed a thousand childless American couples who had no idea why they failed to conceive, even though the wives were virgins.

Qutb was familiar with the Kinsey Report, and referenced it in his later writings to illustrate his view of Americans as little different from beasts—"a reckless, deluded herd that only knows lust and money." A staggering rate of divorce was to be expected in such a society, since "Every time a husband or wife notices a new sparkling personality, they lunge for it as if it were a new fashion in the world of desires." The turbulent overtones of his own internal struggles can be heard in his diatribe: "A girl looks at you, appearing as if she were an enchanting nymph or an escaped mermaid, but as she approaches, you sense only the screaming instinct inside her, and you can smell her burning body, not the scent of perfume but flesh, only flesh. Tasty flesh, truly, but flesh nonetheless."

THE END OF THE WORLD war had brought America victory but not security. Many Americans felt that they had defeated one totalitarian enemy only to encounter another far stronger and more insidious than European fascism. "Communism is creeping inexorably into these destitute lands," the young evangelist Billy

Graham warned, "into war-torn China, into restless South America, and unless the Christian religion rescues these nations from the clutch of the unbelieving, America will stand alone and isolated in the world."

*The Guernsey Literary
and Potato Peel Pie Society*



MARY ANN SHAFFER
& ANNIE BARROWS

Dial Press Trade Paperbacks

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8th January, 1946

Mr. Sidney Stark, Publisher
Stephens & Stark Ltd.
21 St. James's Place
London S.W.1
England

Dear Sidney,

Susan Scott is a wonder. We sold over forty copies of the book, which was very pleasant, but much more thrilling from my standpoint was the food. Susan managed to procure ration coupons for icing sugar and *real eggs* for the meringue. If all her literary luncheons are going to achieve these heights, I won't mind touring about the country. Do you suppose that a lavish bonus could spur her on to butter? Let's try it—you may deduct the money from my royalties.

Now for my grim news. You asked me how work on my new book is progressing. Sidney, it isn't.

English Foibles seemed so promising at first. After all, one should be able to write reams about the Society to Protest the Glorification of the English Bunny. I unearthed a photograph of the Vermin Exterminators' Trade Union, marching down an Oxford street with placards screaming "Down with Beatrix Potter!" But what is there to write about after a caption? Nothing, that's what.

I no longer want to write this book—my head and my heart just aren't in it. Dear as Izzy Bickerstaff is—and was—to me, I don't want to write anything else under that name. I don't want

to be considered a light-hearted journalist anymore. I do acknowledge that making readers laugh—or at least chuckle—during the war was no mean feat, but I don't want to do it anymore. I can't seem to dredge up any sense of proportion or balance these days, and God knows one cannot write humor without them.

In the meantime, I am very happy Stephens & Stark is making money on *Izzy Bickerstaff Goes to War*. It relieves my conscience over the debacle of my Anne Brontë biography.

My thanks for everything and love,
Juliet

P.S. I am reading the collected correspondence of Mrs. Montagu. Do you know what that dismal woman wrote to Jane Carlyle? "My dear little Jane, everybody is born with a vocation, and yours is to write charming little notes." I hope Jane spat on her.

From Sidney to Juliet

10th January, 1946

Miss Juliet Ashton
23 Glebe Place
Chelsea
London S.W. 3

Dear Juliet:

Congratulations! Susan Scott said you took to the audience at the luncheon like a drunkard to rum—and they to you—

so please stop worrying about your tour next week. I haven't a doubt of your success. Having witnessed your electrifying performance of "The Shepherd Boy Sings in the Valley of Humiliation" eighteen years ago, I know you will have every listener coiled around your little finger within moments. A hint: perhaps in this case, you should refrain from throwing the book at the audience when you finish.

Susan is looking forward to ushering you through bookshops from Bath to Yorkshire. And of course, Sophie is agitating for an extension of the tour into Scotland. I've told her in my most infuriating older-brother manner that *It Remains To Be Seen*. She misses you terribly, I know, but Stephens & Stark must be impervious to such considerations.

I've just received *Izzy's* sales figures from London and the Home Counties—they are excellent. Again, congratulations!

Don't fret about *English Foibles*; better that your enthusiasm died now than after six months spent writing about bunnies. The crass commercial possibilities of the idea were attractive, but I agree that the topic would soon grow horribly fey. Another subject—one you'll like—will occur to you.

Dinner one evening before you go? Say when.

Love,
Sidney

P.S. You write charming little notes.

From Juliet to Sidney

11th January, 1946

Dear Sidney,

Yes, lovely—can it be somewhere on the river? I want oysters and champagne and roast beef, if obtainable; if not, a chicken will do. I am very happy that *Izzy's* sales are good. Are they good enough that I don't have to pack a bag and leave London?

Since you and S&S have turned me into a moderately successful author, dinner must be my treat.

Love,
Juliet

P.S. I did not throw "The Shepherd Boy Sings in the Valley of Humiliation" at the audience. I threw it at the elocution mistress. I meant to cast it at her feet, but I missed.

From Juliet to Sophie Strachan

12th January, 1946

Mrs. Alexander Strachan
Feochan Farm
by Oban
Argyll

Dear Sophie,

Of course I'd adore to see you, but I am a soul-less, will-less automaton. I have been ordered by Sidney to Bath, Colchester, Leeds, and several other garden spots I can't recall at the moment, and I can't just slither off to Scotland instead. Sidney's brow would lower—his eyes would narrow—he would stalk. You know how nerve-racking it is when Sidney stalks.

I wish I could sneak away to your farm and have you coddle me. You'd let me put my feet on the sofa, wouldn't you? And then you'd tuck blankets around me and bring me tea. Would Alexander mind a permanent resident on his sofa? You've told me he is a patient man, but perhaps he would find it annoying.

Why am I so melancholy? I should be delighted at the prospect of reading *Izzy* to an entranced audience. You know how I love talking about books, and you know how I adore receiving compliments. I should be thrilled. But the truth is that I'm gloomy—gloomier than I ever was during the war. Everything is so *broken*, Sophie: the roads, the buildings, the people. Especially the people.

This is probably the aftereffect of a horrid dinner party I went to last night. The food was ghastly, but that was to be expected. It was the guests who unnerved me—they were the most

demoralizing collection of individuals I've ever encountered. The talk was of bombs and starvation. Do you remember Sarah Morecroft? She was there, all bones and gooseflesh and bloody lipstick. Didn't she use to be pretty? Wasn't she mad for that horse-riding fellow who went up to Cambridge? He was nowhere in evidence; she's married to a doctor with grey skin who clicks his tongue before he speaks. And he was a figure of wild romance compared to my dinner partner, who just happened to be a single man, presumably the last one on earth—oh Lord, how miserably mean-spirited I sound!

I swear, Sophie, I think there's something wrong with me. Every man I meet is intolerable. Perhaps I should set my sights lower—not so low as the grey doctor who clicks, but a bit lower. I can't even blame it on the war—I was never very good at men, was I?

Do you suppose the St. Swithin's furnace-man was my one true love? Since I never spoke to him, it seems unlikely, but at least it was a passion unscathed by disappointment. And he had that beautiful black hair. After that, you remember, came the Year of Poets. Sidney's quite snarky about those poets, though I don't see why, since he introduced me to them. Then poor Adrian. Oh, there's no need to recite the dread rolls to you, but Sophie—what *is* the matter with me? Am I too particular? I don't want to be married just to be married. I can't think of anything lonelier than spending the rest of my life with someone I can't talk to, or worse, someone I can't be silent with.

What a dreadful, complaining letter. You see? I've succeeded in making you feel relieved that I won't be stopping in Scotland. But then again, I may—my fate rests with Sidney.

Kiss Dominic for me and tell him I saw a rat the size of a terrier the other day.

Love to Alexander and even more to you,
Juliet

From Dawsey Adams, Guernsey, Channel Islands, to Juliet

12th January, 1946

Miss Juliet Ashton
81 Oakley Street
Chelsea
London S.W. 3

Dear Miss Ashton,

My name is Dawsey Adams, and I live on my farm in St. Martin's Parish on Guernsey. I know of you because I have an old book that once belonged to you—the *Selected Essays of Elia*, by an author whose name in real life was Charles Lamb. Your name and address were written inside the front cover.

I will speak plain—I love Charles Lamb. My own book says *Selected*, so I wondered if that meant he had written other things to choose from? These are the pieces I want to read, and though the Germans are gone now, there aren't any bookshops left on Guernsey.

I want to ask a kindness of you. Could you send me the name and address of a bookshop in London? I would like to order more of Charles Lamb's writings by post. I would also like to ask if anyone has ever written his life story, and if they have, could a copy be found for me? For all his bright and turning mind, I think Mr. Lamb must have had a great sadness in his life.

Charles Lamb made me laugh during the German Occupation, especially when he wrote about the roast pig. The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society came into being because of a roast pig we had to keep secret from the German soldiers, so I feel a kinship to Mr. Lamb.

I am sorry to bother you, but I would be sorrier still not to know about him, as his writings have made me his friend.

Hoping not to trouble you,
Dawsey Adams

P.S. My friend Mrs. Maugery bought a pamphlet that once belonged to you, too. It is called *Was There a Burning Bush? A Defense of Moses and the Ten Commandments*. She liked your margin note, “Word of God or crowd control???” Did you ever decide which?

From Juliet to Dawsey

15th January, 1946

Mr. Dawsey Adams
Les Vauxlarens
La Bouvée
St. Martin's, Guernsey

Dear Mr. Adams,

I no longer live on Oakley Street, but I'm so glad that your letter found me and that my book found you. It was a sad wrench to part with the *Selected Essays of Elia*. I had two copies and a dire need of shelf-room, but I felt like a traitor selling it. You have soothed my conscience.

I wonder how the book got to Guernsey? Perhaps there is some secret sort of homing instinct in books that brings them to their perfect readers. How delightful if that were true.

Because there is nothing I would rather do than rummage through bookshops, I went at once to Hastings & Sons upon receiving your letter. I have gone to them for years, always finding the one book I wanted—and then three more I hadn't known I wanted. I told Mr. Hastings you would like a good, clean copy (and *not* a rare edition) of *More Essays of Elia*. He will send it to you by separate post (invoice enclosed) and was delighted to know you are also a lover of Charles Lamb. He said the best biography of Lamb was by E. V. Lucas, and he would hunt out a copy for you, though it may take a while.

In the meantime, will you accept this small gift from me? It is his *Selected Letters*. I think it will tell you more about him than any biography ever could. E. V. Lucas sounds too stately to include my favorite passage from Lamb: “Buz, buz, buz, bum, bum, bum, wheeze, wheeze, wheeze, fen, fen, fen, tinky, tinky, tinky, cr’annch! I shall certainly come to be condemned at last. I have been drinking too much for two days running. I find my moral sense in the last stage of a consumption and my religion getting faint.” You’ll find that in the *Letters* (it’s on page 244). They were the first Lamb I ever read, and I’m ashamed to say I only bought the book because I’d read elsewhere that a man named Lamb had visited his friend Leigh Hunt, in prison for libeling the Prince of Wales.

While there, Lamb helped Hunt paint the ceiling of his cell sky blue with white clouds. Next they painted a rose trellis up one wall. Then, I further discovered, Lamb offered money to help Hunt’s family outside the prison—though he himself was as poor as a man could be. Lamb also taught Hunt’s youngest daughter to say the Lord’s Prayer backward. You naturally want to learn everything you can about a man like that.

That’s what I love about reading: one tiny thing will interest you in a book, and that tiny thing will lead you onto another book, and another bit there will lead you onto a third book. It’s

geometrically progressive—all with no end in sight, and for no other reason than sheer enjoyment.

The red stain on the cover that looks like blood—is blood. I got careless with my paper knife. The enclosed postcard is a reproduction of a painting of Lamb by his friend William Hazlitt.

If you have time to correspond with me, could you answer several questions? Three, in fact. Why did a roast pig dinner have to be kept a secret? How could a pig cause you to begin a literary society? And, most pressing of all, what is a potato peel pie—and why is it included in your society's name?

I have sub-let a flat at 23 Glebe Place, Chelsea, London S.W.3. My Oakley Street flat was bombed in 1945 and I still miss it. Oakley Street was wonderful—I could see the Thames out of three of my windows. I know that I am fortunate to have any place at all to live in London, but I much prefer whining to counting my blessings. I am glad you thought of me to do your *Elia* hunting.

Yours sincerely,
Juliet Ashton

P.S. I never could make up my mind about Moses—it still bothers me.

From Juliet to Sidney

18th January, 1946

Dear Sidney,

This isn't a letter: it's an apology. Please forgive my moaning about the teas and luncheons you set up for *Izzy*. Did I call you a

tyrant? I take it all back—I love Stephens & Stark for sending me out of London.

Bath is a glorious town: lovely crescents of white, upstanding houses instead of London's black, gloomy buildings or—worse still—piles of rubble that were once buildings. It is bliss to breathe in clean, fresh air with no coal smoke and no dust. The weather is cold, but it isn't London's dank chill. Even the people on the street look different—upstanding, like their houses, not grey and hunched like Londoners.

Susan said the guests at Abbot's book tea enjoyed themselves immensely—and I know I did. I was able to un-stick my tongue from the roof of my mouth after the first two minutes and began to have quite a good time.

Susan and I are off tomorrow for bookshops in Colchester, Norwich, King's Lynn, Bradford, and Leeds.

Love and thanks,
Juliet

From Juliet to Sidney

21st January, 1946

Dear Sidney,

Night-time train travel is wonderful again! No standing in the corridors for hours, no being shunted off for a troop train to pass, and above all, no black-out curtains. All the windows we passed were lighted, and I could snoop once more. I missed it so terribly during the war. I felt as if we had all turned into moles scuttling along in our separate tunnels. I don't consider myself a

real peeper—they go in for bedrooms, but it's families in sitting rooms or kitchens that thrill me. I can imagine their entire lives from a glimpse of bookshelves, or desks, or lit candles, or bright sofa cushions.

There was a nasty, condescending man in Tillman's bookshop today. After my talk about *Izzy*, I asked if anyone had questions. He literally leapt from his seat to go nose-to-nose with me—how was it, he demanded, that I, a mere woman, dared to bastardize the name of Isaac Bickerstaff? “The true Isaac Bickerstaff, noted journalist, nay the sacred heart and soul of eighteenth-century literature: dead now and his name desecrated by you.”

Before I could muster a word, a woman in the back row jumped to her feet. “Oh, sit down! You can't desecrate a person who never was! He's not dead because he was never alive! Isaac Bickerstaff was a pseudonym for Joseph Addison's *Spectator* columns! Miss Ashton can take up any pretend name she wants to—so shut up!” What a valiant defender—he left the store in a hurry.

Sidney, do you know a man named Markham V. Reynolds, Jr.? If you don't, will you look him up for me—*Who's Who*, the *Domesday Book*, Scotland Yard? Failing those, he may simply be in the Telephone Directory. He sent a beautiful bunch of mixed spring flowers to me at the hotel in Bath, a dozen white roses to my train, and a pile of red roses to Norwich—all with no message, only his engraved card.

Come to that, how does he know where Susan and I are staying? What trains we are taking? All his flowers have met me upon my arrival. I don't know whether to feel flattered or hunted.

Love,
Juliet

From Juliet to Sidney

23rd January, 1946

Dear Sidney,

Susan just gave me the sales figures for *Izzy*—I can scarcely believe them. I honestly thought everyone would be so weary of the war that no one would want a remembrance of it—and certainly not in a book. Happily, and once again, you were right and I was wrong (it half-kills me to admit this).

Traveling, talking before a captive audience, signing books, and meeting strangers *is* exhilarating. The women I've met have told me such war stories of their own, I almost wish I had my column back. Yesterday, I had a lovely, gossipy chat with a Norwich lady. She has four daughters in their teens, and just last week, the eldest was invited to tea at the cadet school in town. Arrayed in her finest frock and spotless white gloves, the girl made her way to the school, stepped over the threshold, took one look at the sea of shining cadet faces before her—and fainted dead away! The poor child had never seen so many males in one place in her life. Think of it—a whole generation grown up without dances or teas or flirting.

I love seeing the bookshops and meeting the booksellers—booksellers really are a special breed. No one in their right mind would take up clerking in a bookstore for the salary, and no one in his right mind would want to own one—the margin of profit is too small. So, it has to be a love of readers and reading that makes them do it—along with first dibs on the new books.

Do you remember the first job your sister and I had in London? In crabby Mr. Hawke's secondhand bookshop? How I loved

him—he'd simply unpack a box of books, hand one or two to us and say, "No cigarette ashes, clean hands—and for God's sake, Juliet, none of your margin notes! Sophie, dear, don't let her drink coffee while she reads." And off we'd go with new books to read.

It was amazing to me then, and still is, that so many people who wander into bookshops don't really know what they're after—they only want to look around and hope to see a book that will strike their fancy. And then, being bright enough not to trust the publisher's blurb, they will ask the book clerk the three questions: (1) What is it about? (2) Have you read it? (3) Was it any good?

Real dyed-in-the-wool booksellers—like Sophie and me—can't lie. Our faces are always a dead giveaway. A lifted brow or curled lip reveals that it's a poor excuse for a book, and the clever customers ask for a recommendation instead, whereupon we frog-march them over to a particular volume and command them to read it. If they read it and despise it, they'll never come back. But if they like it, they're customers for life.

Are you taking notes? You should—a publisher should send not just one reader's copy to a bookshop, but several, so that all the staff can read it, too.

Mr. Seton told me today that *Izzy Bickerstaff* makes an ideal present for both someone you like and someone you don't like but have to give a present to anyway. He also claimed that 30 percent of all books bought are bought as gifts. Thirty percent??? Did he lie?

Has Susan told you what else she has managed besides our tour? Me. I hadn't known her half an hour before she told me my make-up, my clothes, my hair, and my shoes were drab, all drab. The war was over, hadn't I heard?

She took me to Madame Helena's for a haircut; it is now short and curly instead of long and lank. I had a light rinse, too—Susan and Madame said it would bring out the golden highlights in my "beau-

tiful chestnut curls.” But I know better; it’s meant to cover any grey hairs (four, by my count) that have begun to creep in. I also bought a jar of face cream, a lovely scented hand lotion, a new lipstick, and an eye-lash curler—which makes my eyes cross whenever I use it.

Then Susan suggested a new dress. I reminded her that the Queen was very happy wearing her 1939 wardrobe, so why shouldn’t I be? She said the Queen doesn’t need to impress strangers—but I do. I felt like a traitor to crown and country; no decent woman has new clothes—but I forgot that the moment I saw myself in the mirror. My first new dress in four years, and such a dress! It is the exact color of a ripe peach and falls in lovely folds when I move. The saleslady said it had “Gallic Chic” and I would too, if I bought it. So I did. New shoes are going to have to wait, since I spent almost a year’s worth of clothing coupons on the dress.

Between Susan, my hair, my face, and my dress, I no longer look a listless, bedraggled thirty-two-year-old. I look a lively, dashing, haute-couturé (if this isn’t a French verb, it should be) thirty.

Apropos of my new dress and no new shoes—doesn’t it seem shocking to have more stringent rationing after the war than during the war? I realize that hundreds of thousands of people all over Europe must be fed, housed, and clothed, but privately I resent it that so many of them are Germans.

I am still without any ideas for a book I want to write. It is beginning to depress me. Do you have any suggestions?

Since I am in what I consider to be the North I’m going to place a trunk call to Sophie in Scotland tonight. Any messages for your sister? Your brother-in-law? Your nephew?

This is the longest letter I’ve ever written—you needn’t reply in kind.

Love,
Juliet

From Susan Scott to Sidney

25th January, 1946

Dear Sidney,

Don't believe the newspaper reports. Juliet was not arrested and taken away in handcuffs. She was merely reproved by one of Bradford's constables, and he could barely keep a straight face.

She did throw a teapot at Gilly Gilbert's head, but don't believe his claim that she scalded him; the tea was cold. Besides, it was more of a skim-by than a direct hit. Even the hotel manager refused to let us compensate him for the teapot—it was only dented. He was, however, forced by Gilly's screams to call in the constabulary.

Herewith the story, and I take full responsibility for it. I should have refused Gilly's request for an interview with Juliet. I knew what a loathsome person he was, one of those unctuous little worms who work for *The London Hue and Cry*. I also knew that Gilly and the *LH&C* were horribly jealous of the *Spectator's* success with the Izzy Bickerstaff columns—and of Juliet.

We had just returned to the hotel from the Brady's Booksmith party for Juliet. We were both tired—and full of ourselves—when up popped Gilly from a chair in the lounge. He begged us to have tea with him. He begged for a short interview with “our own wonderful Miss Ashton—or should I say England's very own Izzy Bickerstaff?” His smarm alone should have alerted me, but it didn't—I wanted to sit down, gloat over Juliet's success, and have a cream tea.

So we did. The talk was going smoothly enough, and my mind was wandering when I heard Gilly say, “. . . you were a war

widow yourself, weren't you? Or rather—*almost* a war widow—as good as. You were to marry a Lieutenant Rob Dartry, weren't you? Had made arrangements for the ceremony, hadn't you?"

Juliet said, "I beg your pardon, Mr. Gilbert." You know how polite she is.

"I don't have it wrong, do I? You and Lieutenant Dartry *did* apply for a marriage license. You *did* make an appointment to be married at the Chelsea Register Office on 13th December, 1942, at 11:00 A.M. You *did* book a table for luncheon at the Ritz—only you never showed up for any of it. It's perfectly obvious that you jilted Lieutenant Dartry at the altar—poor fellow—and sent him off alone and humiliated, back to his ship, to carry his broken heart to Burma, where he was killed not three months later."

I sat up, my mouth gaping open. I just looked on helplessly as Juliet attempted to be civil: "I didn't jilt him *at the altar*—it was the day before. And he wasn't humiliated—he was relieved. I simply told him that I didn't want to be married after all. Believe me, Mr. Gilbert, he left a happy man—delighted to be rid of me. He didn't slink back to his ship, alone and betrayed—he went straight to the CCB Club and danced all night with Belinda Twining."

Well, Sidney, surprised as Gilly was, he was not daunted. Little rodents like Gilly never are, are they? He quickly guessed that he was on to an even juicier story for his paper.

"OH-HO!" he smirked, "What was it, then? Drink? Other women? A touch of the old Oscar Wilde?"

That was when Juliet threw the teapot. You can imagine the hubbub that ensued—the lounge was full of other people having tea—hence, I am sure, the newspapers learning of it.

I thought his headline, "*IZZY BICKERSTAFF GOES TO WAR—AGAIN! Reporter Wounded in Hotel Bun-Fight*," was a bit harsh, but not too bad. But "*JULIET'S FAILED ROMEO—A*

FALLEN HERO IN BURMA" was sick-making, even for Gilly Gilbert and the *Hue and Cry*.

Juliet is worried she may have embarrassed Stephens & Stark, but she is literally sick over Rob Dartry's name being slung around in this fashion. All I could get her to say to me was that Rob Dartry was a good man, a very good man—none of it was his fault—and he did not deserve this!

Did you know Rob Dartry? Of course, the drink/Oscar Wilde business is pure rot, but why did Juliet call off the wedding? Do you know why? And would you tell me if you did? Of course you wouldn't; I don't know why I'm even asking.

The gossip will die down of course, but does Juliet have to be in London for the thick of it? Should we extend our tour to Scotland? I admit I'm of two minds about this; the sales there have been spectacular, but Juliet has worked so hard at these teas and luncheons—it is not easy to get up in front of a roomful of strangers and praise yourself and your book. She's not used to this hoopla like I am and is, I think, very tired.

Sunday we'll be in Leeds, so let me know then about Scotland.

Of course, Gilly Gilbert is despicable and vile and I hope he comes to a bad end, but he has pushed *Izzy Bickerstaff Goes to War* onto the Best Seller List. I'm tempted to write him a thank-you note.

Yours in haste,
Susan

P.S. Have you found out who Markham V. Reynolds is yet? He sent Juliet a forest of camellias today.

Telegram from Juliet to Sidney

AM TERRIBLY SORRY TO HAVE EMBARRASSED YOU
AND STEPHENS & STARK. LOVE, JULIET

From Sidney to Juliet

26th January, 1946

Miss Juliet Ashton
The Queens Hotel
City Square
Leeds

Dear Juliet,

Don't worry about Gilly—you did not embarrass S&S; I'm only sorry that the tea wasn't hotter and you didn't aim lower. The Press is hounding me for a statement regarding Gilly's latest muckraking, and I am going to give them one. Don't worry; it's going to be about Journalism in these degenerate times—not about you or Rob Dartry.

I just spoke to Susan about going on to Scotland and—though I know Sophie will never forgive me—decided against it. *Izzy's* sales figures are going up—way up—and I think you should come home.

The *Times* wants you to write a long piece for the supplement—one part of a three-part series they plan to publish in successive issues. I'll let them surprise you with the subject, but

I can promise you three things right now: they want it written by Juliet Ashton, *not by Izzy Bickerstaff*; the subject is a serious one; and the sum mentioned means you can fill your flat with fresh flowers every day for a year, buy a satin quilt (Lord Woolton says you no longer need to have been bombed out to buy new bed-covers), and purchase a pair of real leather shoes—if you can find them. You can have my coupons.

The *Times* doesn't want the article until late spring, so we will have more time to think up a new book possibility for you. All good reasons to hurry back, but the biggest one is that I miss you.

Now, about Markham V. Reynolds, Junior. I do know who he is, and the *Domesday Book* won't help—he's an American. He is the son and heir of Markham V. Reynolds, Senior, who used to have a monopoly on paper mills in the States and now just owns most of them. Reynolds, Junior, being of an artistic turn of mind, does not dirty his hands in making paper—he prints on it instead. He's a publisher. The *New York Journal*, the *Word*, *View*—those are all his, and there are several smaller magazines as well. I knew he was in London. Officially, he's here to open the London office of *View*, but rumor has it that he's decided to begin publishing books, and he's here to beguile England's finest authors with visions of plenty and prosperity in America. I didn't know his technique included roses and camellias, but I'm not surprised. He's always had more than his fair share of what we call cheek and Americans call can-do spirit. Just wait till you see him—he's been the undoing of stronger women than you, including my secretary. I'm sorry to say she's the one who gave him your itinerary *and* your address. The silly woman thought he was so romantic-looking, with “such a lovely suit and handmade shoes.” Dear God! She couldn't seem to grasp the concept of breach of confidentiality, so I had to sack her.

He's after you, Juliet, no doubt about it. Shall I challenge

him to a duel? He would undoubtedly kill me, so I'd rather not. My dear, I can't promise you plenty or prosperity or even butter, but you do know that you're Stephens & Stark's—especially Stark's—most beloved author, don't you?

Dinner the first evening you are home?

Love,
Sidney

From Juliet to Sidney

28th January, 1946

Dear Sidney,

Yes, dinner with pleasure. I'll wear my new dress and eat like a pig.

I am so glad I didn't embarrass S&S about Gilly and the teapot—I was worried. Susan suggested I make a “dignified statement” to the press too, about Rob Dartry and why we did not marry. I couldn't possibly do that. I honestly don't think I'd mind looking like a fool, if it didn't make Rob look a worse one. But it would—and of course, he wasn't a fool at all. But he'd *sound that way*. I'd much prefer to say nothing and look like a feckless, flighty, cold-hearted bitch.

But I'd like *you* to know why—I'd have told you before, but you were off with the Navy in 1942, and you never met Rob. Even Sophie never met him—she was up at Bedford that fall—and I swore her to secrecy afterwards. The longer I put off saying

anything, the less important it became for you to know, especially in light of how it made me look—witless and foolish for getting engaged in the first place.

I thought I was in love (*that's* the pathetic part—my idea of being in love). In preparation for sharing my home with a husband, I made room for him so he wouldn't feel like a visiting aunt. I cleared out half my dresser drawers, half my closet, half my medicine chest, half my desk. I gave away my padded hangers and brought in those heavy wooden ones. I took my golliwog off the bed and put her in the attic. Now my flat was meant for two, instead of one.

On the afternoon before our wedding, Rob was moving in the last of his clothes and belongings while I delivered my Izzy article to the *Spectator*. When I was through, I tore home, flew up the stairs, and threw open the door to find Rob sitting on a low stool in front of my bookcase, surrounded by cartons. He was sealing the last one up with gummed tape and string. There were eight boxes—*eight boxes* of my books bound up and ready for the basement!

He looked up and said, "Hello, darling. Don't mind the mess, the porter said he'd help me carry these down to the basement." He nodded toward my bookshelves and said, "Don't they look wonderful?"

Well, there were no words! I was too appalled to speak. Sidney, every single shelf—where my books had stood—was filled with athletic trophies: silver cups, gold cups, blue rosettes, red ribbons. There were awards for every game that could possibly be played with a wooden object: cricket bats, squash racquets, tennis racquets, oars, golf clubs, Ping-Pong paddles, bows and arrows, snooker cues, lacrosse sticks, hockey sticks, and polo mallets. There were statues for everything a man could

jump over, either by himself or on a horse. Next came the framed certificates—for shooting the most birds on such and such a date, for First Place in footraces, for Last Man Standing in some filthy tug-of-war against Scotland.

All I could do was scream, “How dare you! What have you DONE?! Put my books back!”

Well, that’s how matters started. Eventually, I said something to the effect that I could never marry a man whose idea of bliss was to strike out at little balls and little birds. Rob countered with remarks about damned bluestockings and shrews. And it all degenerated from there—the only thought we probably had in common was, What the hell have we talked about for the last four months? What, indeed? He huffed and puffed and snorted—and left. And I unpacked my books.

Remember the night last year when you met my train to tell me my home had been bombed flat? You thought I was laughing in hysteria? I wasn’t—it was in irony—if I’d let Rob store all my books in the basement, I’d still have them, every one.

Sidney, as a token of our long friendship, you do not need to comment on this story—not ever. In fact, I’d far prefer it if you didn’t.

Thank you for tracing Markham V. Reynolds, Junior, to his source. So far, his blandishments are entirely floral, and I remain true to you and the Empire. However, I do have a pang of sympathy for your secretary—I hope he sent her some roses for her trouble—as I’m not certain that my scruples could withstand the sight of handmade shoes. If I ever do meet him, I’ll take care not to look at his feet—or I’ll lash myself to a flagpole first and then peek, like Odysseus.

Bless you for telling me to come home. Am looking forward to the *Times* proposal for a series. Do you promise on Sophie’s

head it will not be a frivolous subject? They aren't going to ask me to write about the Duchess of Windsor, are they?

Love,
Juliet

From Juliet to Sophie Strachan

31st January, 1946

Dear Sophie,

Thank you for your flying visit to Leeds—there are no words to express how much I needed to see a friendly face just then. I honestly was on the verge of stealing away to the Shetlands to take up the life of a hermit. It was beautiful of you to come.

The *London Hue and Cry's* sketch of me taken away in chains was overdrawn—I wasn't even arrested. I know Dominic would much prefer a godmother in prison, but he will have to settle for something less dramatic this time.

I told Sidney the only thing I could do about Gilly's callous, lying accusations was to maintain a dignified silence. He said I could do that if I wanted to, but Stephens & Stark could not!

He called a press conference to defend the honor of *Izzy Bickerstaff*, Juliet Ashton, and Journalism itself against such trash as Gilly Gilbert. Did it make the papers in Scotland? If not—here are the highlights. He called Gilly Gilbert a twisted weasel (well, perhaps not in exactly those words, but his mean-

ing was clear) who lied because he was too lazy to learn the facts and too stupid to understand the damage his lies inflicted upon the noble traditions of Journalism. It was lovely.

Sophie, could two girls (now women) ever have had a better champion than your brother? I don't think so. He gave a wonderful speech, though I must admit to a few qualms. Gilly Gilbert is such a snake-in-the-grass, I can't believe he'll just slither away without a hiss. Susan said that, on the other hand, Gilly is also such a frightful little coward, he would not dare to retaliate. I hope she's right.

Love to you all,
Juliet

P.S. That man has sent me another bale of orchids. I'm getting a nervous twitch, waiting for him to come out of hiding and make himself known. Do you suppose this is his strategy?

From Dawsey to Juliet

31st January, 1946

Dear Miss Ashton,

Your book came yesterday! You are a nice lady and I thank you with all my heart.

I have a job at St. Peter Port harbor—unloading ships, so I can read during tea breaks. It is a blessing to have real tea and bread with butter, and now—your book. I like it too because the

cover is soft and I can put it in my pocket everywhere I go, though I am careful not to use it up too quickly. And I value having a picture of Charles Lamb—he had a fine head, didn't he?

I would like to correspond with you. I will answer your questions as well as I can. Though there are many who can tell a story better than I can, I will tell you about our roast pig dinner.

I have a cottage and a farm, left to me by my father. Before the war, I kept pigs, and grew vegetables for St. Peter Port markets and flowers for Covent Garden. I often worked also as a carpenter and roofer.

The pigs are gone now. The Germans took them away to feed their soldiers on the continent, and ordered me to grow potatoes. We were to grow what they told us and nothing else. At first, before I knew the Germans as I came to later, I thought I could keep a few pigs hidden—for my own self. But the Agricultural Officer nosed them out and carried them off. Well, that was a blow, but I thought I'd manage all right, for potatoes and turnips were plentiful, and there was still flour then. But it is strange how the mind turns on food. After six months of turnips and a lump of gristle now and then, I was hard put to think about anything but a fine, full meal.

One afternoon, my neighbor, Mrs. Maugery, sent me a note. Come quick, it said. And bring a butcher knife. I tried not to get my hopes high—but I set out for the manor house at a great clip. And it was true! She had a pig, a hidden pig, and she invited me to join in the feast with her and her friends!

I never talked much while I was growing up—I stuttered badly—and I was not used to dinner parties. To tell the truth, Mrs. Maugery's was the first one I was ever invited to. I said yes, because I was thinking of the roast pig, but I wished I could take my piece home and eat it there.

It was my good luck that my wish didn't come true, because

that was the first meeting of the Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society, even though we didn't know it then. The dinner was a rare treat, but the company was better. With talking and eating, we forgot about clocks and curfews until Amelia (that's Mrs. Maugery) heard the chimes ring nine o'clock—we were an hour late. Well, the good food had strengthened our hearts, and when Elizabeth McKenna said we should strike out for our rightful homes instead of skulking in Amelia's house all night, we agreed. But breaking curfew was a crime—I'd heard of folks being sent to prison camp for it—and keeping a pig was a worse one, so we whispered and picked our way through the fields as quiet as could be.

We would have come out all right if not for John Booker. He'd drunk more than he'd eaten at dinner, and when we got to the road, he forgot himself and broke into song! I grabbed hold of him, but it was too late: six German patrol officers suddenly rose out of the trees with their Lugers drawn and began to shout—Why were we out after curfew? Where had we been? Where were we going?

I couldn't think what to do. If I ran, they'd shoot me. I knew that much. My mouth was dry as chalk and my mind was blank, so I just held on to Booker and hoped.

Then Elizabeth drew in her breath and stepped forward. Elizabeth isn't tall, so those pistols were lined up at her eyes, but she didn't blink. She acted like she didn't see any pistols at all. She walked up to the officer in charge and started talking. You never heard such lies. How sorry she was that we had broken curfew. How we had been attending a meeting of the Guernsey Literary Society, and the evening's discussion of *Elizabeth and Her German Garden* had been so delightful that we had all lost track of time. Such a wonderful book—had he read it?

None of us had the presence of mind to back her up, but the patrol officer couldn't help himself—he had to smile back at her.

Elizabeth is like that. He took our names and ordered us very politely to report to the Commandant the next morning. Then he bowed and wished us a good evening. Elizabeth nodded, gracious as could be, while the rest of us edged away, trying not to run like rabbits. Even lugging Booker, I got home quick.

That is the story of our roast pig dinner.

I'd like to ask you a question of my own. Ships are coming in to St. Peter Port harbor every day to bring us things Guernsey still needs: food, clothes, seed, plows, feed for animals, tools, medicine—and most important, now that we have food to eat, shoes. I don't believe that there was a fit pair left on the island by the end of the war.

Some of the things being sent to us are wrapped up in old newspaper and magazine pages. My friend Clovis and I smooth them out and take them home to read—then we give them to neighbors who, like us, are eager for any news of the outside world in the past five years. Not just any news or pictures: Mrs. Saussey wants to see recipes; Mme. LePell wants fashion papers (she is a dressmaker); Mr. Brouard reads Obituaries (he has his hopes, but won't say who); Claudia Rainey is looking for pictures of Ronald Colman; Mr. Tourtelle wants to see Beauty Queens in bathing dress; and my friend Isola likes to read about weddings.

There is so much we wanted to know during the war, but we were not allowed letters or papers from England—or anywhere. In 1942, the Germans called in all the wireless sets—of course, there were hidden ones, listened to in secret, but if you were caught listening, you could be sent to the camps. That is why we don't understand so many things we can read about now.

I enjoy the war-time cartoons, but there is one that bewilders me. It was in a 1944 *Punch* and shows ten or so people walking down a London street. The chief figures are two men in bowler hats, holding briefcases and umbrellas, and one man is saying to

the other man, “It is ridiculous to say these Doodlebugs have affected people in any way.” It took me several seconds to realize that every person in the cartoon had one normal-sized ear and one *very large* ear on the other side of his head. Perhaps you could explain it to me.

Yours sincerely,
Dawsey Adams

THE
DEATH
CURE
JAMES
DASHNER

DELACORTE PRESS

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CHAPTER 1

It was the smell that began to drive Thomas slightly mad.

Not being alone for over three weeks. Not the white walls, ceiling and floor. Not the lack of windows or the fact that they never turned off the lights. None of that. They'd taken his watch; they fed him the exact same meal three times a day—slab of ham, mashed potatoes, raw carrots, slice of bread, water—never spoke to him, never allowed anyone else in the room. No books, no movies, no games.

Complete isolation. For over three weeks now, though he'd begun to doubt his tracking of time—which was based purely on instinct. He tried to best guess when night had fallen, made sure he only slept what felt like normal hours. The meals helped, though they didn't seem to come regularly. As if he was meant to feel disoriented.

Alone. In a padded room devoid of color—the only exceptions a small, almost-hidden stainless-steel toilet in the corner and an old wooden desk that Thomas had no use for. Alone in an unbearable silence, with unlimited time to think about the disease rooted inside him: the Flare, that silent, creeping virus that slowly took away everything that made a person human.

None of this drove him crazy.

But he stank, and for some reason that set his nerves on a sharp wire, cutting into the solid block of his sanity. They didn't let him shower or bathe, hadn't provided him with a change of clothes since he'd arrived or anything to clean his body with. A simple rag would've helped; he

could dip it in the water they gave him to drink and clean his face at least. But he had nothing, only the dirty clothes he'd been wearing when they locked him away. Not even bedding—he slept all curled up, his butt wedged in the corner of the room, arms folded, trying to hug some warmth into himself, often shivering.

He didn't know why the stench of his own body was the thing that scared him the most. Perhaps that in itself was a sign that he'd lost it. But for some reason his deteriorating hygiene pushed against his mind, causing horrific thoughts. Like he was rotting, decomposing, his insides turning as rancid as his outside felt.

That was what worried him, as irrational as it seemed. He had plenty of food and just enough water to quench his thirst; he got plenty of rest, and he exercised as best he could in the small room, often running in place for hours. Logic told him that being filthy had nothing to do with the strength of your heart or the functioning of your lungs. All the same, his mind was beginning to believe that his unceasing stench represented death rushing in, about to swallow him whole.

Those dark thoughts, in turn, were starting to make him wonder if Teresa hadn't been lying after all that last time they'd spoken, when she'd said it was too late for Thomas and insisted that he'd succumbed to the Flare rapidly, had become crazy and violent. That he'd *already* lost his sanity before coming to this awful place. Even Brenda had warned him that things were about to get bad. Maybe they'd both been right.

And underneath all that was the worry for his friends. What had happened to them? Where were they? What was the Flare doing to their minds? After everything they'd been subjected to, was this how it was all going to end?

The rage crept in. Like a shivering rat looking for a spot of warmth, a crumb of food. And with every passing day came an increasing anger so intense that Thomas sometimes caught himself shaking uncontrolla-

bly before he reeled the fury back in and pocketed it. He didn't want it to go away for good; he only wanted to store it and let it build. Wait for the right time, the right place, to unleash it. WICKED had done all this to him. WICKED had taken his life and those of his friends and were using them for whatever purposes they deemed necessary. No matter the consequences.

And for that, they would pay. Thomas swore this to himself a thousand times a day.

All these things went through his mind as he sat, back against the wall, facing the door—and the ugly wooden desk in front of it—in what he guessed was the late morning of his twenty-second day as a captive in the white room. He always did this—after eating breakfast, after exercising. Hoping against hope that the door would open—actually *open*, all the way—the whole door, not just the little slot on the bottom through which they slid his meals.

He'd already tried countless times to get the door open himself. And the desk drawers were empty, nothing there but the smell of mildew and cedar. He looked every morning, just in case something might've magically appeared while he slept. Those things happened sometimes when you were dealing with WICKED.

And so he sat, staring at that door. Waiting. White walls and silence. The smell of his own body. Left to think about his friends—Minho, Newt, Frypan, the other few Gladers still alive. Brenda and Jorge, who'd vanished from sight after their rescue on the giant Berg. Harriet and Sonya, the other girls from Group B, Aris. About Brenda and her warning to him after he'd woken up in the white room the first time. How had she spoken in his mind? Was she on his side or not?

But most of all, he thought about Teresa. He couldn't get her out of his head, even though he hated her a little more with every passing moment. Her last words to him had been *WICKED is good*, and right

or wrong, to Thomas she'd come to represent all the terrible things that had happened. Every time he thought of her, rage boiled inside him.

Maybe all that anger was the last string tethering him to sanity as he waited.

Eat. Sleep. Exercise. Thirst for revenge. That was what he did for three more days. Alone.

On the twenty-sixth day, the door opened.

CHAPTER 2

Thomas had imagined it happening, countless times. What he would do, what he would say. How he'd rush forward and tackle anyone who came in, make a run for it, flee, escape. But those thoughts were almost for amusement more than anything. He knew that WICKED wouldn't let something like that happen. No, he'd need to plan out every detail before he made his move.

When it *did* happen—when that door popped open with a slight puffing sound and began to swing wide—Thomas was surprised at his own reaction: he did nothing. Something told him an invisible barrier had appeared between him and the desk—like back in the dorms after the Maze. The time for action hadn't arrived. Not yet.

He felt only the slightest hint of surprise when the Rat Man walked in—the guy who'd told the Gladers about the last trial they'd been forced on, through the Scorch. Same long nose, same weasel-like eyes; that greasy hair, combed over an obvious bald spot that took up half his head. Same ridiculous white suit. He looked paler than the last time Thomas had seen him, though, and he was holding a thick folder filled with dozens of crinkled and messily stacked papers in the crook of one elbow and dragging a straight-backed chair.

“Good morning, Thomas,” he said with a stiff nod. Without waiting for a response, he pulled the door shut, set the chair behind the desk and took a seat. He placed the folder in front of him, opened it and started flipping through the pages. When he found what he'd been looking for

he stopped and rested his hands on top. Then he flashed a pathetic grin, his eyes settling on Thomas.

When Thomas finally spoke, he realized that he hadn't done so in weeks, and his voice came out like a croak. "It'll only be a good morning if you let me out."

Not even a flicker of change passed over the man's expression. "Yes, yes, I know. No need to worry—you're going to be hearing plenty of positive news today. Trust me."

Thomas thought about that, ashamed that he let it lift his hopes, even for a second. He should know better by now. "*Positive* news? Didn't you choose us because you thought we were intelligent?"

Rat Man remained silent for several seconds before he responded. "Intelligent, yes. Among more important reasons." He paused and studied Thomas before continuing. "Do you think we *enjoy* all this? You think we *enjoy* watching you suffer? It's all been for a purpose, and very soon it will make sense to you." The intensity of his voice had built until he'd practically shouted that last word, his face now red.

"Whoa," Thomas said, feeling bolder by the minute. "Slim it nice and calm there, old fella. You look three steps away from a heart attack." It felt good to let such words flow out of him.

The man stood from his chair and leaned forward on the desk. The veins in his neck bulged in taut cords. He slowly sat back down, took several deep breaths. "You would think that almost four weeks in this white box might humble a boy. But you seem more arrogant than ever."

"So are you going to tell me that I'm not crazy, then? Don't have the Flare, never did?" Thomas couldn't help himself. The anger was rising in him until he felt like he was going to explode. But he forced a calmness into his voice. "That's what kept me sane through all this—deep down I know you lied to Teresa, that this is just another one of

your tests. So where do I go next? Gonna send me to the shuck moon? Make me swim across the ocean in my undies?" He smiled for effect.

The Rat Man had been staring at Thomas with blank eyes throughout his rant. "Are you finished?"

"No, I'm not finished." He'd been waiting for an opportunity to speak for days and days, but now that it had finally come, his mind went empty. He'd forgotten all the scenarios he'd played out in his mind. "I . . . want you to tell me everything. Now."

"Oh, Thomas." The Rat Man said it quietly, as if delivering sad news to a small child. "We didn't lie to you. You *do* have the Flare."

Thomas was taken aback; a chill cut through the heat of his rage. Was Rat Man lying even now? he wondered. But he shrugged, as if the news were something he'd suspected all along. "Well, I haven't started going crazy yet." At a certain point—after all that time crossing the Scorch, being with Brenda, surrounded by Cranks—he'd come to terms with the fact that he'd catch the virus eventually. But he told himself that for now he was still okay. Still sane. And that was all that mattered at the moment.

Rat Man sighed. "You don't understand. You don't understand what I came in here to tell you."

"Why would I believe a word that comes out of your mouth? How could you possibly expect me to?"

Thomas realized that he'd stood up, though he had no memory of doing so. His chest lurched with heavy breaths. He had to get control of himself. Rat Man's stare was cold, his eyes black pits. Regardless of whether this man was lying to him, Thomas knew he was going to have to hear him out if he ever wanted to leave this white room. He forced his breathing to slow. He waited.

After several seconds of silence, his visitor continued. "I know we've

lied to you. Often. We've done some awful things to you and your friends. But it was all part of a plan that you not only agreed to, but helped set in place. We've had to take it all a little farther than we'd hoped in the beginning—there's no doubt about that. However, everything has stayed true to the spirit of what the Creators envisioned—what *you* envisioned in their place after they were . . . purged."

Thomas slowly shook his head; he knew he'd been involved with these people once, somehow, but the concept of putting anyone through what he'd gone through was incomprehensible. "You didn't answer me. How can you possibly expect me to believe anything you say?" He recalled more than he let on, of course. Though the window to his past was caked with grime, revealing little more than splotchy glimpses, he knew he'd worked with WICKED. He knew Teresa had, too, and that they'd helped create the Maze. There'd been other flashes of memory.

"Because, Thomas, there's no value in keeping you in the dark," Rat Man said. "Not anymore."

Thomas felt a sudden weariness, as if all the strength had seeped out of him, leaving him with nothing. He sank to the floor with a heavy sigh. He shook his head. "I don't even know what that means." What was the point of even having a conversation when words couldn't be trusted?

Rat Man kept talking, but his tone changed; it became less detached and clinical and more professorial. "You are obviously well aware that we have a horrible disease eating the minds of humans worldwide. Everything we've done up till now has been calculated for one purpose and one purpose only: to analyze your brain patterns and build a blueprint from them. The goal is to use this blueprint to develop a cure for the Flare. The lives lost, the pain and suffering—you knew the stakes when this began. We all did. It was all done to ensure the survival of the human race. And we're very close. Very, very close."

Memories had come back to Thomas on several occasions. The Changing, the dreams he'd had since, fleeting glimpses here and there, like quick lightning strikes in his mind. And right now, listening to the white-suited man talk, it felt as if he were standing on a cliff and all the answers were just about to float up from the depths for him to see in their entirety. The urge to grasp those answers was almost too strong to keep at bay.

But he was still wary. He knew he'd been a part of it all, had helped design the Maze, had taken over after the original Creators died and kept the program going with new recruits. "I remember enough to be ashamed of myself," he admitted. "But living through this kind of abuse is a lot different than planning it. It's just not right."

Rat Man scratched his nose, shifted in his seat. Something Thomas said had gotten to him. "We'll see what you think at the end of today, Thomas. We shall see. But let me ask you this—are you telling me that the lives of a few aren't worth losing to save countless more?" Again, the man spoke with passion, leaning forward. "It's a very old axiom, but do you believe the end can justify the means? When there's no choice left?"

Thomas only stared. It was a question that had no good response.

The Rat Man might have smiled, but it looked more like he was sneering. "Just remember that at one time you believed it did, Thomas." He started to collect his papers as if to go but didn't move. "I'm here to tell you that everything is set and our data is almost complete. We're on the cusp of something great. Once we have the blueprint, you can go boo-hoo with your friends all you want about how *unfair* we've been."

Thomas wanted to cut the man with harsh words. But he held back. "How does torturing us lead to this blueprint you're talking about? What could sending a bunch of unwilling teenagers to terrible places, watching some of them die—what could that possibly have to do with finding a cure for some disease?"

“It has everything in the *world* to do with it.” Rat Man sighed heavily. “Boy, soon you’ll remember everything, and I have a feeling you’re going to regret a lot. In the meantime, there’s something you need to know—it might even bring you back to your senses.”

“And what’s that?” Thomas really had no idea what the man would say.

His visitor stood up, smoothed the wrinkles out of his pants and adjusted his coat. Then he clasped his hands behind his back. “The Flare virus lives in every part of your body, yet it has no effect on you, nor will it ever. You’re a member of an extremely rare group of people. You’re *immune* to the Flare.”

Thomas swallowed, speechless.

“On the outside, in the streets, they call people like you Munies,” Rat Man continued. “And they really, really hate you.”

THE
Alienist

—

CALEB
CARR



RANDOM HOUSE TRADE PAPERBACKS
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The Alienist is a work of historical fiction. Apart from the well-known actual people, events, and locales that figure in the narrative, all names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to current events or locales, or to living persons, is entirely coincidental.

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PART I

Perception

—

*Whilst part of what we perceive comes
through our senses from the object before us,
another part (and it may be the larger part)
always comes out of our own mind.*

William James,
The Principles of Psychology

*These bloody thoughts,
from what are they born?*

Piave,
from Verdi's Macbeth

CHAPTER I

January 8th, 1919

Theodore is in the ground.

The words as I write them make as little sense as did the sight of his coffin descending into a patch of sandy soil near Sagamore Hill, the place he loved more than any other on earth. As I stood there this afternoon, in the cold January wind that blew off Long Island Sound, I thought to myself: Of course it's a joke. Of course he'll burst the lid open, blind us all with that ridiculous grin and split our ears with a high-pitched bark of laughter. Then he'll exclaim that there's work to do—"action to get!"—and we'll all be martialed to the task of protecting some obscure species of newt from the ravages of a predatory industrial giant bent on planting a fetid factory on the little amphibian's breeding ground. I was not alone in such fantasies; everyone at the funeral expected something of the kind, it was plain on their faces. All reports indicate that most of the country and much of the world feel the same way. The notion of Theodore Roosevelt being gone is that—unacceptable.

In truth, he'd been fading for longer than anyone wanted to admit, really since his son Quentin was killed in the last days of the Great Butchery. Cecil Spring-Rice once droned, in his best British blend of affection and needling, that Roosevelt was throughout his life "about six"; and Herm Hagedorn noted that after Quentin was shot out of the sky in the summer of 1918 "the boy in Theodore died." I dined with Laszlo Kreizler at Delmonico's tonight, and mentioned Hagedorn's comment to him. For the remaining two

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courses of my meal I was treated to a long, typically passionate explanation of why Quentin's death was more than simply heartbreaking for Theodore: he had felt profound guilt, too, guilt at having so instilled his philosophy of "the strenuous life" in all his children that they often placed themselves deliberately in harm's way, knowing it would delight their beloved father. Grief was almost unbearable to Theodore, I'd always known that; whenever he had to come to grips with the death of someone close, it seemed he might not survive the struggle. But it wasn't until tonight, while listening to Kreizler, that I understood the extent to which moral uncertainty was also intolerable to the twenty-sixth president, who sometimes seemed to think himself Justice personified.

Kreizler . . . He didn't want to attend the funeral, though Edith Roosevelt would have liked him to. She has always been truly partial to the man she calls "the enigma," the brilliant doctor whose studies of the human mind have disturbed so many people so profoundly over the last forty years. Kreizler wrote Edith a note explaining that he did not much like the idea of a world without Theodore, and, being as he's now sixty-four and has spent his life staring ugly realities full in the face, he thinks he'll just indulge himself and ignore the fact of his friend's passing. Edith told me today that reading Kreizler's note moved her to tears, because she realized that Theodore's boundless affection and enthusiasm—which revolted so many cynics and was, I'm obliged to say in the interests of journalistic integrity, sometimes difficult even for friends to tolerate—had been strong enough to touch a man whose remove from most of human society seemed to almost everyone else unbridgeable.

Some of the boys from the *Times* wanted me to come to a memorial dinner tonight, but a quiet evening with Kreizler seemed much the more appropriate thing. It wasn't out of nostalgia for any shared boyhood in New York that we raised our glasses, because Laszlo and Theodore didn't actually meet until Harvard. No, Kreizler and I were fixing our hearts on the spring of 1896—nearly a quarter-century ago!—and on a series of events that still seems too bizarre to have occurred even in this city. By the end of our dessert and Madeira (and how poignant to have a memorial meal in Delmonico's, good old Del's, now on its way out like the rest of us, but in those days the bustling scene of some of our most important encounters), the two of us were laughing and shaking our heads, amazed to this day that we were able to get through the ordeal with our skins; and still saddened,

as I could see in Kreizler's face and feel in my own chest, by the thought of those who didn't.

There's no simple way to describe it. I could say that in retrospect it seems that all three of our lives, and those of many others, led inevitably and fatefully to that one experience; but then I'd be broaching the subject of psychological determinism and questioning man's free will—reopening, in other words, the philosophical conundrum that wove irrepressibly in and out of the nightmarish proceedings, like the only hummable tune in a difficult opera. Or I could say that, during the course of those months, Roosevelt, Kreizler, and I, assisted by some of the best people I've ever known, set out on the trail of a murderous monster and ended up coming face-to-face with a frightened child; but that would be deliberately vague, too full of the "ambiguity" that seems to fascinate current novelists and which has kept me, lately, out of the bookstores and in the picture houses. No, there's only one way to do it, and that's to tell the whole thing, going back to that first grisly night and that first butchered body; back even further, in fact, to our days with Professor James at Harvard. Yes, to dredge it all up and put it finally before the public—that's the way.

The public may not like it; in fact, it's been concern about public reaction that's forced us to keep our secret for so many years. Even the majority of Theodore's obituaries made no reference to the event. In listing his achievements as president of the Board of Commissioners of New York City's Police Department from 1895 to 1897, only the *Herald*—which goes virtually unread these days—tacked on uncomfortably, "and of course, the solution to the ghastly murders of 1896, which so appalled the city." Yet Theodore never claimed credit for that solution. True, he had been open-minded enough, despite his own qualms, to put the investigation in the hands of a man who *could* solve the puzzle. But privately he always acknowledged that man to be Kreizler.

He could scarcely have done so publicly. Theodore knew that the American people were not ready to believe him, or even to hear the details of the assertion. I wonder if they are now. Kreizler doubts it. I told him I intended to write the story, and he gave me one of his sardonic chuckles and said that it would only frighten and repel people, nothing more. The country, he declared tonight, really hasn't changed much since 1896, for all the work of people like Theodore, and Jake Riis and Lincoln Steffens, and the many other men and women of their ilk. We're all still running, according to Kreizler—in our private

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moments we Americans are running just as fast and fearfully as we were then, running away from the darkness we know to lie behind so many apparently tranquil household doors, away from the nightmares that continue to be injected into children's skulls by people whom Nature tells them they should love and trust, running ever faster and in ever greater numbers toward those potions, powders, priests, and philosophies that promise to obliterate such fears and nightmares, and ask in return only slavish devotion. Can he truly be right . . . ?

But I wax ambiguous. To the beginning, then!

CHAPTER 2

An ungodly pummeling on the door of my grandmother's house at 19 Washington Square North brought first the maid and then my grandmother herself to the doorways of their bedrooms at two o'clock on the morning of March 3, 1896. I lay in bed in that no-longer-drunk yet not-quite-sober state which is usually softened by sleep, knowing that whoever was at the door probably had business with me rather than my grandmother. I burrowed into my linen-cased pillows, hoping that he'd just give up and go away.

"Mrs. Moore!" I heard the maid call. "It's a fearful racket—shall I answer it, then?"

"You shall not," my grandmother replied, in her well-clipped, stern voice. "Wake my grandson, Harriet. Doubtless he's forgotten a gambling debt!"

I then heard footsteps heading toward my room and decided I'd better get ready. Since the demise of my engagement to Miss Julia Pratt of Washington some two years earlier, I'd been staying with my grandmother, and during that time the old girl had become steadily more skeptical about the ways in which I spent my off-hours. I had repeatedly explained that, as a police reporter for *The New York Times*, I was required to visit many of the city's seamier districts and houses and consort with some less than savory characters; but she remembered my youth too well to accept that admittedly strained story. My homecoming deportment on the average evening generally reinforced her suspicion that it was state of mind, not professional obligation, that

drew me to the dance halls and gaming tables of the Tenderloin every night; and I realized, having caught the gambling remark just made to Harriet, that it was now crucial to project the image of a sober man with serious concerns. I shot into a black Chinese robe, forced my short hair down on my head, and opened the door loftily just as Harriet reached it.

"Ah, Harriet," I said calmly, one hand inside the robe. "No need for alarm. I was just reviewing some notes for a story, and found I needed some materials from the office. Doubtless that's the boy with them now."

"John!" my grandmother blared as Harriet nodded in confusion. "Is that you?"

"No, Grandmother," I said, trotting down the thick Persian carpet on the stairs. "It's Dr. Holmes." Dr. H. H. Holmes was an unspeakably sadistic murderer and confidence man who was at that moment waiting to be hanged in Philadelphia. The possibility that he might escape before his appointment with the executioner and then journey to New York to do my grandmother in was, for some inexplicable reason, her greatest nightmare. I arrived at the door of her room and gave her a kiss on the cheek, which she accepted without a smile, though it pleased her.

"Don't be insolent, John. It's your least attractive quality. And don't think your handsome charms will make me any less irritated." The pounding on the door started again, followed by a boy's voice calling my name. My grandmother's frown deepened. "Who in blazes is that and what in blazes does he want?"

"I believe it's a boy from the office," I said, maintaining the lie but myself perturbed about the identity of the young man who was taking the front door to such stern task.

"The office?" my grandmother said, not believing a word of it. "All right, then, answer it."

I went quickly but cautiously to the bottom of the staircase, where I realized that in fact I knew the voice that was calling for me but couldn't identify it precisely. Nor was I reassured by the fact that it was a young voice—some of the most vicious thieves and killers I'd encountered in the New York of 1896 were mere striplings.

"Mr. Moore!" The young man pleaded again, adding a few healthy kicks to his knocks. "I must talk to Mr. John Schuyler Moore!"

I stood on the black and white marble floor of the vestibule. "Who's there?" I said, one hand on the lock of the door.

"It's me, sir! Stevie, sir!"

I breathed a slight sigh of relief and unlocked the heavy wooden portal. Outside, standing in the dim light of an overhead gas lamp—the only one in the house that my grandmother had refused to have replaced with an electric bulb—was Stevie Taggert, "the Stevepipe," as he was known. In his first eleven years Stevie had risen to become the bane of fifteen police precincts; but he'd then been reformed by, and was now a driver and general errand boy for, the eminent physician and alienist, my good friend Dr. Laszlo Kreizler. Stevie leaned against one of the white columns outside the door and tried to catch his breath—something had clearly terrified the lad.

"Stevie!" I said, seeing that his long sheet of straight brown hair was matted with sweat. "What's happened?" Looking beyond him I saw Kreizler's small Canadian calash. The cover of the black carriage was folded down, and the rig was drawn by a matching gelding called Frederick. The animal was, like Stevie, bathed in sweat, which steamed in the early March air. "Is Dr. Kreizler with you?"

"The doctor says you're to come with me!" Stevie answered in a rush, his breath back. "Right away!"

"But where? It's two in the morning—"

"Right away!" He was obviously in no condition to explain, so I told him to wait while I put on some clothes. As I did so, my grandmother shouted through my bedroom door that whatever "that peculiar Dr. Kreizler" and I were up to at two in the morning she was sure it was not respectable. Ignoring her as best I could, I got back outside, pulling my tweed coat close as I jumped into the carriage.

I didn't even have time to sit before Stevie lashed at Frederick with a long whip. Falling back into the dark maroon leather of the seat, I thought to upbraid the boy, but again the look of fear in his face struck me. I braced myself as the carriage careened at a somewhat alarming pace over the cobblestones of Washington Square. The shaking and jostling eased only marginally as we turned onto the long, wide slabs of Russ pavement on Broadway. We were heading downtown, downtown and east, into that quarter of Manhattan where Laszlo Kreizler plied his trade and where life became, the further one progressed into the area, ever cheaper and more sordid: the Lower East Side.

For a moment I thought that perhaps something had happened to Laszlo. Certainly that would have accounted for the fretful way in which Stevie whipped and drove Frederick, an animal I knew him at most times to treat with complete kindness. Kreizler was the first human being

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who'd ever been able to get more than a bite or a punch out of Stevie, and he was certainly the only reason the young fellow wasn't still in that Randalls Island establishment so euphemistically known as the "Boys' House of Refuge." Besides being, as the Police Department had put it, "a thief, pickpocket, drunkard, nicotine fiend, feeler"—the member of a *banco* team that lures dupes to the site of the game—"and congenitally destructive menace," all by the time he was ten, Stevie had attacked and badly maimed one of the guards on Randalls Island, who he claimed had tried to assault him. ("Assault," in the newspaper language of a quarter-century ago, almost invariably meaning rape.) Because the guard had a wife and family, the boy's honesty, and finally his sanity, had been questioned—which was when Kreizler, as one of the foremost experts of the day in forensic psychiatry, had made his entrance. At Stevie's sanity hearing Kreizler painted a masterful picture of the boy's life on the streets since the age of three, when he had been abandoned by his mother, who put an opium habit above caring for her son and finally became the mistress of a Chinese purveyor of the drug. The judge had been impressed by Kreizler's speech, and skeptical of the injured guard's testimony; but he would only agree to release Stevie when Kreizler offered to take the boy in and vouched for his future conduct. I thought Laszlo quite crazy, at the time; but there was no doubting that in just over a year Stevie had become a very different youth. And, like almost everyone who worked for Laszlo, the boy was devoted to his patron, despite that peculiar quality of emotional distance that made Kreizler so perplexing to many who knew him.

"Stevie," I called out over the din of the carriage wheels hitting the worn edges of the granite Russ slabs, "where *is* Dr. Kreizler? Is he all right?"

"At the Institute!" Stevie answered, his blue eyes wide. Laszlo's work was based in the Kreizler Institute for Children, a combination of school and research center that he had founded during the eighties. I was about to ask what he was doing there at such an hour but swallowed the query when we charged headlong through the still-busy intersection of Broadway and Houston Street. Here, it was once sagely remarked, you could fire a shotgun in any direction without hitting an honest man; Stevie contented himself with sending drunkards, *faro* dealers, morphine and cocaine addicts, prostitutes, their sailor marks, and simple vagrants flying for the safety of the sidewalk. From that sanctuary most of them called curses after us.

"Then are we going to the Institute, too?" I shouted. But Stevie only reined the horse sharply left at Spring Street, where we disrupted business outside two or three concert saloons, houses of assignation where prostitutes who passed themselves off as dancers made arrangements for later meetings at cheap hotels with hapless fools who were generally from out of town. From Spring Stevie made his way to Delancey Street—which was in the midst of being widened to accommodate the expected traffic of the new Williamsburg Bridge, whose construction had only recently begun—and then we flew on past several darkened theaters. Echoing down from each passing side street I could hear the desperate, demented sounds of the dives: filthy holes that sold rotgut liquor laced with everything from benzine to camphor for a nickel a glass atop a dirty plank that passed for a bar. Stevie did not slacken the pace—we were headed, it seemed, for the very edge of the island.

I made one last attempt at communication: "Aren't we going to the Institute?!"

Stevie shook his head in reply, then cracked the long horsewhip again. I shrugged, sitting back to hang on to the sides of the carriage and wonder what could have frightened this boy—who in his short life had seen many of the horrors that New York had to offer—so very badly.

Delancey Street carried us past the shuttered stalls of fruit and clothing merchants and on into one of the worst of the Lower East Side's tenement- and shanty-strewn ghettos, the neighborhood near the waterfront just above Corlears Hook. A vast, maudlin sea of small shacks and shoddy new tenements stretched away to either side of us. The area was a stewpot of different immigrant cultures and languages, the Irish predominating to the south of Delancey Street and the Hungarians farther north, near Houston. An occasional church of some denomination or other was visible among the rows upon rows of dismal residences, which even on this crisp morning were draped with lines of laundry. Some pieces of clothing and bedding, frozen almost solid, twisted in the wind stiffly at what might have seemed unnatural angles; but in truth, nothing in such a place—where furtive souls scurried from darkened doorways to blackened alleys wrapped in what were often little more than rags, their feet bare to the frozen horse manure, urine, and soot that coated the streets—could truly be called unnatural. We were in a neighborhood that knew little of laws, man-made or otherwise, a neighborhood that gave joy to visitors and resi-

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dents only when they were allowed to view its recession in the distance after making their escape.

Near the end of Delancey Street, the smells of sea and fresh water, along with the stench of refuse that those who lived near the waterfront simply dumped off the edge of Manhattan every day, mingled to produce the distinctive aroma of that tidal pool we call the East River. A large structure soon slanted up before us: the ramp approach to the nascent Williamsburg Bridge. Without pausing, and much to my dismay, Stevie crashed onto the boarded roadway, the horse's hooves and carriage wheels clattering far more loudly against wood than they had against stone.

An elaborate maze of steel supports below the roadway bore us dozens of feet up into the night air. As I wondered what our destination could possibly be—for the towers of the bridge were nothing like completed, and the structure's opening was years away—I began to make out what looked like the walls of a large Chinese temple suddenly looming ahead. Composed of huge granite blocks and crowned by two squat watchtowers, each of which was ringed by a delicate steel walkway, this peculiar edifice was the Manhattan-side anchor of the bridge, the structure that would eventually hold one set of ends of the enormous steel suspension cables that would support the central span. In a way, though, my impression of it as a temple was not far off the mark: like the Brooklyn Bridge, whose Gothic arches I could see silhouetted against the night sky to the south, this new roadway over the East River was a place where many workers' lives had been sacrificed to the faith of Engineering, which in the past fifteen years had produced towering marvels all over Manhattan. What I did not know was that the blood sacrifice that had been made atop the western anchor of the Williamsburg Bridge on that particular night was of a very different nature.

Near the entrance to the watchtowers atop the anchor, standing under the flimsy light of a few electric bulbs and bearing portable lanterns, were several patrolmen whose small brass insignia marked them as coming from the Thirteenth Precinct (we had passed the station house moments before on Delancey Street). With them was a sergeant from the Fifteenth, a fact that immediately struck me as odd—in two years of covering the criminal beat for the *Times*, not to mention a childhood in New York, I'd learned that each of the city's police precincts guarded its terrain jealously. (Indeed, at mid-century the various police factions had openly warred with each other.) For the Thir-

teenth to have summoned a man from the Fifteenth indicated that something significant was going on.

Stevie finally reined the gelding up near this group of blue great-coats, then leapt from his seat and took the hard-breathing horse by the bit, leading him to the side of the roadway near an enormous pile of construction materials and tools. The boy eyed the cops with familiar distrust. The sergeant from the Fifteenth Precinct, a tall Irishman whose pasty face was notable only because he did not sport the broad mustache so common to his profession, stepped forward and studied Stevie with a threatening smile.

"That's little Stevie Taggert, ain't it?" he said, speaking with a pronounced brogue. "You don't suppose the commissioner's called me all this way to box your ears for ya, do ya, Stevie, ya little shit?"

I stepped down from the carriage and approached Stevie, who shot the sergeant a sullen glance. "Pay no mind, Stevie," I said, as sympathetically as possible. "Stupidity goes with the leather helmet." The boy smiled a bit. "But I wouldn't mind your telling me what I'm doing here."

Stevie nodded to the northern watchtower, then pulled a battered cigarette out of his pocket. "Up there. The doctor says you're to go up."

I started for the doorway in the granite wall, but Stevie stayed by the horse. "You're not coming?"

The boy shuddered and turned away, lighting the cigarette. "I seen it once. And if I never see such again I'll be done right. When you're ready to get back home, Mr. Moore, I'll be right here. Doctor's instructions."

I felt increased apprehension as I turned and headed for the doorway, where I was stopped by the arm of the police sergeant. "And who might you be, with the young Stevepipe driving you around past all respectable hours? This is a crime scene, y'know." I gave the man my name and occupation, at which he grinned and showed me an impressive gold tooth. "Ah, a gentleman of the press—and the *Times*, no less! Well, Mr. Moore, I've just arrived myself. Urgent call, apparently no other man they could trust. Spell it F-l-y-n-n, sir, if you will, and don't go labeling me no roundsman. Full sergeant. Come on, we'll head up together. Mind you behave, young Stevie, or I'll have you back on Randalls Island faster'n spit!"

Stevie turned back to the horse. "Why don't you go chase yourself," the boy mumbled, just loud enough for the sergeant to hear.

Flynn spun with a look of lethal anger, but, remembering my presence, checked himself. "Incorrigible, that one, Mr. Moore. Can't imagine what a man like you's doing in his presence. Need him as a contact with the underworld, no doubt. Up we go, sir, and mind, it's dark as the pit in here!"

So it was. I stumbled and tripped my way up a rough flight of stairs, at the top of which I could make out the form of another leatherhead. The cop—a roundsman from the Thirteenth Precinct—turned on our approach and then called to someone else:

"It's Flynn, sir. He's here."

We came out of the stairs into a small room littered with sawhorses, planks of wood, buckets of rivets, and bits of metal and wiring. Wide windows gave a full view of the horizon in every direction—the city behind us, the river and the partially completed towers of the bridge before us. A doorway led out onto the walkway that ran around the tower. Near the doorway stood a slit-eyed, bearded sergeant of detectives named Patrick Connor, whom I recognized from my visits to Police Headquarters on Mulberry Street. Next to him, looking out over the river with his hands clasped behind his back, rocking on the balls of his feet, was a much more familiar figure: Theodore.

"Sergeant Flynn," Roosevelt said without turning. "It's ghastly work that has prompted our call, I'm afraid. Ghastly."

My discomfort suddenly heightened when Theodore spun to face us. There was nothing unusual in his appearance: an expensive, slightly dandy checked suit of the kind that he fancied in those days; the spectacles that were, like the eyes behind them, too small for his tough, square head; the broad mustache bristling below the wide nose. Yet his visage was excessively odd, nonetheless. Then it occurred to me: his teeth. His numerous, usually snapping teeth—they were nowhere in sight. His jaws were clamped shut in what seemed passionate anger, or remorse. Something had shaken Roosevelt badly.

His dismay seemed to grow when he saw me. "What—Moore! What in thunder are you doing here?"

"I'm glad to see you, too, Roosevelt," I managed through my nervousness, extending a hand.

He accepted it, though for once he didn't loosen my arm from its socket. "What—oh, I am sorry, Moore. I—delighted to see you, of course, delighted. But who told you—?"

"Told me what? I was abducted and brought here by Kreizler's boy. On his orders, without so much as a word of explanation."

"Kreizler!" Theodore murmured in soft urgency, glancing out the window with a confounded and even fearful look that was not at all typical of him. "Yes, Kreizler's been here."

"Been? Do you mean he's gone?"

"Before I arrived. He left a note. And a report." Theodore revealed a piece of paper clutched in his left hand. "A preliminary one, at any rate. He was the first doctor they could find. Although it was quite hopeless . . ."

I took the man by the shoulder. "Roosevelt. What is it?"

"To be sure, Commissioner, I wouldn't mind knowing meself," Sergeant Flynn added, with quaint obsequiousness that was repellant. "We get little enough sleep at the Fifteenth, and I'd just as soon—"

"Very well," Theodore said, steeling himself. "How are your stomachs, gentlemen?"

I said nothing, and Flynn made some absurd joke about the wide range of grisly sights he'd encountered in his life; but Theodore's eyes were all hard business. He indicated the door to the outer walkway. Detective Sergeant Connor stepped aside and then Flynn led the way out.

My first thought on emerging, despite my apprehension, was that the view from the walkway was even more extraordinary than that from the tower windows. Across the water lay Williamsburg, once a peaceful country town but now rapidly becoming a bustling part of the metropolis that was destined, within months, to officially evolve into Greater New York. To the south, again, the Brooklyn Bridge; in the southwestern distance the new towers of Printing House Square, and below us the churning, black waters of the river—

And then I saw it.

CHAPTER 3

Odd, how long it took my mind to make any sense of the image. Or perhaps not; there was so much so very wrong, so very out of place, so . . . distorted. How could I have expected myself to grasp it quickly?

On the walkway was the body of a young person. I say “person” because, though the physical attributes were those of an adolescent boy, the clothes (little more than a chemise that was missing a sleeve) and facial paint were those of a girl. Or, rather, of a woman, and a woman of dubious repute at that. The unfortunate creature’s wrists were trussed behind the back, and the legs were bent in a kneeling position that pressed the face to the steel of the walkway. There was no sign of any pants or shoes, just one sock hanging pathetically from a foot. But what had been done to the body . . .

The face did not seem heavily beaten or bruised—the paint and powder were still intact—but where once there had been eyes there were now only bloody, cavernous sockets. A puzzling piece of flesh protruded from the mouth. A wide gash stretched across the throat, though there was little blood near the opening. Large cuts crisscrossed the abdomen, revealing the mass of the inner organs. The right hand had been chopped neatly off. At the groin there was another gaping wound, one that explained the mouth—the genitals had been cut away and stuffed between the jaws. The buttocks, too, had been shorn off, in what appeared large . . . one could only call them carving strokes.

In the minute or two that it took me to note all these details the vista around me faded into a sea of indistinguishable blackness, and what I thought was the churning progress of a ship turned out to be my own blood in my ears. With the sudden realization that I might be sick, I spun to grasp the railing of the walkway and hung my head out over the water.

"Commissioner!" Connor called, stepping out of the watchtower. But it was Theodore who got to me first, in a quick bound.

"Easy, now, John," I heard him say, as he supported me with that wiry yet remarkably strong boxer's frame of his. "Breathe deeply."

As I followed his instructions I heard a long, trailing whistle from Flynn, who continued to stare at the body. "Well, now," he said, addressing the corpse without sounding particularly concerned. "Somebody has done for you, young Giorgio-called-Gloria, haven't they? You're a hell of a mess."

"Then you do know the child, Flynn?" Theodore said, leaning me against the wall of the watchtower. Steadiness was returning to my head.

"That I do, Commissioner." Flynn seemed in the dim light to be smiling. "Though it was no child, this one, not if childhood be judged by behavior. Family name Santorelli. Must've been, oh, thirteen years old, or thereabouts. Giorgio, it was called originally, and since it began working out of Paresis Hall, it called itself Gloria."

"It?" I said, wiping cold sweat from my forehead with the cuff of my coat. "Why do you call him 'it'?"

Flynn's smile became a grin. "Sure, and what would you call it, Mr. Moore? It warn't no male, not to judge by its antics—but God didn't create it female, teither. They're all its to me, that breed."

Theodore's hands went forcefully to his hips, the fingers curling up into fists—he'd taken the measure of Flynn. "I'm not interested in your philosophical analysis of the situation, Sergeant. Whatever else, the boy was a child and the child has been murdered."

Flynn chuckled and glanced again at the body. "No arguing *that*, sir!"

"Sergeant!" Theodore's voice, always a little too rasping and shrill for his appearance, scratched a little more than usual as he barked at Flynn, who stood up straight. "Not another word out of you, sir, unless it's to answer my questions! Understood?"

Flynn nodded; but the cynical, amused resentment that all long-time officers in the department felt for the commissioner who in just one year had stood Police Headquarters and the whole chain of de-

partmental command on its ear remained evident in the slightest curl of his upper lip. Theodore could not have missed it.

"Now then," Roosevelt said, his teeth clicking in that peculiar way of theirs, cutting each word out of his mouth. "You say the boy was called Giorgio Santorelli, and that he worked out of Paresis Hall—that's Biff Ellison's establishment on Cooper Square, correct?"

"That'd be the one, Commissioner."

"And where would you guess that Mr. Ellison is at this moment?"

"At this—? Why, in the Hall itself, sir."

"Go there. Tell him I want him at Mulberry Street tomorrow morning."

For the first time, Flynn looked concerned. "Tomorrow—now, begging your pardon, Commissioner, but Mr. Ellison's not the sort of man to take that kind of a summons sweetly."

"Then arrest him," Theodore said, turning away and staring out at Williamsburg.

"Arrest him? Sure, Commissioner, if we arrested every owner of a bar or disorderly house that harbors boy-whores, just because one gets roughed up or even murdered, why, sir, we'd never—"

"Perhaps you would like to tell me the real reason for your resistance," Theodore said, those busy fists of his starting to flex behind his back. He walked right up and put his spectacles in Flynn's face. "Is Mr. Ellison not one of your primary sources of graft?"

Flynn's eyes widened, but he managed to draw himself up haughtily and affect wounded pride. "Mr. Roosevelt, I've been on the force for fifteen years, sir, and I think I know how this city works. You don't go harassing a man like Mr. Ellison just because some little piece of immigrant trash finally gets what's coming to it!"

That was all, and I knew that was all—and it was fortunate for Roosevelt that I did, for had I not shot over at just that moment to grab his arms he would certainly have beaten Flynn into a bloody pulp. It was a struggle, though, to keep hold of those strong arms. "No, Roosevelt, no!" I whispered in his ear. "It's what his kind want, you know that! Attack a man in uniform and they'll have your head, there'll be nothing the mayor can do about it!"

Roosevelt was breathing hard, Flynn was once again smiling, and Detective Sergeant Connor and the roundsman were making no move toward physical intervention. They knew full well that they were precariously positioned at that moment between the powerful wave of municipal reform that had swept into New York with the findings of

the Lexow Commission on police corruption a year earlier (of which Roosevelt was a strong exponent) and the perhaps greater power of that same corruption, which had existed for as long as the force and was now quietly biding its time, waiting until the public wearied of the passing fashion of reform and sank back into business as usual.

"A simple choice for you, Flynn," Roosevelt managed, with dignity that was notably unimpaired for a man so full of rage. "Ellison in my office or your badge on my desk. Tomorrow morning."

Flynn gave up the struggle sullenly. "Sure. *Commissioner*." He spun on his heel and headed back down the watchtower steps, mumbling something about a "damned society boy playing at policeman." One of the cops who had been positioned below the tower then appeared, to say that a coroner's wagon had arrived and was ready to haul the body away. Roosevelt told them to wait a few minutes and then dismissed Connor and the roundsman as well. We were now alone on the walkway, except for the ghoulish remains of what had once been, apparently, another of the many desperately troubled young people who every season were spat up by the dark, miserable tenement ocean that stretched away from us to the west. Forced to use whatever means they could—and Giorgio Santorelli's had been the most basic—to survive on their own, such children were more *completely* on their own than anyone unfamiliar with the New York City ghettos of 1896 could possibly imagine.

"Kreizler estimates that the boy was killed earlier tonight," Theodore said, glancing at the sheet of paper in his hand. "Something about the temperature of the body. So the killer may still be in the area. I have men combing it. There are a few other medical details, and then this message."

He handed the paper to me, and on it I saw scrawled in Kreizler's agitated block hand: "ROOSEVELT: TERRIBLE ERRORS HAVE BEEN MADE. I WILL BE AVAILABLE IN THE MORNING, OR FOR LUNCH. WE SHOULD BEGIN—THERE IS A TIME-TABLE." I tried for a moment to make sense of it.

"It's fairly tiresome of him to be so cryptic" was the only conclusion I could reach.

Theodore managed a chuckle. "Yes. I thought so, too. But I think I understand, now. It was examining the body that did it. Do you have any idea, Moore, how many people are murdered in New York every year?"

"Not really." I gave the corpse another curious glance, but jerked

my head back around when I saw the cruel way in which the face was pressed to the steel walkway—so that the lower jaw was pushed at a grotesque sidelong angle away from the upper—and the black-red holes that had once been eyes. “If I were to guess I’d say hundreds. Perhaps one or two thousand.”

“So would I,” Roosevelt answered. “But I, too, would only be guessing. Because we don’t even pay attention to most of them. Oh, the force bends every effort if the victim is respectable and well-to-do. But a boy like this, an immigrant who turned to the flesh trade—I’m ashamed to say it, Moore, but there’s no precedent for looking into such a case, as you could see in Flynn’s attitude.” His hands went to his hips again. “But I’m getting tired of it. In these vile neighborhoods husbands and wives kill each other, drunkards and dope fiends murder decent working people, prostitutes are slaughtered and commit suicide by the score, and at most it’s seen as some sort of grimly amusing spectacle by outsiders. That’s bad enough. But when the victims are children like this, and the general reaction is no different than Flynn’s—by God, I get to feeling warlike with my own people! Why, already this year we’ve had three such cases, and not so much as a whisper from the precincts or the detectives.”

“Three?” I asked. “I only know about the girl at Draper’s.” Shang Draper ran a notorious brothel at Sixth Avenue and Twenty-fourth Street, where customers could purchase the favors of children (mostly girls, but the occasional boy as well) between the ages of nine and fourteen. In January a ten-year-old girl had been found beaten to death in one of the brothel’s small paneled rooms.

“Yes, and you only know of *that* one because Draper had been slow with his graft payments,” Roosevelt said. The bitter battle against corruption waged by the current mayor, Colonel William L. Strong, and lieutenants such as Roosevelt had been courageous, but they had not succeeded in eradicating the oldest and most lucrative of police activities: the collection of graft from the operators of saloons, concert halls, disorderly houses, opium dens, and every other palace of vice. “Someone in the Sixteenth Precinct, I still don’t know who, made the most of that story to the press as a method of turning the screws. But the other two victims were boys like this, found in the streets and therefore useless in trying to pressure their panderers. So the stories went untold . . .”

His voice faded into the slap of the water below us and the steady

rush of the river breeze. "Were they both like this?" I asked, watching Theodore watch the body.

"Virtually. Throats cut. And they'd both been gotten at by the rats and birds, like this one. It didn't make an easy sight."

"Rats and birds?"

"The eyes," Roosevelt answered. "Detective Sergeant Connor puts that down to rats, or carrion pickers. But the rest of this . . ."

There hadn't been anything in the papers about these other two killings, although there was nothing surprising about that. As Roosevelt had said, murders that appeared insoluble and that occurred among the poor or outcast were barely recorded, much less investigated, by the police; and when the victims were members of a segment of society that was not generally acknowledged to exist, then the chances of public awareness shrank from slim to none. I wondered for a moment what my own editors at the *Times* would have done if I'd suggested running a story about a young boy who made his living painting himself like a female whore and selling his body to grown men (many of them ostensibly respectable men), who was horribly butchered in a dark corner of the city. I would have been lucky to escape with a dismissal; forced internment at the Bloomingdale Asylum would have been the more likely result.

"I haven't spoken to Kreizler in years," Roosevelt mused at length. "Although he sent me a very decent note when"—for a moment his words became awkward—"that is, at a very difficult time."

I understood. Theodore was referring to the death of his first wife, Alice, who had passed away in 1884 after giving birth to their daughter, who bore the same name. His loss that day had been doubly staggering, for his mother had died within hours of his wife. Theodore had dealt with the tragedy typically, sealing off the sad, sacrosanct memory of his bride, and never mentioning her again.

He tried to rouse himself, and turned to me. "Still, the good doctor must have called you here for a reason."

"I'm deuced if I can see it," I replied with a shrug.

"Yes," Theodore said with another affectionate chuckle. "As inscrutable as any Chinaman, our friend Kreizler. And perhaps, like him, I've been among the strange and awful too long, these past months. But I think I may be able to divine his purpose. You see, Moore, I've had to ignore all the other killings like this one, because there's no desire to investigate them in the department. Even if there were, none of

our detectives is trained to make sense of such butchery. But this boy, this horrible, bloody mess—justice can only be blind so long. I’ve a scheme, and I think Kreizler has a scheme—and I think *you’re* the one to bring us together.”

“*Me?*”

“Why not? Just as you did at Harvard, when we all met.”

“But what am I supposed to do?”

“Bring Kreizler to my office tomorrow. Late morning, as he says. We’ll share thoughts and see what can be done. But mind you, be discreet—as far as anyone else is concerned, it’s a social reunion of old friends.”

“Damn it, Roosevelt, *what* is a social reunion of old friends?”

But I’d lost him to the rapture of a plan. He ignored my plaintive question, took a deep breath, barreled his chest, and appeared far more comfortable than he had to that point. “Action, Moore—we shall respond with action!”

And then he grabbed me around the shoulders in a tight hug, his enthusiasm and moral certainty all back in full force. As for my own sense of certainty, any kind of certainty, I waited in vain for its arrival. All I knew was that I was being drawn into something that involved the two most passionately determined men I’d ever known—and that thought offered me no comfort as we went back downstairs to Kreizler’s carriage, leaving the body of the pitiable Santorelli boy alone on that tower, high in the freezing sky that was still untouched by any trace of dawn.

CHAPTER 4

Cold, cutting March rain came with the morning. I rose early to find that Harriet had, mercifully, prepared me a breakfast of strong coffee, toast, and fruit (which she, drawing on the experience of a family full of inebriates, believed essential for anyone who imbibed often). I settled into my grandmother's glass-enclosed nook, overlooking her still-dormant rose garden in the rear yard, and decided to digest the morning edition of the *Times* before trying to telephone the Kreizler Institute. With the rain pattering on the copper roof and glass walls around me, I inhaled the fragrance of the few plants and flowers that my grandmother kept alive year-round and took in the paper, trying to reestablish contact with a world that, in light of the previous evening's events, seemed suddenly and disturbingly removed.

SPAIN IS FULL OF WRATH, I learned; the question of American support for the nationalist rebels in Cuba (the U.S. Congress was considering granting them full belligerent status, and thus effectively recognizing their cause) was continuing to cause the vicious, crumbling regime in Madrid much worry. Boss Tom Platt, the town's cadaverous old Republican mastermind, was assailed by the editors of the *Times* for trying to prostitute the imminent reorganization of the city into a Greater New York—one that would include Brooklyn and Staten Island, as well as Queens, the Bronx, and Manhattan—to his own nefarious purposes. The approaching Democratic and Republican conventions both promised to center around the question of bimetallicism, or whether or not America's solid old gold standard should be

sullied by the introduction of silver-based currency. Three hundred and eleven black Americans had taken ship for Liberia; and the Italians were rioting because their troops had been badly defeated by Abyssinian tribesmen on the other side of that dark continent.

Momentous as all this no doubt was, it held little interest for a man in my mood. I turned to lighter matters. There were bicycling elephants at Proctor's Theatre; a troop of Hindu fakirs at Hubert's Fourteenth Street Museum; Max Alvary was a brilliant Tristan at the Academy of Music; and Lillian Russell was *The Goddess of Truth* at Abbey's. Eleanora Duse was "no Bernhardt" in *Camille*, and Otis Skinner in *Hamlet* shared her penchant for weeping too easily and too often. *The Prisoner of Zenda* was in its fourth week at the Lyceum—I had seen it twice and thought for a moment about going again that night. It was a grand escape from the worries of the usual day (not to mention the grim sights of an extraordinary night): castles with watery moats, sword battles, a diverting mystery, and stunning, swooning women . . .

Yet even as I thought of the play, my eyes wandered to other items. A man on Ninth Street who had once cut his brother's throat while drunk, drank again and shot his mother; there were still no clues in the particularly vicious murder of artist Max Eglau at the Institution for the Improved Instruction of Deaf Mutes; a man named John Mackin, who had killed his wife and mother-in-law and then tried to end his own life by cutting his throat, had recovered from the wound but was now trying to starve himself. The authorities had convinced Mackin to eat by showing him the frightful force-feeding apparatus that would otherwise be used to keep him alive for the executioner . . .

I threw the paper aside. Taking in a last heavy gulp of sweet black coffee, and then a section of a peach shipped from Georgia, I redoubled my resolve to get to the Lyceum box office. I had just started back for my room to dress when the telephone let out with a loud clang, and I heard my grandmother in her morning room exclaim "Oh, God!" in alarm and anger. The telephone bell did that to her, yet she never entertained any suggestion that it be removed, or at least muffled.

Harriet appeared from the kitchen, her soft, middle-aged features specked with soap bubbles. "It's the telephone, sir," she said, wiping her hands on her apron. "Dr. Kreizler calling."

Pulling my Chinese robe tighter, I headed for the little wooden box near the kitchen and took up the heavy black receiver, putting it to my

ear as I placed my other hand on the anchored mouthpiece. "Yes?" I said. "Is that you, Laszlo?"

"Ah, so you're awake, Moore," I heard him say. "Good." The sound was faint, but the manner was, as always, energetic. The words bore the lilt of a European accent: Kreizler had immigrated to the United States as a child, when his German father, a wealthy publisher and 1848 republican, and Hungarian mother had fled monarchist persecution to begin a somewhat celebrated life in New York as fashionable political exiles. "What time does Roosevelt want us?" he asked, without any thought that Theodore might have refused his suggestion.

"Before lunch!" I said, raising my volume as if to overcome the faintness of his voice.

"Why the devil are you shouting?" Kreizler said. "Before lunch, eh? Excellent. Then we've time. You've seen the paper? The bit on this man Wolff?"

"No."

"Read it while you're dressing, then."

I glanced at my robe. "How did you know that I—"

"They have him at Bellevue. I'm supposed to assess him, anyway, and we can ask a few additional questions, to determine if he's connected to our business. Then on to Mulberry Street, a brief stop at the Institute, and lunch at Del's—squab, I should think, or the pigeon crepinettes. Ranhofer's poivrade sauce with truffles is superb."

"But—"

"Cyrus and I will go directly from my house. You'll have to take a hansom. The appointment's for nine-thirty—try not to be late, will you, Moore? We mustn't waste a minute in this affair."

And then he was gone. I walked back to the nook, picked up the *Times* again, and leafed through it. The article was on page eight:

Henry Wolff had been drinking in the tenement apartment of his neighbor, Conrad Rudesheimer, the night before. The latter's five-year-old daughter had entered the room, and Wolff proceeded to make some comments that Rudesheimer found unsuitable for the ears of a young girl. The father objected; Wolff pulled a gun and shot the girl in the head, killing her, then fled. He had been captured, several hours later, wandering aimlessly—near the East River. I dropped the paper again, momentarily struck by a premonitory feeling that the events of the previous night atop the bridge tower had been only an overture.

Back in the hallway I ran headlong into my grandmother, her silver hair perfectly coiffed, her gray and black dress unimpeachably neat, and her gray eyes, which I had inherited, glaring. "John!" she said in surprise, as if ten other men were staying in her house. "Who in the world was on the telephone?"

"Dr. Kreizler, Grandmother," I said, bounding up the stairs.

"Dr. Kreizler!" she called after me. "Well, dear! I've had about enough of that Dr. Kreizler for one day!" As I closed the door of my bedroom and began to dress, I could still hear her: "If you ask me, he's awfully peculiar! And I don't put much stock in his being a doctor, either. That Holmes man was a doctor, too!" She stayed in that vein while I washed, shaved, and scrubbed my teeth with Sozodont. It was her way; and for all that it was annoying, to a man who, without recent memory, had lost what he was sure was his only chance at domestic happiness, it was still better than a lonely apartment in a building full of other men who had resigned themselves to solitary lives.

Snatching a gray cap and a black umbrella as I dashed out the front door, I made for Sixth Avenue at a brisk pace. The rain was coming down much harder now, and a particularly stiff wind had begun to blow. When I reached the avenue the force of air suddenly changed directions as it swept under the tracks of the New York Elevated Railroad line, which ran above either side of the street just inside the sidewalks. The shift blasted my umbrella inside out, along with those of several other members of the throng that was hustling under the tracks; and the combined effect of the heightening wind, the rain, and the cold was to make the usually bustling rush hour seem absolute pandemonium. Making for a cab as I struggled with my cumbersome, useless umbrella, I was cut off by a merry young couple who maneuvered me out of their way with no great finesse and clambered quickly into my hansom. I swore loudly against their progeny and shook the dead umbrella at them, prompting the woman to scream in fright and the man to fix an anxious eye on me and tell me I was mad—all of which, considering my destination, gave me a good chuckle and made the wet wait for another hansom much easier. When one came around the corner of Washington Place I did not wait for it to stop, but leapt in, shut the doors around my legs, and hollered to the driver to get me to the Insane Pavilion at Bellevue: not the kind of order any cabbie wants to hear. The look of dismay on his face as we drove off gave me another little laugh, so that by the time we hit Fourteenth Street I didn't even mind the feel of wet tweed against my legs.

With the perversity of the typical New York City cabman, my driver—the collar of his raincoat turned up and his top hat encased in a thin rubber sheath—decided to battle his way through the shopping district along Sixth Avenue above Fourteenth Street before turning east. We had slowly passed most of the big department stores—O'Neill's, Adams & Company, Simpson-Crawford—before I rapped on the roof of the cab with my first and assured my man that I did need to get to Bellevue *this* morning. With a rude jerk we spun right at Twenty-third, and then plowed through the thoroughly unregulated intersection of that street with Fifth Avenue and Broadway. Passing the squat bulk of the Fifth Avenue Hotel, where Boss Platt made his headquarters and was probably putting the finishing touches to the Greater New York scheme at that very moment, we turned up along the eastern edge of Madison Square Park to Twenty-sixth, then changed directions in front of the Italianate arcades and towers of Madison Square Garden to head east once more. The square, solemn, red-brick buildings of Bellevue appeared on the horizon, and in just a few more minutes we crossed First Avenue and pulled up behind a large black ambulance on the Twenty-sixth Street side of the hospital grounds, near the entrance to the Insane Pavilion. I paid my cabbie off and headed in.

The Pavilion was a simple building, long and rectangular. A small, uninviting vestibule greeted visitors and internees, and beyond this, through the first of many iron doors, was a wide corridor running down the center of the building. Twenty-four “rooms”—really cells—opened off of the corridor, and separating these cells into two wards, female and male, were two more sliding, studded iron doors at the corridor's midway point. The Pavilion was used for observation and evaluation, primarily of persons who had committed violent acts. Once their sanity (or lack of it) had been determined and official reports were received, the internees were shipped out to other, even less inviting institutions.

As soon as I was inside the vestibule I heard the usual shouts and howls—some coherent protests, some simply wails of madness and despair—coming from the cells beyond. At the same instant I spotted Kreizler; odd, how strongly the sight of him has always been associated, in my mind, with such sounds. As usual, his suit and coat were black, and as often he was reading the music notices in the *Times*. His black eyes, so much like a large bird's, flitted about the paper as he shifted from one foot to the other in sudden, quick movements. He

held the *Times* in his right hand, and his left arm, underdeveloped as the result of a childhood injury, was pulled in close to his body. The left hand occasionally rose to swipe at his neatly trimmed mustache and the small patch of beard under his lower lip. His dark hair, cut far too long to meet the fashion of the day, and swept back on his head, was moist, for he always went hatless; and this, along with the bobbing of his face at the pages before him, only increased the impression of some hungry, restless hawk determined to wring satisfaction from the worrisome world around him.

Standing next to Kreizler was the enormous Cyrus Montrose, Laszlo's valet, occasional driver, effective bodyguard, and alter ego. Like most of Kreizler's employees, Cyrus was a former patient, one who made me more than a little nervous, despite his apparently controlled manner and appearance. That morning he was dressed in gray pants and a tightly buttoned brown jacket, and his broad, black features did not seem even to register my approach. But as I came closer he tapped Kreizler on the arm and pointed my way.

"Ah, Moore," Kreizler said, taking a chained watch from his vest with his left hand and extending his right with a smile. "Splendid."

"Laszlo," I answered, shaking his hand. "Cyrus," I added, with a nod that was barely returned.

Kreizler indicated his newspaper as he checked the time. "I'm somewhat irritated with your employers. Yesterday evening I saw a brilliant *Pagliacci* at the Metropolitan, with Melba and Ancona—and all the *Times* can talk about is Alvary's Tristan." He paused to study my face. "You look tired, John."

"I can't imagine why. Tearing around in an uncovered carriage in the middle of the night is usually so restful. Would you mind telling me what I'm doing here?"

"A moment." Kreizler turned to an attendant in a dark blue uniform and box cap who lounged in a straight-backed wooden chair nearby. "Fuller? We're ready."

"Yes sir, Doctor," the man answered, taking an enormous ring of large keys from his belt and starting for the doorway to the central corridor. Kreizler and I fell in to follow, Cyrus remaining behind like a waxwork.

"You *did* read the article, didn't you, Moore?" Kreizler asked, as the attendant unlocked and opened the doorway to the first ward. With the opening the howls and shouts from the cells became almost deafening and quite unnerving. There was little light in the windowless corridor,

only that which a few overworked electric bulbs could offer. Some of the small observation windows in the imposing iron doors of the cells were open.

"Yes," I answered at length, very uneasily. "I read it. And I understand the possible connection—but why do you need *me*?"

Before Kreizler could answer, a woman's face suddenly appeared in the first door to our right. Her hair, though pinned up, was unkempt, and the expression on her worn, broad features was one of violent outrage. That expression changed in an instant, however, when she saw who the visitor was. "Dr. Kreizler!" she said in a hoarse but passionate gasp.

At that the train of reaction was propelled into high speed: Kreizler's name spread down the corridor from cell to cell, inmate to inmate, through the walls and iron doors of the women's ward and on into the men's. I'd seen this happen several times before, in different institutions, but it was no less remarkable on each occasion: the words were like the flow of water over coals, taking away crackling heat and leaving only a steaming whisper, a perhaps momentary but nonetheless effective remission from deep-burning fire.

The cause of this singular phenomenon was simple. Kreizler was known throughout the patient, as well as the criminal, medical, and legal, communities in New York to be the man whose testimony in court or at a sanity hearing could determine, more than that of any other alienist of the day, whether a given person was sent to prison, to the somewhat less horrifying confines of a mental institution, or back out onto the streets. The moment he was spotted in a place such as the Pavilion, therefore, the usual sounds of madness gave way to an eerie attempt at coherent communication on the part of most of the inmates. Only the uninitiated or the hopelessly distressed would continue their ravings; and yet the effect of this sudden reduction in noise was not at all reassuring. Indeed, it was in some ways worse on the nerves, for one knew that the attempt at order was a strained one, and that the sounds of anguish would soon return—again, like burning coals roasting away the transitory suppression of a splash of water.

Kreizler's reaction to the inmates' behavior was no less disconcerting, for one was left only to imagine what experiences in his life and career could have implanted in him the ability to walk through such a place and witness such desperate performances (all peppered by measured yet passionate pleas of "Dr. Kreizler, I must talk with you!" "Dr. Kreizler, please, I am not like these others!") without submitting to

fear, revulsion, or despair. As he moved in measured strides down the long corridor, his brows drew together over his gleaming eyes, which shot quickly from side to side, cell to cell, with a look of sympathetic admonishment: as if these people were errant children. At no point did he allow himself to address any of the inmates, but this refusal was not cruel; quite the contrary, for to speak to any one would only have raised that unfortunate person's hopes, perhaps unrealistically, while dashing those of the other supplicants. Any patients present who had been in madhouses or prisons before, or who had been under observation for an extended period at Bellevue, knew that this was Kreizler's practice; and they made their most emphatic pleas with their eyes, aware that it was only with the organ of sight that Kreizler would acknowledge them.

We passed through the sliding iron doors and into the men's ward, and followed the attendant Fuller to the last cell on the left. He stood to the side and opened the small observation window in the heavily banded door. "Wolff!" he called. "Visitors for you. Official business, so behave."

Kreizler stood before the window looking inward, and I watched over his shoulder. Inside the small, bare-walled cell a man sat on a rough cot, under which lay a dented steel chamber pot. Heavy bars covered the one small window, and ivy obscured the little external light that tried to enter. A metal pitcher of water and a tray bearing a bit of bread and an oatmeal-encrusted bowl lay on the floor near the man, whose head was in his hands. He wore only an undershirt and woolen pants without a belt or suspenders (suicide being the worry). Heavy shackles were clamped around his wrists and ankles. When he lifted his face, a few seconds after Fuller's call, he revealed a pair of red eyes that reminded me of some of my worst mornings; and his deeply lined, whiskered face bore an expression of detached resignation.

"Mr. Wolff," Kreizler said, watching the man carefully. "Are you sober?"

"Who wouldn't be?" the man answered slowly, his words indistinct, "after a night in this place?"

Kreizler closed the small iron gate that covered the window and turned to Fuller. "Has he been drugged?"

Fuller shrugged uncomfortably. "He was raving when they brought him in, Dr. Kreizler. Seemed more than just drunk, the superintendent said, so they jabbed him full of chloral."

Kreizler sighed in deep irritation. Chloral hydrate was one of the

banes of his existence, a bitter-tasting, neutrally colored, somewhat caustic compound that slowed the rate of the heart and thus made the subject singularly calm—or, if used as it was in many saloons, almost comatose and an easy target for robbery or kidnapping. The body of the medical community, however, insisted that chloral did not cause addiction (Kreizler violently disagreed); and at twenty-five cents a dose, it was a cheap and convenient alternative to wrestling a patient into chains or a leather harness. It was therefore used with abandon, especially on mentally disturbed or simply violent subjects; but in the twenty-five years since its introduction, its use had spread to the general public, who were free, in those days, to buy not only chloral, but morphine, opium, cannabis indica, or any other such substance at any drugstore. Many thousands of people had destroyed their lives by freely surrendering to chloral's power to "release one from worry and care, and bring on healthful sleep" (as one manufacturer put it). Death by overdose had become common; more and more suicides were connected to chloral use; and yet the doctors of the day continued blithely to insist on its safety and utility.

"How many grains?" Kreizler asked, exchanging weariness for annoyance—he was aware that administration of the drug was neither Fuller's job nor his fault.

"They began with twenty," the attendant answered sheepishly. "I told them, sir, I told them you were scheduled for the evaluation and that you'd be angry, but—well, you know, sir."

"Yes," Kreizler answered quietly, "I know." Which made three of us—and what we knew was that on hearing of Kreizler's slated appearance and probable objections, the Pavilion's superintendent had almost certainly doubled the dose of chloral and significantly decreased Wolff's ability to participate in the kind of assessment Kreizler liked to make, which involved many probing questions and was ideally conducted on a subject free of the effects of drugs or alcohol. Such was the general feeling among his colleagues, particularly those of the older generation, toward Kreizler.

"Well," Laszlo announced, after pondering the question for a few moments. "There's nothing to do—we are here, Moore, and time presses." I thought immediately about the strange reference to "a timetable" in Kreizler's note to Roosevelt the night before; but I said nothing as he unbolted the door and pulled at its considerable weight. "Mr. Wolff," Kreizler announced, "we must talk."

For the next hour I sat through Kreizler's examination of this

vague, disoriented man, who held as firmly as the chloral hydrate would allow to the notion that if he had truly erased most of young Louisa Rudesheimer's head with his pistol—and we assured him that he had—then he must be insane, and should of course be sent to an asylum (or at most to the facility for insane convicts at Mattewan) rather than to prison or the gallows. Kreizler took careful note of this attitude but for the moment did not discuss the case itself. Instead he ran through a long list of seemingly unconnected questions about Wolff's past, his family, friends, and childhood. The questions were deeply personal and in any normal setting would have seemed presumptuous and even offensive; and the fact that Wolff's reactions to Kreizler's inquiries were less violent than most men's was almost certainly due to his being drugged. But the absence of anger also indicated a lack of precision and forthrightness in the responses, and the interview seemed destined for a premature end.

But not even Wolff's chemically induced calm could be maintained when Kreizler finally began to ask him about Louisa Rudesheimer. Had Wolff harbored any sexual feelings toward the girl? Laszlo inquired, with a bluntness not often heard in discussions of such subjects. Were there other children in his building or in his neighborhood toward whom he did harbor such feelings? Did he have a lady friend? Did he visit disorderly houses? Did he find himself sexually drawn to young boys? Why had he shot the girl and not stabbed her? Wolff was at first bewildered by all this, and appealed to the attendant, Fuller, asking whether or not he must answer. Fuller, with somewhat lascivious glee, made it plain that he must, and Wolff complied, for a time. But after half an hour of it he staggered to his feet, rattled his manacles, and swore that no man could force him to participate in such an obscene inquisition. He declared defiantly that he would rather face the hangman; at which point Kreizler stood and stared straight into Wolff's eyes.

"I fear that in New York State, the electrical chair is increasingly usurping the gallows, Mr. Wolff," he said evenly. "Although I suspect that, based on your answers to my questions, you will find that out for yourself. God have mercy on you, sir."

As Kreizler strode toward the door, Fuller quickly pulled it open. I took a last look at Wolff before following Laszlo out: the man's aspect had suddenly shifted from indignant to deeply fearful, but he was too weak now to do more than mumble pathetic protests as to what he was certain was his insanity and then fall back onto his cot.

Kreizler and I walked back down the Pavilion's main corridor as Fuller rebolted the door to Wolff's cell. The quiet pleas of the other patients began again, but we were soon through them. Once we were out and in the vestibule, the shouts and howls behind us gained in volume once more.

"I believe we can dismiss him, Moore," Kreizler said, quietly and wearily, as he pulled on a pair of gloves that Cyrus handed him. "Drugged though he may be, Wolff has revealed himself—violent, certainly, and resentful of children. A drunkard, as well. But he is not mad, nor do I think he is connected to our current business."

"Ah," I said, seizing the opportunity, "now, about that—"

"They'll *want* him to be mad, of course," Laszlo mused, not hearing me. "The doctors here, the newspapers, the judges, they'd like to think that only a madman would shoot a five-year-old girl in the head. It creates certain . . . *difficulties*, if we are forced to accept that our society can produce sane men who commit such acts." He sighed once and took an umbrella from Cyrus. "Yes, that will be a long day or two in court, I should think . . ."

We exited the Pavilion, myself seeking refuge with Kreizler under his umbrella, and then climbed into the now-covered calash. I knew what was coming: a monologue that was a kind of catharsis for Kreizler, a restatement of some of his most basic professional principles, designed to relieve the enormous responsibility of helping send a man to his death. Kreizler was a confirmed opponent of the practice of executing criminals, even vicious murderers such as Wolff; but he did not allow this opposition to affect his judgment or his definition of true insanity, which was, by comparison with that of many of his colleagues, relatively narrow. As Cyrus jumped into the driver's seat of the calash and the carriage pulled away from Bellevue, Kreizler's diatribe began to cover subjects I'd heard him discuss many times before: how a broad definition of insanity might make society as a whole feel better but did nothing for mental science, and only lessened the chance that the truly mentally diseased would receive proper care and treatment. It was an insistent sort of speech—Kreizler seemed to be trying to push the image of Wolff in the electrical chair further and further away—and as it wound on, I realized that there was no hope of my gaining any hard information concerning just what in hell was going on and why I'd been called into whatever it was.

Glancing about at the passing buildings in some frustration, I let my eyes come to rest on Cyrus, momentarily thinking that, since he

had to listen to this sort of thing more than anyone, I might get some sympathy out of the man. I should have known better. Like Stevie Taggart, Cyrus had had a hard life before coming to work for Laszlo and was now quite devoted to my friend. As a boy in New York Cyrus had seen his parents literally torn to pieces during the draft riots of 1863, when angry hordes of white men and women, many of them recently arrived immigrants, expressed their unwillingness to fight for the causes of the Union and slave emancipation by laying hold of any blacks they could find—including young children—and dismembering them, burning them alive, tarring them, whatever medieval tortures their Old World minds could conceive. A talented musician with a splendid bass-baritone voice, Cyrus had been taken in by a pandering uncle after his parents' death, and trained to be a "professor," a piano player in a brothel that proffered young black women to white men of means. But his youthful nightmare had left him rather reluctant to tolerate bigoted abuse from the house's customers. One night in 1887 he had come upon a drunken policeman taking his graft in trade, which the cop apparently thought included brutal blows from the back of his hand and taunts of "nigger bitch." Cyrus had calmly gone to the kitchen, fetched a large butcher knife, and dispatched the cop to that special Valhalla reserved for fallen members of the New York City Police Department.

Enter Kreizler once again. Expounding a theory he called "explosive association," he had revealed the genesis of Cyrus's actions to the judge in the case: during the few minutes involved in the killing, Laszlo said, Cyrus had returned in his mind to the night of his parents' death, and the well of anger that had been left untapped since that incident came gushing forth and engulfed the offending policeman. Cyrus was not insane, Kreizler announced; he had responded to the situation in the only way possible for a man with his background. The judge had been impressed by Kreizler's arguments, but given the public mood he could hardly release Cyrus. Internment in the New York City Lunatic Asylum on Blackwells Island was suggested; but Kreizler stated that employment at his Institute would be far more likely to effect rehabilitation. The judge, anxious to be rid of the case, agreed. The affair didn't do anything to mitigate Kreizler's public and professional reputation as a maverick, and it certainly didn't make the average visitor to Laszlo's home anxious to be alone in the kitchen with Cyrus. But it did ensure the man's loyalty.

There was no break in the pelting rain as we moved at a trot down

the Bowery, the only major street in New York that, to my knowledge, has never known the presence of a church. Saloons, concert halls, and flophouses flashed by, and when we passed Cooper Square I spotted the large electric sign and shaded windows of Biff Ellison's Paresis Hall, where Giorgio Santorelli had centered his pathetic operations. On we drove, through more tenement wastelands whose sidewalk mayhem was only slightly moderated by the rain. It was not until we had turned onto Bleecker Street and were nearing Police Headquarters that Kreizler said flatly:

"You saw the body."

"Saw it?" I said in some annoyance, though I was relieved to finally discuss the subject. "I still see it if I close my eyes for more than a minute. What the hell was the idea of getting my whole house up and forcing me to go down there, anyway? It's not as though I can report that kind of thing, you know that—all it did was agitate my grandmother, and that's not much of an achievement."

"I'm sorry, John. But you needed to see just what it is we'll be dealing with."

"I am not dealing with anything!" I protested again. "I'm only a reporter, remember, a reporter with a gruesome story that I can't tell."

"You do yourself no justice, Moore," Kreizler said. "You are a veritable cyclopedia of privileged information—though you may not realize it."

My voice rose: "Laszlo, what in *hell*—"

But once again, I could get no further. As we turned onto Mulberry Street I heard calling voices, and looked up to see Link Steffens and Jake Riis running toward the carriage.

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