



St. Martin's First

Debut Fiction from St. Martin's Press



Winter 2016 Sampler

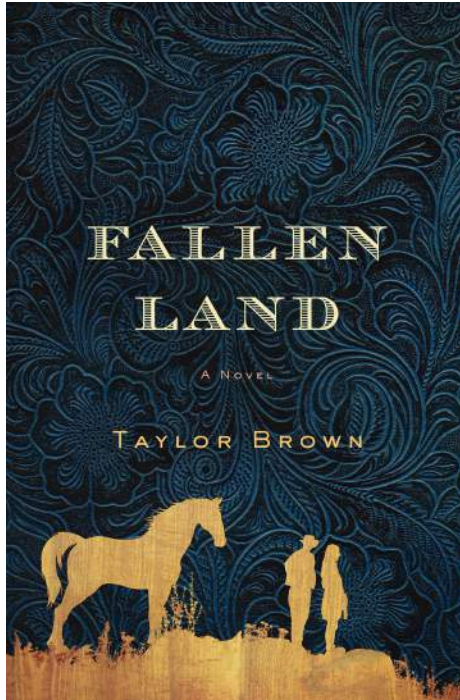


A SAMPLER OF DEBUT FICTION FROM ST. MARTIN'S PRESS

WINTER 2016

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Fallen Land is Taylor Brown's debut novel set in the final year of the Civil War, as a young couple on horseback flees a dangerous band of marauders who seek a bounty reward. Callum, a seasoned horse thief at fifteen years old, came to America from his native Ireland as an orphan. Ava, her father and brother lost to the war, hides in her crumbling home until Callum determines to rescue her from the bands of hungry soldiers pillaging the land, leaving destruction in their wake. Ava and Callum have only each other in the world and their remarkable horse, Reiver, who carries them through the destruction that is the South. Pursued relentlessly by a murderous slave hunter, tracking dogs, and ruthless ex-partisan rangers, the couple race through a beautiful but ruined land, surviving on food they glean from abandoned farms and the occasional kindness of strangers. In the end, as they intersect with the scorching destruction of Sherman's March, the couple seek a safe haven where they can make a home and begin to rebuild their lives. Dramatic and thrillingly written with an uncanny eye for glimpses of beauty in a ravaged landscape, *Fallen Land* is a love story at its core, and an unusually assured first novel by award-winning young author Taylor Brown.

TAYLOR BROWN grew up on the Georgia coast. He has lived in Buenos Aires, San Francisco, and the mountains of Western North Carolina. His fiction has appeared in more than twenty publications, including *The Baltimore Review*, *The North Carolina Literary Review*, and *storySouth*. He is the recipient of the Montana Prize in Fiction, and was a finalist in both the Machigonne Fiction Contest and the Doris Betts Fiction Prize. An Eagle Scout, he lives in Wilmington, North Carolina.

Chapter I



Pale light crept into the black stanchions of pine, the ashen ground, the red center of dying coals. The camped men rose, silent, and broke the bread of old pillage between blackened fingers. One of their number looked at his own. Soot and powder, ash and dirt. Neat crescents accrued underneath the nails, trim and black, like he'd tried to dig himself out of a hole in the ground. Or into one.

Some of the others chewed loudly, bread dry in dry mouths. No tins rattled. There was no coffee, not for some days. He always wanted to talk in this quiet of early morning, to speak something into the silence that assembled them into the crooked line of horsemen. No colors among the trees. No badges, no uniforms. He wanted to ask what peace might be gained if they hovered here longer in the mist, did not mount and ride. But they always did.

So he sprang up first. He shoved the last crust down his

gullet and kicked old Swinney where his britches failed him, an inordinance of cloven white flesh.

“Goddamn katydid,” said Swinney, second in command.

“Least I ain’t a old ash-shitter.”

“You be lucky to get this old, son. Right lucky this day and age.”

The boy set his cap on bold.

“Lucky as you?”

Old Swinney hawked and spat a heavy clot of himself into the coals.

“Luckier.”

They rode horses of all colors, all bloods. “Strays,” they called them, tongue in cheek. Horses that offered themselves for the good of the country, under no lock and key. The quality of a man’s mount was no measure of rank, a measure instead of luck and cunning and sometimes, oftentimes, cruelty.

The boy went to mount his own, a fly-bitten nag with a yellow-blond coat in some places, gray patches of hairless skin in others. She’d been a woman’s horse once, most likely. The men used to joke about this. Then one of their favorites, an informal company jester, had been blown right from her back. The mare had stood there unmoved, flicking her ears, biting grass from the trampled soil. No one save the Colonel enjoyed a horse so steady. They left off joking.

The boy stuck one cracked boot into the stirrup, an ill-formed shape clanged from glowing iron by an idiot smithy. Or so the men had told him. They told him many such things, their faces fire-bitten and demonic over the cookfire, the embers circling them like burning flies. The boy believed them all. Never the facts, the names, the settings. But what they were getting at, this he believed. There was faith in their eyes, so black and silvered—like the move of steel in darkness.

Rays of dawn shot now through the black overhang of trees, spotting the ground with halos of warped design. The rest of the men slung themselves into their saddles, a cadre of stiff-jointed grunts, and some of them stepped their horses into the light unawares. The boy saw them go luminous among the black woods, specterlike. Like men elected to sainthood. Faces skull-gone, mouths hidden in the gnarled bush of their beards, showing only their teeth. The equipage of war hung by leather belts, pistols and knives and backslung scatterguns of all gauges. This hardened miscellany jolted and clanked as their horses tapered into the long, irregular file of their occupation.

They rode the forest until the white face of the sun hung right above them and the insects clouded so thickly that men soiled their cheeks and foreheads with dirt or ash from the previous night's fire. The horses flicked the mosquitoes from their rumps with their tails, the skin of man and animal growing spattered with spots of blood. They came finally to the verge of a small green valley of sparse trees. There was a farmhouse down there, a barn. Out of habit they stopped for lunch, though there was little to drink and less to eat. They stopped within the cover of the trees so as not to be seen from the valley below.

When the boy dismounted his horse, old Swinney slapped him on the shoulder.

"Welcome to Virginny," said the old man.

"Virginia?" said the boy, his eyes going wide with wonder.

"That's right. Colonel wants you to see if they got anything to eat down there."

The boy nodded. He crept toward the edge of the trees, his face dark amid the shadows. He could feel the older men's eyes upon him, their ears attuned to the snap of stick or shrub.

They listened because he made no sound, this boy, the lightest of foot among them. Their scout. A former horse thief whose skills translated readily to their pursuits. At last he stared down upon the rough-planked barn, the once-white house, the single white pig mired in a sagging pen of mud. He stared down upon Virginia for a long time, a stranger unto this country. Then he turned his head and made a whip-poor-will's whistle over his shoulder.

When he returned, the men of the troop, thirty-odd strong, were tightening their holsters and sighting their rifles, sliding their knives back and forth in their sheaths, back and forth, making sure no catches might slow the draw. The boy carried a French dueling pistol of uncommon caliber. He mounted up and pulled the heavy J-shaped weapon from his belt and thumbed the hammer back. The filigreed metal of the action spun and clicked into place. The rich wood frame was scarred by countless run-ins with his belt buckle, tree branches, roots where he'd dropped the thing practicing his pistoleer skills.

Swinney stood below him.

"You got any bullets left for that thing, boy?"

The boy held the pistol toward him butt-first.

"She's a firecracker," he warned, smiling.

When the older man reached for the pistol, the boy dropped it sideways from his hand and hooked it upside down by the trigger guard and spun the gun upon its axis, catching it by the backstrap, the trigger fingered, the barrel at Swinney's chest, the older man's eyes wide with fright.

"Let them sons of bitches learn the hard way," said the boy.

In fact, he did not have any bullets. He was out.

Swinney's eyes narrowed and he shook his head.

“What you need is a good ass-whooping, boy. Not them parlor tricks.”

The boy spun the gun and stuck it in his belt.

“Now don’t you go getting jealous on me, Swinney.”

The older man, his keeper of sorts, made a derisive gesture and waddled down the line.

The provenance of the pistol was known—one of a pair from the vast arms collection of a Union sympathizer whose home they’d raided. The boy’s first of such prizes. He’d been promptly swindled of one of the guns in a bet over the estimated height of a sycamore that was fated for firewood. That left him one pistol and five balls for the smoothbore barrel. Two went to target practice, one to drunken roistering, one to a duel with a blue jay on a fence post (lost), and the last plumb lost along the way.

He could only wait now for another of his comrades to fall. Be first to scavenge.

“Hey, Swinney,” he called. “You think they’re down there? Any villains?”

“Somebody is,” said the fat man, turning back down the line.

The boy sat astride his horse and made ready to maraud. When their leader rode past, the boy could smell him. The Colonel was riding the line with words of exhortation, of courage and duty and triumph. He had long curly locks, dark as crow feathers, flying loose under a plumed hat. He wore four Colt revolvers on his belt, butt-forward, and carried two dragoon pistols in saddle holsters, and he wore fine riding boots that went up to his knees. He was the man who had once poled across the foggy Potomac in the dead of night to ambush the Maryland Guards in their sleep. The man who

had kidnapped a Northern general from a hotel room in West Virginia, pulling him from the bed he shared with a purchased negress. He was the man who had blown more Baltimore & Ohio Railroad bridges than anyone, and captured at least one of those B&O trains for his own profit, keeping the gold, and been stripped of his commission for it. His battalion of Partisan Rangers had been disbanded, some said by order of Lee himself, but for these few who remained. He led them through the hills on missions of their own.

The Colonel rode out into the light and struck his saber heavenward, no gleam upon the corroded blade. The band spurred their horses' bellies at the slashed order of charge, dropping down into the valley upon a thunder of hooves. The cavalcade fanned out as they descended, tearing divots from the soft turf. The boy, so scant of weight, pulled ahead of many in the onrush. He was not first to the house but first onto the porch, his horse needing no dally to stay her. The porch planks gave beneath his boots, sodden or thin-cut or both. The door was standing wide and he ducked into the sudden dark. Pistol first, knife second. The ceilings were low, the furniture neat. No roaches scattered before him. No people. Other men clamored through the door behind him. Outside, war whoops and the squeal of the slaughtered pig.

No one in the front rooms, the rear, the kitchen. He found the stairs and shot upward into the blue dark of the second floor, the balls of his feet hardly touching the steps, the point of his blade plumbing the gloom like a blind man's stick. The curtains were all drawn, the floor dark. He stepped from one room into another. Quilted beds neatly made, wardrobe of cheap wood. Then he crossed the threshold into still another room, this the darkest.

He swung the pistol toward her white back, the dark hair all upon its contours like a black eddy of stream water. She had not heard him, was watching the other door. Her thin shift was open at the back, skin and cloth pale as bone. He swallowed, suddenly nervous, and realized how hungry he was, his stomach drawn up empty inside him. Heart, heart, heart again. It sounded in the cavity of his chest. The pistol began to quiver like a pistol should, whelmed with power.

His voice a whisper: "Ma'am?"

She spun on bare feet, kitchen knife clutched to chest, face silly-hard with courage, fear.

"Which side?" she asked him.

"It don't matter which."

She was not looking at him, not listening, either, staring instead into the black tunnel of the barrel like she might jam the pike by willpower alone.

He looked at her and then at the gun, kinking his wrist to better see the thing. An object foreign to him. He lowered it to his side and sheathed the knife as well, and the two of them stood staring at each other, unspeaking.

"What's your name?" he asked finally, dry-mouthed, his words hardly crossing the six feet of space that separated them.

She pointed the kitchen knife at him.

"Ava. Any closer and I kill you."

The floorboards jolted, steps upon the stairs. He shot across to her, past the blade.

"You got to hide."

"Nowhere to," she said. "I'll take my chances."

"They ain't good."

A bearded sharecropper with tobacco-juiced lips, black-gritted, clopped into the room. The boy knew him but not

his name, not at this moment. A Walker Colt hung loosely in the man's hand. He saw the girl and smiled.

"Christmas come early," he said.

The boy stood beside the girl, his mouth agape. She spoke to him without looking.

"You a man, or I got to protect my own self?"

His mouth closed. Slowly he raised the dueling pistol, ornate and empty, at the older man's heart.

"I don't reckon it's Christmas yet," he said.

The man spat a black knot on the floor and leveled his pistol at the boy, casual-like.

"Now Mr. Colt here, he beg to differ."

The boy went to thumb back the hammer of his weapon, but back it was.

"Where them pistol tricks, boy?"

"Don't reckon I need them."

Black caulking divided the man's teeth.

"You killed yet?"

"Plenty."

"No. I knowed you was a virgin the day we took you on. I knowed by plain sight and I know it still. You want to be a man? Tell you what, I'll let you watch."

The fingers of his free hand began to unbutton his britches as he walked slowly across the room, legs straddled.

The boy put the palm of his hand against the girl's belly to push her behind him, and her waist was as tiny and delicate as his idea of what was fragile in the world.

"No," said the boy to the sharecropper. "No."

The man kept coming.

"No."

At last the boy lunged, unsheathing his knife, and a white crack exploded inside his head, and dreaming or dying he

felt his blade plunge into the liquid underbelly of all that might have happened. All that would have. He saw her eyes come over him, blue-rimmed, the pupils deep and black and wide as wells. All for him. Then darkness.



Hands upon his face, his brow. Palms smooth. Tough but smooth, callus-shaven. No scratching, no frictive grit. A voice like running water. The layers that bound him were cut away, piece by piece, until he was naked, unwooled, committed to dark.

In and out for hours, days. Drifting. Sometimes there were voices over him, whispers and orders he could not decipher. He floated in a world his own, dark with nightmare. Dreams of his past, fevered, like the night of the wreck. The men he pushed under, the men who pushed him. Ladders of them, limb-conjoined, wanting for air. The spouts of exhalation, gargle-mouthed. The groan of the ship sinking beneath them, sucking them under. The white jet of expelled air, last of the pockets that saved him, shooting him to the surface, white-birtherd.

Then and now black-whirled. Nightmare and memory.

The ship gone, the waves high. The pale slit of coast, like snow. The beach underneath his feet, his knees, his face. Then the lopsided shack, the man called Swinney who nursed him on fish and whiskey, who took him in as a father might, and then the Colonel, who took them all. After that the land grown mountainous, and meaner, and scarecrow men who haunted the ridges, and rib-boned horses beneath them, and always the hunger, insatiable, and the wagons raided, and the barns and the farmhouses, and never so much blood.

With these fever dreams came the vomiting. Hot on his

chest, aprons of himself expelled. Sickness and sweat and instruments on his skin, metal-cold.

One day he could hear the words of the men over his sickbed:

“How long’s he been like this?”

“Couple days. Took that long to find you.”

“How old is he?”

“Couldn’t really say, Doc.”

“He’s hardly even whiskered.”

“Well.”

“Well, where did he come from?”

“Shipwreck off the coast, blockade-runner.”

“Immigrant? Another Irish, with sympathies?”

“Could be. What’s that matter to you?”

“Niggers turned inside out is what they are. They don’t fight for us.”

“This one does.”

“Well, he won’t be fighting for anything, this swelling doesn’t diminish.”

“You best hope it do, Doc.”

“Shall I, Mr. Swinney?”

“Otherwise you might find yourself there beside him. Untongued.”

“Where is your commanding officer?”

“Don’t you worry your head about it.”

“Where is he?”

“With the girl. And you, Doc. You with me.”

Days later the sickbed gone, the house, too, his world beginning to sway and totter beneath him, uncertain of step. It expanded and collapsed and sweated and snorted, a ribbed joinery articulating beneath him as though the surface of

the world had sprung from engines hot and deep beneath the soil and rock.

Sometimes he could not sit the horse, too dizzy, so they laid him belly-down across the torso of a horse with no saddle, his head lying against one of the flaring sides. In daylight, the sun leered sickeningly above him, the trees all warped and gnarled, the world ugly and pale and mean. He shut his eyes against the light. Nightfall, he was led stumbling to void himself in the trees, liquid and quaking. A round man, gone strange to him, leading him by a length of rope.

Swinney, he realized.

He came back into the world but slowly. The ground growing more certain, the light less painful. The dreams shorter. The pain duller. Then he was back in it, all at once, and it was hunger that brought him. He awoke on the back of the horse. The light was slanted, late afternoon, and he had never been so hungry. He tried to wrestle loose and found himself rope-bound to the animal like a sack of feed or beans or other provision.

He called out when someone walked past, his voice strange with disuse. Before long another man stood beside him, unhitching the ropes with thick fingers. He slid to the ground and leaned against the horse. The blood receded from his vision, leaving old Swinney standing there before him, loose loops of rope in his hand. The boy rubbed the chafed skin at his wrists. He touched his head lightly, the bandage, the long crust of blood.

“I a prisoner, Swinney?”

Swinney shook his head.

“No, boy.”

“Should I be?”

“Colonel said you done him a favor puncturing that son of a bitch. Said he never did like him.”

“So is he . . .”

Swinney nodded.

“Bled out. Colonel’s orders.”

“And the girl?”

Swinney turned from him.

“Come with me, boy. You need to eat.”

They walked toward the light of the fire. The boy staggered along behind, finding his legs. He was still disoriented, his boots tripping along the ground.

“Where are we?” he asked.

Swinney was to the left of him. He said something, but the boy didn’t quite hear him. He stepped closer.

“What?”

Swinney answered again. Again the boy didn’t catch his words, not fully. He stopped and clamped his nostrils and blew to clear out his ear canals.

Swinney came around to the front of him.

“Your ear?”

The boy tapped his left one, just underneath the bandage. Swinney came around to that side of him and leaned forward to whisper into the ear. The boy heard only strange mufflings, like the whisper of a foreign language.

“I can’t hear,” he told Swinney.

The older man came around to his good ear and patted him on the shoulder.

“I said, a few days north of that farmhouse. It’s been near a fortnight. Doctor said you was bad concussed. Ear ain’t much to lose, considering what you could of.”

The boy nodded. “North,” he said, mostly to himself.

Swinney looked at him a long moment. His belly shook.

“Lucky dog,” he said. He turned.

The boy thought to say something, but nothing came.

He followed the old man the rest of the way to the fire, the men and horses glazed with flame. The boy sat on the white heart of a hickory stump, and the others showed him their smiles, yellow-toothed, dark-gummed. He cocked his good ear toward the fire. They handed him a tin of stewed pork and he slurped down its contents in a single go.

When he handed back the empty tin, he saw the sleeve of his coat.

One of the men leaned into the fire, showing his face.

“She sewn it for you,” he said.

“We had to cut away your old,” said Swinney. “We was going to give you Oldham’s.”

“Oldham?” said the boy.

“Man you killed,” said somebody. “Probably you ought to know his name.”

“You know all their names?” the boy asked him.

A chuckle rose multilunged from men’s chests, choral.

“She wasn’t wanting you to wear Oldham’s,” said Swinney. “She sewn you that one out of old what-have-you.”

“Rags and quilts and such.”

“Bedsheets, too.”

“I heard scraps of old Oldham hisself.”

“A coat of many colors.”

“Yea,” said another man. “Like Joseph’s of old.”

The boy held the sleeves toward the fire’s orbit. Ribbons and patches of cloth cross-laced the coat, thick-stitched. He stood among the men and worked his arms inside the coat and found the cut of it closer than any he’d ever worn, his small

frame normally swallowed in volumes of wool. This one hugged him like a second skin. He thought of who'd stitched it, of how she must know the contours that shaped him.

"How is she?" he asked them.

They rustled. No one spoke.

"What the hell y'all done to her?"

The boy looked around, his face darkened.

"Should I of stuck every last one of you? That it?"

One man, then another, put a hand to his knife.

Swinney stepped forward. He cleared his throat.

"We left her," he said. "She ain't none of your concern."

"Says who?"

"Says the Colonel."

The boy looked to where the Colonel's fire flickered a good ways off. He knew he should lower his voice but didn't.

"What does he care?"

Swinney let his hands fall open, silent.

The boy looked at him, his eyes slowly widening.

"The Colonel is married," he said.

The men shifted on their blankets and stumps. The boy looked at them a long moment. His voice was low. "He's had his way, then."

It wasn't a question.

The men said nothing. Their assent.

Then he whispered it, the question that remained: "Against her will?"

None of the men looked at him. They looked at the fire or their hands or their boots but not at him. The boy swallowed thickly and thumbed the bandage on his head.

"So be it," he said. He sat back on the stump and stared into the fire.

Sometime later he discovered a giant pocket sewn into the

inner flap of the coat, on the left-hand side, as if made for something specific.

“Say,” he said, “I get something out of all this?”

Swinney stood and pulled an object from beneath his bedroll. The men handed it one to the next, circling the firelight until a woolen sock, heavy as a giant’s foot, arrived in the boy’s hand. He slipped off the sock, and the Walker Colt sat in his lap. It was a giant of a pistol, twice the weight of a newer Colt, built to kill not just men but the horses they rode, this one outfitted with trick grips that glowed like a moon in his hand. It looked made for a man twice his size, a frontier treasure for which men would surely kill. For which they had.

“You earned it,” said Swinney.

“Yeah, you did,” said somebody else.

The boy pointed the pistol into the dark of the man’s voice.

“Five shots left,” he said. “One through my head.”

Nobody spoke, and he knew they wondered what spirits might have snuck through that wound of his. Into his head. What meanness. He did not feel like a boy anymore. He felt old as any of them. Older even.

He rode for three days among them, quiet. Alien.

Waiting.

One night, Swinney pulled him aside.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” he asked.

“Tell me how to get back.”

“You got to be shitting me.”

“Tell me,” said the boy.

The third night, he lay down to rest early. The cold was coming down out of the north and the ground could keep a man from sleeping if he didn’t get to sleep early enough, with some sunlight still left in the dirt, the rock. He pulled the

bandage from his head and felt the scabby place where the ball had passed along his skull, an inch from ending him.

After a time he rose from his pallet of old sacks amid the snoring of his compatriots and moved toward the far-off embers of the Colonel's fire, silent as a wraith, one hand on the grip of his pistol to mask its glow. When he passed Swinney, he saw two white orbs look at him. Just as quickly they disappeared, closed, and whatever they saw prompted no movement.

The boy kept on picking his way among the stones, the heads, making no shadow, no sound. The coals of the Colonel's fire glowed red, the flames low. His black thoroughbred stood seventeen hands tall, thick-muscled, big haunches twitching in its sleep. A stallion. The boy did not see the saddle sitting in the shadows, but he saw the Colonel's slouch hat lying there beside him, the twin tassels still gold even for all they'd ridden above.

The boy pulled back the sleeve of his new coat and crouched, slow to lessen the crackling of his boots, and took the hat by the hand indentions over the crown. It would cover the scar. As he turned to the horse, the shadow of the round brim crossed the Colonel's face. The boy saw him shift, his hand groping for the butt of the pistol under his bedroll. By the time the Colonel sat upright, he must have found himself all alone, his gun pointed toward empty space. Leaves, fire-spangled, quivering where the horse had been, hoofprints welled with firelight.

The boy laid his cheek low against the horse's neck as they crashed through underbrush and low-hanging limbs. He hit upon an old wagon road whose dust shone white and crooked down the mountain switchbacks. The company shunned such roads, where spies could estimate the size of their force, where they could be detected at all. They took

horse trails or even game trails instead, or they cut their own where the brush grew thick. The boy had the strongest horse underneath him and he was the lightest rider to boot and he believed he might outrun on the open road whomever they sent to catch him.

He dropped down, down out of the mountains in darkness, his breath and the breath of the horse pluming together, their dust hounding them as they rode. He thought of the men pursuing them, riders with plumes of dead birds in their hats, guns of many hands come to rest finally in their black-creased palms. He knew they fashioned themselves the most devoted Yankee-killers in all the land, and there were but two things that sated them: blood and money. He didn't have any money.

First light rose colorless over hills crumpled and creased into one another, a sheet enameled over a miscellany of untold items, of corpses and rock and whatever else gave the earth its shape. Sparse trees bristled from the hillsides gold-leafed, a touch of red. The season was turning, and fast. He had been out of the world for what seemed an eternity, and if he could just see her, he thought she might embrace him surely as the coat she'd made him. Their courtship so short, seconds alone, but the true shape of him displayed forevermore in the event that split them. He thought this would count above all else.

At a high outcropping of rock, he tethered the horse and climbed to the flat top to surveil the terrain behind him, the terrain ahead. Dust rose from the road far behind him. Whether of riders in pursuit, he could not say. Plenty of others traveled these roads. Couriers, runaways, men of uniformed war. Militia and home guard, too. Enemies all for a boy of his position and exploits.

He let the horse drink at a rock-strewn stream and drank

some himself and set off again. In daylight he left the main road and traveled parallel, rounding into and out of sight of its commerce, his path much slowed over the closed ground. When darkness fell, he returned to the road.

Day and night he rode to see her. His Ava. Dusk of the third day he rode out onto a ridge and saw farmhouses of the sort he sought, houses like hers in the valley bottoms. Swaddling them were forests richer with autumn than the forests out of which he rode, more abrupt spurts of red and yellow against the green. Whether by time or altitude, he could not say, the land of his past mainly evergreen, few colors to mark the seasons. His heart swelled upon the vista below him until he saw the black kink of river that lay in his path, no bridge in sight.

He rode down the ridges until he reached the riverbank, where the road attenuated into a long white spear under the shallows and disappeared. A wooden barge sat beached on the bank, a ferryman dozing on the afterdeck.

The boy hauled the horse to a stop alongside and kicked the hull.

“Hey there.”

The ferryman opened one eye beneath the shadow of his cap. He eyed the boy and the horse he rode and the hat he wore.

“Ten bits to cross,” he said. “No bartering ’less you got something to drink.”

The boy looked out at the flat river, the black surface vented here and there with hidden currents. Then he looked behind him at the road. Then back again to the river, deep as the nightmares that plagued him. The shipwreck.

“Two bits,” said the man again.

“Where’s the nearest bridge?” the boy asked him.

“Bridge? Two bits is cheap, son. Specially for a man with a horse like that one. Course, if you got you a drop of whiskey—”

“I need a bridge, sir. No ferries.”

The man looked hurt.

“Well, if you’re extra partial to bridges, the nearest is ten miles yonder. Them sons a bitches blown her last month. Dynamite. But she’s still operable, least tolerably. Don’t you go telling nobody, though. That’s in confidence.”

He winked.

The boy looked upriver in the direction indicated. Then he tipped his cavalryman’s hat at the ferryman.

“I’m much obliged, sir.”

As he hauled the horse down to the soft flats of the riverbank, the boy knew his pursuers would learn all they needed to know from this man. They would know what condition he was in, what condition his horse. They would know what direction he was headed, how much ground they could gain on him by taking the ferry. And, most of all, they would know he was not a boy without fear.

He stopped the horse a ways down the bank and looked back over his shoulder at the dozing ferryman. The boy knew how he could remove all of that knowledge from the man’s head. All that might betray him. And he could prove to them what kind of a man he was. A kind better left alone. His fingers touched the butt of the Colt. A moment later he gripped great fistfuls of the horse’s mane and shot away toward the bridge.

He began to catch shapes quivering upon ridges he’d crossed, dust rising from paths he’d taken just hours before. They were gaining. He stopped for nothing, and still they gained.

They overtook him two days later in the valley of the

farmhouse. It was the Colonel and two of his fastest riders, the Colonel riding hatless on a big blood bay, the other two flanking him. The trio broke from the trees diagonal to the boy in a flying wedge, the Colonel leading with his horse pistol drawn, the others with Spencer repeaters already shouldered like buffalo hunters of the plains. It was just the three of them, riding light for speed, and it was plenty.

They came on not firing at first to save the horse he rode. They headed him off right before the porch of the house. He called out to her over them, and they smiled from behind the long barrels of their weapons, pointing him down. Ava appeared in the window of the room where he had first and last seen her, where she had perhaps sewn the coat he wore with those white and slender fingers that spread now flat upon the windowpane like a prisoner's.

"Off the horse," said the Colonel.

He had his horse turned broadside to the porch steps, the front door.

"Didn't hear you," said the boy, cocking his ear toward him.

A blow landed across his back and he fell forward. His hands streaked across the sweat-slick musculature of the horse, helpless. It was too lean to grip. Too hard. He landed shoulder-first in the yard and his wind left him, thumped out of his lungs. He rolled onto his back and looked bleary-eyed at the men and horses, their shapes warped and wavering as those seen from below the surface of a well. He could not get enough air.

The Colonel shucked his near foot from the stirrup and brought his other leg over the pommel and dropped from his horse without ever turning his back. The gaunt hollows of his face, his cheeks, looked down into the boy's. The upturned points of his mustache sat upon his face like a black smile. He

reached out of sight and his hand came back, placing the slouch hat on his head, pulling the brim into place.

“I give a boy a chance, and look what it gets me. All for a goddamn woman.”

“Her name is Ava,” said the boy. “I saved her.”

The Colonel pulled him off the ground by the coat.

“But can you save yourself?”

The boy heard the patchwork of colors strain against the stitches that bound them, begin to tear faintly but not to give.

“I saved her,” he said.

The butt of the horse pistol came hard across his temple, his jaw, his nose. Bone and cartilage succumbing to harder matter. The Colonel dropped him, broken, to the ground.

“Get her, then,” he said. “Go in and get her.”

Faintly the boy saw a hand against the sky, a finger pointed heavenward. Wayward from the house, the window. The boy could not see if the Colonel was wearing gloves or if his hand was just that black with gunpowder and soot.

“Go get her.”

The corners of the boy’s vision were darkening. He looked up at the Colonel, tall above him, his chest pushed out. Pleased. He was standing that way when his heart exploded from his chest. Only after seeing it did the boy hear the shot. More followed in quick succession, long plumes of smoke bursting from the trees, the Colonel’s two riders shot from their mounts. One of the horses screamed, struck too, the others thundering in flight. Their hooves shook the ground. Then silence.

Soon he found other men around him, strangers, these in uniform. Gray or blue, he could not tell. They asked him who he fought for and what company and what name. Their breath was rancid, their words quick. He could not answer them.

They asked him how he came by such a horse and was it not stolen. They asked him whether he was a deserter or a bounty jumper or a coward or a foreigner, and he could not tell them. They told him the men they'd just killed had died trying to kill him, and they could only honor the dead by carrying out their final wishes.

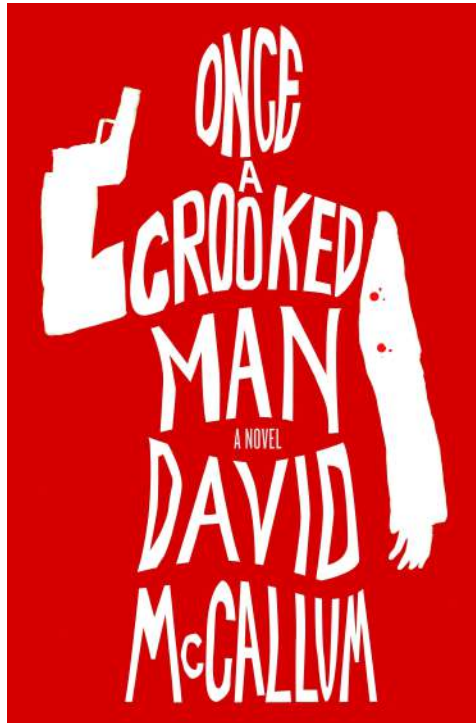
They said they did not want to waste another bullet.

They rode him up onto the ridge where he'd first looked down upon this valley, this state. They slung a rope over a heavy limb and sat him on the horse he'd stolen and slid the noose over his bare neck. There were three of them. He did not fight.

Below him the forests glimmered firelike in the last rays of sun, colors as brightly variegated as the coat he wore. He could hardly swallow for the snugness of the rope. He looked down at his Ava, a white cutout in the black upper window, and he was sorry she would remember him this way. He looked down upon that whole country so pretty in the fall, in the season of blood and gold, and he was no longer a stranger unto the land.

A man stepped forward to bind his hands. He was wearing the Colonel's slouch hat slanted rakishly over his brow like some kind of joke. Another had a repeating rifle propped over his shoulder. The third was scratching his groin, smiling, his long sharpshooting rifle cradled across his chest. The boy put his hand into his coat. Slowly, to provoke no alarm. They watched him. He pulled the pistol butt-first from where it hung hidden in the folds and offered the bone-white grip of it to his captors, one finger on the trigger guard.

"She's a firecracker," he warned, his smile broken in the gathering dusk.



on-sale 1/12/16

Publicity Contact: Sara.Melnyk@stmartins.com

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A deliciously quirky debut crime novel from David McCallum, the beloved actor know for his portrayal of Ilya Kuryakin on The Man From U.N.C.L.E. and Dr. Donald "Ducky" Mallard on NCIS.

Crime pays. And pays well.

Sal, Max and Enzo Bruschetti have proved this over a lifetime of nefarious activity that they have kept hidden from law enforcement. Nowhere in any file, on any computer is there a record of anything illegal from which they have profited. But Max has a problem. His body is getting old and his doctor has told him to take it easy. Max has decided that the time has come for the family to retire.

But when young actor Harry Murphy overhears the Bruschetti brothers planning changes to their organization, including the murder of a man in London who knows too much, the Bruschetti's plans begin to unravel.

After Harry makes the well-intentioned if egregious mistake of trying to warn the Bruchetti's intended victim he finds himself alone in a foreign country, on the wrong side of the law, with a suitcase full of cash and a dangerous man on his trail. And while his good looks, charm and cheerful persistence may prove assets in the turbulent events that follow, none of Harry's past roles have prepared him for what happens next.

DAVID MCCALLUM is a Scottish-born actor and musician. He is best known for his television roles as Russian secret agent Ilya Kuryakin on The Man from U.N.C.L.E., interdimensional time-agent Steel on Sapphire & Steel, and his current role as medical examiner Dr. Donald "Ducky" Mallard on NCIS

The beer in Harry's hand grew warm as the implications of what he was doing percolated down through his head. This wasn't a script for a movie. It was fact, not fiction. An actual Colonel Villiers lived in London. Someone was going to try to knock him off. Once he was a corpse on the ground no one would come along and help him up. He'd be dead meat. And so would Harry if he stuck his nose in. Real murderers don't leave clues. The person who killed them both would never be caught. Harry would suffer an anonymous death in a foreign country. Only a fool would get himself involved.

Then his cellphone rang in the living room. Once again it was Richie.

"Hello there, sport," he said cheerily. "Sorry about the play, but we just got some good news. You have a booking at Nutmeg at 9 AM tomorrow for Mueller's Mayonnaise."

"Wow! That's great," exclaimed Harry.

"They loved your reading. When you get there, ask for BJ." And he hung up. Richie was a man of few words.

It was a sign! The recording fee would cover the flight and hotel and the residual payments would cover any additional expenses. He would drop by the Mews and knock on the door. If trouble arose he could always improvise. Harry had played dozens of shady characters and with so much firsthand experience he would know exactly what to say and do. Once he had done his duty he would relax for a while. Go sightseeing. Visit a few of his favorite restaurants. Take in a couple of shows.

Maybe he would pop over to Paris for a naughty weekend. Or Copenhagen. Copenhagen was naughtier. And if the whole thing turned out to be a hoax, he would simply have enjoyed a memorable vacation and would be able to come home with a whole new perspective on life.

Aware that time was of the essence he went on line and found several last-minute low-fare options to Heathrow. He chose a flight out of Kennedy on American Airlines.

The next morning the commercial turned out to be an animated cartoon. Harry's enthusiastic reading of "Mueller's Mayo. It's in the bag!" had thrilled the client as it was perfect for the talking sandwich that leaped in and out of a kid's lunchbox. Soon after noon everyone had convinced themselves they had the definitive reading of the cute little voice.

Harry left extra time for the taxi ride to Kennedy Airport in effort to avoid the rush-hour exodus from the city. As always, the Van Wyck was a parking lot. But check-in and security went relatively smoothly and he was able to get himself a bite to eat before it was time to board. At the gate he was delighted to find that due to overbooking he had been upgraded. This was clearly a sign that he had made the right decision to go and warn Colonel Villiers.

The seat in Business Class had a series of levers that would angle the head, body and feet to any desired position. A touch-screen television and Bose headphones were provided for the inflight entertainment. As Harry sipped from the little plastic glass of champagne, he amused himself by reading the safety pamphlet telling what he should do if this massive plane came down unexpectedly in the Atlantic.

“Good evening,” said a voice, soft and low.

Harry looked up.

Settling into the seat next to him was a woman with deep violet eyes. Elizabeth Taylor eyes. She wore a smart suit, a Hermes scarf and the current issue of Vanity Fair poked out from her carry-on.

“Good evening,” he said, marveling at his good fortune.

Harry took a moment to check out the other passengers in the cabin. Could one of them be on his way to eliminate the Colonel? And need a hired killer necessarily be a male? There had been several movies in the last few years with diabolical women assassins. Would she, or he, be traveling in Business? The more successful could certainly afford the comforts of First but Economy would be the most anonymous. Then he reminded himself that what he was doing was not fiction but reality. He should stick to facts.

Before take-off, seat-belts were fastened, the empty glasses were collected and everyone was made aware of the necessary safety instructions. The cabin gave a slight shudder and right on schedule, the big jet was pushed back from the gate and slowly trundled over the bumpy concrete like an elephant. But as the wheels left the runway the great jet flew into the air like an eagle.

About twenty minutes later the Captain’s voice over the intercom announced they had reached their cruising altitude. His companion pushed the scarf from her head and said, “Excuse me.”

“Of course” he replied.

“Do you know what time we land at Heathrow?” She had an odd accent that Harry couldn’t place.

“About nine-thirty,” he answered.

She smiled her thanks revealing teeth that were toothpaste commercial material. She stretched out her hand. “Marisa Vargas.” Her hand was strong and cool.

“Harry Murphy.”

The flight attendant appeared with tablecloths and they both pulled out their trays.

“Are you traveling on business?” she asked, dropping the magazine at her feet.

Harry took an instant to ponder the question. The last thing he wanted to talk about was show business. He was sipping champagne next to a drop-dead woman en route to Europe. It was unlikely they would ever meet again. Here was an opportunity for a little fabrication. What could he be? Then he remembered, like the Blues Brothers, he was on a 'mission from God'.

"I'm in law enforcement," he said confidentially.

"Really?" The dusky way she replied gave him goose bumps. "Interpol?"

"Well not exactly," he said and added, "I'm with an agency that deals with a select number of cases that are out of the normal areas of police investigative work."

"Really?" She was impressed. "Drugs?"

"Computer crime mostly."

Harry was on a roll.

"The criminal mind has become smart and sophisticated. It's tough to catch them these days."

"Is what you do dangerous?" she asked.

He gave a slight shrug and smoothed out his table cloth. "It's a living."

As he had waited to board the flight Harry had passed the time reading an article in *The Week* describing the deplorable foreign policy decisions of the current administration. All through dinner he talked fluidly about his work as an undercover operative, using plots and dialog from scripts he'd done in the past. Two more glasses of champagne and two of Sangiovese oiled his willing tongue. Marisa was a good listener. The creative fiction only ended when the overhead lights were darkened for the movie. The efforts of the last two days and the flickering images on the screen combined to lull Harry into a deep sleep.

"Mister Murphy."

He opened his eyes to see a tray with a glass of orange juice. A polyester blanket had been draped over him in the night and he felt hot and clammy. First light streamed in through the uncovered windows. The seat across from him was empty. "You were dead to the world," the flight attendant said smiling. "We'll be serving our continental breakfast in a just a moment."

Harry drained the glass in one gulp. His companion reappeared carrying a small leather case. Her hair was held back with a gold clip. Harry grabbed the complimentary kit from the seat pocket and lurched to the toilet. Inside, he slid the bolt to Occupied and the lights blinked on. Unzipping his fly, he relieved the considerable pressure on his bladder and pushed the little lever. A swirl of blue water flushed the toilet with a loud thud. When he returned to his seat Marisa was now wearing the Bose noise-canceling headphones and reading *Vanity Fair*.

The captain throttled back as he began the descent into Heathrow. The landing was smooth and they soon pulled up at the ramp.

Once off the big jet Harry walked as fast as he could through the tunnels in the terminal as he knew from past experience that seconds could make a difference in the time he would have to wait in the immigration hall. Unfortunately, a Dreamliner had disgorged hoards of passengers who not only didn't speak English, but also carried sheaves of papers that needed careful checking and loud stamping. Harry shuffled along in the line.

It took him another ten minutes to find his suitcases at Carousel 4 in the baggage claim. For some unexplained reason they had been taken off the conveyor belt and placed on the floor with luggage from a flight from Miami. The smaller of his two bags had sprung open to reveal his freshly laundered shirts and underwear. He shoved everything back in, closed it up and wheeled his trolley under the octagonal green sign marked: NOTHING TO DECLARE.

A customs official motioned him to stop and indicated he should place his bags on the counter.

“Had an accident, have you?” he said and pointed at the broken zip.

Harry shook his head. “The catch is broken.”

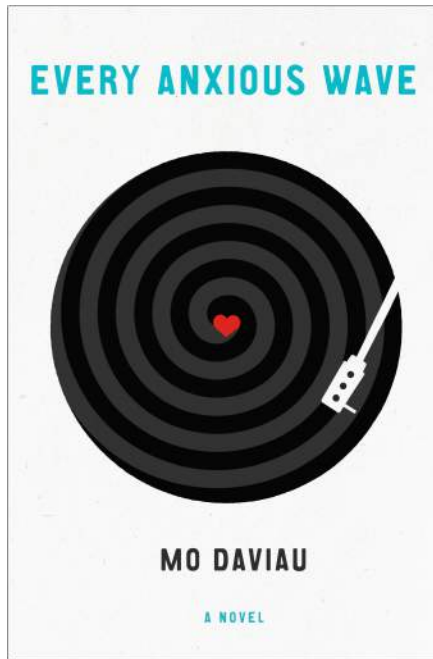
“Open it.”

Harry unzipped the lid and lifted it back.

“On business are you, sir?”

All his life, Harry's parents had lectured him on the need for conformity. In matters of paying taxes, obeying the law and passing through Customs, he was taught to respect authority. Antisocial behavior was the swift route to eternal damnation. The cells of Harry's brain were filled with residual religious guilt. Fear of consequences kept his feet firmly on the straight and narrow.

Nevertheless he thought it prudent to avoid the real reason for his trip. “On vacation,” he answered casually.



on-sale 2/2/16

Publicity Contact: Dori.Weintraub@stmartins.com

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Good guy Karl Bender is a thirty-something bar owner whose life lacks love and meaning. When he stumbles upon a time-travelling worm hole in his closet, Karl and his best friend Wayne develop a side business selling access to people who want to travel back in time to listen to their favorite bands. It's a pretty ingenious plan, until Karl, intending to send Wayne to 1980, transports him back to 980 instead. Though Wayne sends texts extolling the quality of life in tenth century "Mannahatta," Karl is distraught that he can't bring his friend back.

Enter brilliant, prickly, overweight astrophysicist, Lena Geduldig. Karl and Lena's connection is immediate. While they work on getting Wayne back, Karl and Lena fall in love -- with time travel, and each other. Unable to resist meddling with the past, Karl and Lena bounce around time. When Lena ultimately prevents her own long-ago rape, she alters the course of her life and threatens her future with Karl.

A high-spirited and engaging novel, *Every Anxious Wave* plays ball with the big questions of where we would go and who we would become if we could rewrite our pasts, as well as how to hold on to love across time.

MO DAVIAU was born in Fresno, California and proclaimed her life goal of publishing a novel at the age of eight. Mo is also a solo performer, having performed at storytelling shows such as *Bedpost Confessions* and *The Soundtrack Series*. She is a graduate of Smith College and the Helen Zell Writers' Program at the University of Michigan where *Every Anxious Wave* won a Hopwood Award. Mo lives in Portland, Oregon. *Every Anxious Wave* is her first novel.

I

ABOUT A YEAR before the time traveling began, before I lost Wayne and found Lena, Wayne DeMint stumbled into my bar for the first time. He figured out I was the guitarist from the Axis and affixed his khaki-clad keister to my barstool. Night after night, beer after beer, he shared with me and whoever else showed up the content of his dreams: crying kittens, *bukkake*, broken-toothed pirates with bloody bayonets, his dead mother chopped into bits. When closing time came he always wanted to stay, like a kid who didn't want to turn off the TV and go to bed. "I'll mop!" he'd offer, so most nights I sat up with Wayne as he sloshed mop water across my wooden floor. We'd crank up the jukebox and talk about bands, true love, failure, and the past. Mostly the past.

A bar is not a mental health facility, but I never had a dog growing up, and so I listened to Wayne. Wholesome, Midwestern

Wayne, computer scientist, he of the kindest smile and most generous bar tips.

Wayne and I shared that common affliction plaguing single men with limited prospects and self-destructive tendencies: we regarded our pasts with such love and loss that every day forward was a butter knife to the gut. Our twenties had been full of rock music and courage. The future made us older, but our wisdom was dubious. Wayne and I avoided the pain of tomorrow with alcohol and old rock bands. Pavement on the jukebox, the heavenly reddish glow of neon signs, and sentences that started with “Remember when . . .”

THE TIME TRAVEL business had started by accident.

One stupid afternoon a month ago, I couldn't find one of the prized army boots that I had bought from an army-navy surplus store in Boston for sixteen dollars in 1991, when I was twenty-one. The red laces that I'd put in them, due to vague anarchist leanings, were still intact, and even though time had worn away all the tread, those boots were both comfortable and comforting. They represented the very best parts of my life, and having one go missing was more than I could bear on a Sunday afternoon fifteen minutes before I needed to open my bar. Crawling around on the floor of my closet, pushing aside piles of dirty clothes and old magazines, I found myself falling feetfirst through a hole in the floor. Falling and cold. I thought it was from mixing bourbon with cold medicine, but then I landed with a thud on a familiar wooden floor. I had landed at the Empty Bottle, a rock club near my bar. The stack of *Chicago Readers* by the door bore a cover from months earlier. A look out the window revealed barren trees and cars dusted in snow.

When the band took the stage, I realized that I'd been at this show three months ago, in February. A pack of talentless teenag-

ers who played covers of Liz Phair songs like they meant nothing began to tune their guitars, looking for all the world like the smug bastards my friends and I were in the early 1990s.

The real kicker of this experience, the one that makes me clench my ass cheeks together and cry for my mother, happened when I saw myself leaning against the bar, tipping a can of PBR toward my mouth, glaring at the band with eyes of white-hot contempt. The blood rushed to my face. For the first time in my life, I could really see myself. All of myself. I saw what a bitter, pathetic sad-sack Karl Bender had become. Even at the ripe old age of forty I still hadn't mastered the art of shaving; I had whisker skid marks on my face like a teenager. Had Meredith, the woman I was attached to for most of my twenties, known what I would turn into when she dumped me like a bag of trash back in '96? I took the hardest look I could: the stained teeth, the gut, the whole ugly package. I'm prone to self-loathing, but I had never hated myself with more fire and sorrow than I did standing there at the Empty Bottle. I longed to yell at Past Karl's face and break my own jaw. We deserved it.

"Hey, Karl," I said. "Karl? Yo, Bender, what's up?"

Nothing.

I tapped myself on the shoulder. The man before me, myself, Past Karl, did not respond.

I tried to punch my other in the stomach but I felt nothing. Not on my hand or my belly. I tried again. No sensation, no reaction. When I was a child, I wanted to walk into the television. This is what the past looked and felt like. I could take in the colors, smell the faint sweetness of whiskey and cigarettes, and watch as music fans younger and better looking than me took up floor space with the confidence of kings. I could not, however, kick my own ass.

Nor could I take those boots, which I had so loved and now lost, from my old self's feet.

You can't hold onto the past, asshole, I thought as I pressed the

heels of my hands to my eyes because I didn't want to be the bastard crying during a shitty band.

The ring of my cell phone pulled me back to the present. I was slurped back to the closet in my bedroom, as if my body were an ice cube sucked through a straw. I was prone on the wooden floor, my face in a cluster of dust bunnies. My head throbbed and I was shivering cold, even though it was warm and sunny and my apartment didn't have air-conditioning and I'd been too lazy to buy a fan.

I told Wayne. He was the only person in my life that I could trust with information regarding the viability of time travel. "You're chosen!" he exclaimed, his blue eyes sparkling so bright over the dark comfort of my bar that my first instinct was to kick him out, lest he ruin what I'd spent years cultivating: a poorly lit drinking hole for the remorseful, aging, and alone.

He went home to his fifteen computers and wrote the software program, an astonishing time-bending navigational system that harnesses the directional pulls of the wormhole and allows you to choose when and where you'd like to land. Two laptops, three generators, and a series of wires now occupy the desk next to my closet. On the laptop screen there is a Google map with a grid over it. You type in the coordinates of where you want to go, physically. A black binder full of laminated sheets, modeled after the ones found in our nation's finer karaoke bars, features a convenient list of bands, venues, and locations that you can choose from. (The binder was my nonscientific music geek contribution to the business. Savvy travelers/music fans will note a heavy bias toward certain indie-oriented clubs, such as my beloved T.T.'s in Cambridge or Cat's Cradle in Carrboro, North Carolina.) If you insist, you can do your own research into the performance history of your favorite band and we'll custom calibrate the controls just for you.

If pressed to explain his scientific understanding of our portal to the past, Wayne would describe Carl Sagan's theory of the

wormhole: that it is totally possible to travel from point A to point B on an unseen plane C. “Technically that only works for going into the future, though,” Wayne would say. On the fact that point A happened to be the bedroom closet in my apartment on the top floor of a narrow brick building in Wicker Park, Chicago, which also housed a subpar Chinese takeout place called Ming’s Panda, Wayne said, “Well, Karl, you just wanted it bad enough.” That’s Wayne’s other theory: the theory of desire. Through my own deep desire, and because of that nasty word *regret*, the universe chose me to be the custodian of a portal to the past.

The number one house rule: the wormhole was only to be used to attend rock concerts of the past. It kept the experience pure and free from the temptation to try to game yourself a better life. Besides, why would we need music if our lives were exactly as we wanted them to be?

Other house rules: no bringing back souvenirs. Do not talk to anyone in the past. Don’t touch anything. Do not drink or take drugs. No photographs. No audio recording. No staying in the past longer than the length of the show. No wandering out of the music venue. I know you want to see the old cars and the out-of-style clothes and the date on the cover of the newspaper in the newspaper box and the newspaper box itself, but *no*.

House rules.

I told three old music friends about the portal, and instructed them to keep it on the down-low. I didn’t want just anyone off the street coming over to experience this miracle. My indie rock ethics, left over from the nineties, dictated that we keep things small and special. My band, the Axis, was part of an indie scene that attracted clean, artistic children who got good grades, not guys who looked like me—a bulldog-faced pugilist with tattoo sleeves and a broken, badly reset nose. My shoulders were too broad to look good in a cardigan (Axis fans always mistook me for the

bouncer), but the twee-kitty cuteness and clubhouse-guarding business model had seeped into my subconscious, so the wormhole was kept quiet and exclusive, the way the Axis's former indie label, Frederica Records, once was.

I warned my patrons that, while in the tunnel, your body U-turns onto the unseen plane—a jolt akin to the spasms of a wooden roller coaster. Most passengers feel like they're going to toss their cookies.

Then you land, with a thud. It hurts. But not for long.

AT LEAST THIRTY interested friends of friends called me or came by the bar to ask a series of questions that always began with “This is a joke right?” and ended with “If you're fucking with me, I will end you.” Patrons of my wormhole paid me hundreds, sometimes thousands of dollars to take a trip down memory lane. I explained to them how to come back to the present—you typed a code into your cell phone, which reversed the wormhole's directional pull and slurped you back home. Wayne printed up little cards with the return instructions, just to be safe.

Ahoy, time adventurer!

When the show is over, YOU MUST COME HOME!!!

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Open the Web app.
2. Select RETURN.
3. The DATE, TIME, and LOCATION of your return should automatically appear (example: 06/01/2010 19:30 CDT WESTERN AND MILWAUKEE, CHICAGO IL USA)*
4. Press the red button! ZOOM! You'll be home in no time!

***Do not attempt to alter your return coordinates! Attempts to tamper with the program will result in a \$1,000 fine and a lifetime ban!.**

All I had to do was ask, “If you could go back in time and see any band play, what would you choose?” It’s a great conversation starter, decent-enough bar banter, something a man more ambitious than me might keep in his pocket for parties full of beautiful strangers. (Especially if asked in such a way as to build a bridge between the lonely islands of age and regret.)

They came back cold and shaken. I gave them what they wanted but thought they couldn’t have. Most hugged me. A few kned me in the groin; a few more threatened to. All of them, to a person, have come back with cheeks wet with tears. When I return from the past, I sit alone with a notebook and write out the lyrics to songs I’d just heard performed. Song lyrics are a particular type of poetry, laying bare your bones and helping you feel something other than sorrow and failure. Song lyrics reminded me that I may be so lucky as to fall in love again someday. Song lyrics are scripture for guys like me and Wayne.

What I don’t tell my time travel customers is that the experience is rather short. Time goes by more quickly in the past. An hour is a minute. A minute is a microsecond. You might see the whole show, you might not, but it will be over before the first tear you shed reaches your chin. The experience is only slightly more soul-shaking than watching concert footage on YouTube. The music is strangely softer—at an eardrum-ripping Megadeth show I strained to hear anything besides the bass. Traveling is cold. Damn cold. And you can’t bring back souvenirs.

The sorrow you feel when you come back sits deep in your gut. It presses against your head and your heart. Readjusting to the reality of the present hurts like hell; it’s a dull, shameful ache that lingers. The world feels different. Your eyes change. Your heart changes. Those same dull walls you’ve been staring at in the present grow sinister in their sameness. You are left with the horror of

yourself. I'm not the only one who has sobbed like a child upon reentry.

I can't help you with that.

ROCK SHOWS I have traveled back in time to see:

Galaxie 500, 1990, Boston

Unrest, 1993, Arlington, VA

Stereolab, 1998, Chicago

Altamont (with too much time spent lingering over an antique Pepsi bottle lying in the dirt next to a heap of wriggling blankets)

The Traveling Wilburys, NYC, 1990

The Cure, 1989, stadium show in New Jersey

Elvis Costello, 1991, NYC (I've been to this one three times)

Miaow/Durutti Column, the Hacienda, Manchester

The Magnetic Fields, first 69 Love Songs show, Knitting Factory, 1999

Shows that Wayne has traveled back in time to see:

The Rat Pack, live at the Sands, 1963

They Might Be Giants in a NYC basement, 1986

The first Sex Pistols show, 1977 (as seen in the film *24 Hour Party People*)

Bruce Springsteen at the Stone Pony, 1975

Uncle Dumpster (Wayne's high school garage band), Sheboygan, Wisconsin, 1991

Some street musician in Madison that Wayne remembered from his college days, 1995

Rock shows that friends/customers seem to like that make me judge them harshly—like, we have access to time travel and you want to see *what?*:

Woodstock (American rock history's most polished turd)
The Rolling Stones' Steel Wheels Tour
Woodstock 1994
The Axis

Popular selections that friends/customers seem to like, whose appeal I completely get:

Beat Happening and Black Flag in Olympia, Washington, 1984
The Smiths, London, 1985
Frank Zappa Halloween show, 1977
The *Johnny Cash Show*, Johnny performing with Glen Campbell
(Wichita Lineman), 1969
The Last Waltz, San Francisco, 1976
Rolling Stones in the UK, 1967–69
REM in Athens, 1980–83

I'm a quiet guy. I live in three places: my bar, my apartment, and the cheap Mediterranean place on the corner that keeps me well fed with my daily portion of hummus and chicken shawarma. But Wayne had a car, thousands in the bank, and a hole in his heart, so he did crazy stuff like trading his truck's spare tire for a pet scorpion in the parking lot of a Wisconsin casino, because maybe the scorpion would love him, and he knew that the tire wouldn't. I told him that no part of a scorpion's brain was capable of loving anything, much less the human with the sweaty hand that was holding him nine billion scorpion-feet off the ground, but that he was probably right about the tire. Wayne told me I had no right to speak for tires *or* scorpions.

Wayne recounted to me what he had seen on his trips: the music, the air white and heavy with cigarette smoke, the terrible ways men once wore baseball caps, and the way fluorescent T-shirt paint was abused by our generation once upon a time. Holding court while the jukebox screeched some old Melvins track I'd put in there to make sure only people just like me came into my bar, Wayne melted into Little Boy Wayne, pliant and eager to do another tequila shot and repeat back to me and everyone at the bar his special list of things that made him happy: Lemon bars. Driving to Florida in his pickup truck. Cleaning dirt out from under his nails. Sunflower seeds. Basset hounds. Checking tire pressure. By closing time, Wayne returned to some level of normalcy, but the next night it was the same emotional circus.

I'm not saying I plumbed the depths of his psyche, nor was this the limit of our interactions. I merely allowed myself to act as his unlicensed therapist, an occupational hazard. But we were also buddies. After I told him he wasn't allowed to mop anymore, Wayne would draw monsters in his notebook as I tried to woo the honeys under the reddish neon light of the Pabst sign, with my sparkling wit and straight teeth. I had gotten some cash from an out-of-court settlement of a rights dispute with my band's old manager, who had swindled us. What did I do with that money? I got braces at the age of thirty-four. Wayne liked to leap across the bar to point this out to women. He said it made me seem responsible.

OUR FREQUENT TIME-TRAVELING to rock shows only hastened Wayne's descent into madness. While I was in my office negotiating an online pint glass order, I got a call from Wayne. Wayne's normal telephone greeting makes a bubbly sales manager from the local

Chevy dealer sound sedate, so it didn't immediately register that the slurring, babbling guy on the other end of the call was my friend. I invited him over to my apartment. He clearly needed to talk. Wayne arrived wearing his puffy blue winter coat, even though it was May; he had in his trembling hand a Mad Dog in a paper sack. Apparently the management at his job had threatened him with a layoff.

Wayne threw down his backpack and pushed the mountain of unfolded laundry from my threadbare couch onto the floor so he could lie down. He told me that for the past ten nights he had dreamed that the lower half of his body had been replaced with a circular saw, and that everyone he tried to touch he cut to bits. He talked about what a failure he was, how he was thirty-six and had never really been in love, how all he did was work, give his whole life to a company that treated him like crap, and all for what? A paycheck? Security? He was the most insecure guy he knew.

"I'm a tool, Karl."

"Why are you wearing your coat? Take that off." His coat was zipped up to his chin like a kindergartener about to go out and play in the snow. "It's summer."

"Don't act like I don't know what season it is, Karl."

"What do you want, man? Why the tears? Things are good right now. I sent six people to Woodstock, and I charged them a grand each."

Wayne covered his face with his hands and turned away. "What do you know? You own a cool bar. People actually talk to you. You were in the Axis."

I shook my head. "Please stop talking like that. I'm a has-been from a band that twelve people liked in 1999."

Wayne sat up and uncovered his face as if he'd had an instant revelation. "I've been thinking about my soul. Not in a Christian sense but in a . . . in a soul sense. Where it is and what have I been

doing to use it. My soul, you know—meaning that, like, inner essence of goodness and charity. Or whatever.”

“Sounds like you’re battling your demons. Totally normal.”

Wayne wiped his hand across his nose. “I’m weird.”

I was inclined to agree. Everyone is weird in their own way. Wayne wore his winter coat in the summer: I liked to eat spoonfuls of mayonnaise sprinkled with Lawry’s Seasoned Salt while standing naked inside my refrigerator door. The trick was not to scare others. “Wayne, take off that coat. It’s making me nervous.”

Wayne pulled his collar up higher around his head so that only his eyes showed. He had an expression of one possessed. I prayed he didn’t have a gun on him. Part of me wanted to kick his ass out for bringing me down, but I owed him for all the hard work he’d done on the wormhole. I held his pale hand with the perfectly square fingernails.

“I want to be a superhero,” he squeaked.

“Okay. Put on your cape and fly.”

Wayne yanked back his hand. “Are you making fun of me?”

“No. Not at all. I really meant put on your cape and fly. Go live your dreams. You deserve great happiness, buddy, and I don’t want to see you mopey anymore.” I sounded like my mother, who died when I was twenty-three. She was the master of pep talks. I couldn’t fight the longing I felt for her every time I tried to talk Wayne down off his proverbial ledge.

“Go live my dreams?”

“Let those corporate dicks lay you off, Wayne. Walk away. We’ve got plenty of money coming in from the wormhole.”

“I don’t want to do that, Karl,” he said, in a more measured voice.

“Why not?”

“I’ll just get another job after that, and everything will be the same. Same corporate slavery. Same unremarkable future. Except

the only thing that will be different is that I can go back in time and catch that Echo and the Bunnymen show I missed when I was fifteen because Echo never played Sheboygan.”

“Not if you change it. Not if you make a choice to change it, Wayne.”

“Not if I change it. Not if I change it.” Wayne sat up, dug his knuckles into his eyes, and put his glasses back on. “I’ve been thinking. I want to try something.” Wayne hopped off the couch and pushed past me into my bedroom, over the piles of laundry I’d sorted into darks and lights but had so far avoided dragging down to the basement. “I want to change something. I want to change a lot of things, but this one thing in particular, Karl. I believe the time has come to use the wormhole for heroic purposes.”

I knew I wasn’t going to like it.

He looked up at me. “December 8, 1980. Central Park West. I’m going.”

“John Lennon?”

Wayne nodded his head up and down. “I’m going to be a real superhero.”

“You can’t change the past,” I repeated for the fifty millionth time. My damn mantra. “You can’t. You physically cannot change the past.”

Wayne hunched over my desk, stabbing at the keyboard with his index fingers. I didn’t exactly know what he was capable of with the program he had written. He could change the system entirely and I wouldn’t know what he’d done or how to fix it. “What if I just tried?”

“No way, man. No one is allowed to be a time travel vigilante on my watch,” I said, though I didn’t think he was listening. Wayne had that computer guy gift of hyperfocus, of blocking out the rest of the world without care or apology. I was his friend, his bartender, the guy who held his hand and said nice things to him when he

needed to hear them, but the look of determination that had colonized his sweet, boyish face said all I needed to know about how much he was going to take to heart the wisdom of Karl Bender.

"I can do it. I can do something to delay Chapman. Or kill him. Or at least do something. Something to keep him away from John. I can try, can't I?" Wayne wore a maniacal grin and had stopped making eye contact with me.

"You can't take a bullet for John Lennon. Or really mess with Chapman. The past is read-only. You know that."

"I can get around that."

"What?"

"I made out with a girl at the REM show. In 1981. Gosh, she'd be in her fifties now." He composed himself and said, "You can touch people. Talk to them. Kick over a trash can. You just have to get past the first layer."

"No you can't!" I yelled. "Or I can't. How is it that you can touch people in the past and I can't?"

"The exit point is in that other dimension where you can't interact. You just have to penetrate that layer. I thought you wanted the layer so that not having a ticket to the show would be a nonissue."

"How do I do it then? Touch things?"

"I'll tell you when I get back. Look, my soul calls me to correct past wrongs. I'm starting with Lennon. His murder was hugely devastating to a lot of people. At least if I succeed, eighties music won't be half as awful."

"What's a layer, Wayne?" Wayne stared down at his shoes, his mouth shut in defiance. "Wayne?" He remained silent. "Wayne, answer me."

Wayne shook his head. "Forget I said anything."

"No!" I shouted. "What's a layer?"

He shot me a sulky look and then, as if he were preparing to

travel, walked back out to the living room and picked up his backpack and put his arms through the straps. I felt the crux of our relationship—Wayne’s needing me—rip away like a Velcro shoe fastener. “Fuck you, Bender.”

I walked over to Wayne, who flinched when I got up close. “Oh, stop it. I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Maybe you are,” he said.

“Wayne, seriously, dude. Why John Lennon? What’s that going to solve?”

“Lennon was a great peacemaker. He’s, like, he’s . . . he’s the one guy who really could, you know . . . bring the happiness and love out of our hearts. And he had a great creative partnership with the woman he loved. He gave a lot to his fans. To the world.”

I wanted to pat his head in a maternal fashion, but I also wanted to pound his ass and tell him to knock it off. I’d never had a friend like Wayne before, one who was kind and sweet and super smart and who I could trust completely, but who was sometimes the thirty-six-year-old equivalent of a cranky toddler.

“That’s my wormhole too, damn it. Just because it’s in your apartment doesn’t mean it’s not mine.” Wayne’s hands shook, even though they were balled into fists, but his eyes were in some crazy hyperfocus mode. If I tried to talk him out of it, he would override me. Not with physical strength, but with intent. I guess he just wanted it bad enough.

A cluster of colored wires sat anchored to the floor with duct tape, coming out of floorboards into the two laptops that sat perched on my old wooden desk. He rolled off the bed and crawled on his hands and knees to my closet and grabbed a fistful of those wires and looked me straight in the eye. “I’m going to 1980. I’m going and you’re sending me, or I pull these wires out and smash these computers and then I go home and smash my head against the wall. I mean it.”

I made a move toward him.

“Don’t, Karl.” He tugged on his handful of wires. “I’m getting my way.”

“How about, instead of messing with the damn wormhole, you rededicate your life to the spreading of peace and love, or make an album of peace songs, or whatever else John Lennon would have done.”

The wires remained firmly in Wayne’s fist. He wore a backpack full of supplies: flashlight, water bottle, granola bars, extra cell phone, and most importantly, a solar cell phone charger, since zapping back to the present drains the hell out of your battery.

He sniffed a few times and looked me square in the eye. “No.”

I weighed my options. I could jump him, but I didn’t want to hurt the guy. Plus, he’d take those wires with him, the whole deal would be over, and I’d be cut off forever from the drug that was time travel. I wasn’t yet willing to give up the special, sexy rush that was a trip backwards.

“Wayne, did you interact with people in the past? Wayne? I need to know. I need you to tell me what a layer is, buddy. I need you to tell me that you really can mess with the past. Can you?”

Wayne flipped me the bird, then took his cell phone out of the pocket of his puffy coat and pointed it at me.

“Central Park. December 8, 1980,” he said, a little quake in his voice. His face was red and flushed. “Do it. Do it or I wreck this thing and I never set foot in your bar ever again.”

“Why Lennon?”

Wayne’s mouth fell open, and as if it were bad breath, I was hit with a cloud of Wayne’s disappointment in me. “Damn, Karl,” he said, looking away. “If you have to keep asking, you’re, like, not the guy I thought you were.”

I sat down at the computer and stared at the wormhole inter-

face that Wayne had made. It looked like Pong. In the Chron POE (point of entry) field, I typed 08 DEC 1980, and entered 72nd and Central Park West, Manhattan, in the field for Geog POE. I typed slowly, looking up at Wayne to let him know that things were going to be very bad between us, regardless of whether or not he succeeded in saving Lennon. Vigilante shit angered me. Okay, say Wayne saves John Lennon, and then what? We're obligated to kill Hitler, free the slaves, reverse the 2000 election, and punch about fifty million grade-school bullies in the nuts. I prefer to limit my moral obligations to not banging married women and donating money to the Red Cross. The wormhole was already fraught with moral quandaries, and here I was, going against my gut, giving the toddler his way.

Wayne wiped the tears from his cheeks. He jumped up and down like it was his birthday. "Call me in an hour, Karlito. I think this is a benevolent act, I really do. All of your albums over there, they're going to catch fire! You watch!"

I watched. I pushed the button. And in an instant, Wayne went through the floor.

Thirty minutes later, my album collection remained intact.

Twenty minutes after that, a text message from Wayne popped up on my phone: *THIS IS WRONG. WHERE AM I? NOTHING BUT TREES AND SNOW.*

Then: *THERE ARE NO BUILDINGS OR CARS. THIS IS NOT NYC.*

Then: *CHECK THE COMPUTER!*

I like to admit it when I screw up. I find identifying one's faults to be an admirable trait. Once, on a tour, in Providence, I forgot to load our brand-new amp into the van after a gig. We were in New Haven by the time I realized what I had done. Milo, the lead singer who had fronted the money for the amp, responded with a

left hook to my face. He then tried to snap my neck like a twig after we raced back to Providence, only to find that someone had stolen the amp.

I looked at the computer screen: CHRON POE: 08 DEC 980.
Fuck.

I had left off the number one in 1980. I had shuttled my friend one thousand and thirty years into the past. For a moment all I felt was admiration that the system Wayne had set up could be so exact.

Nine hundred and eighty. A full five hundred years before the first boatload of Dutch colonists landed on the Island of Manna-hatta. There is no recorded North American history for the year 980. It would be another one hundred years before Vikings arrived in Newfoundland.

Then I came to. I dialed Wayne's number, hoping that would bring him back to the present, knowing it wouldn't. Reentry requires an electrical power source. He would need to be in a place with many electromagnetic fields, such as a rock club with lights and amps and neon beer signs. Without electromagnetic fields, reentry was impossible. It was a flaw that Wayne was working on eliminating, but science and safety take time to develop while, apparently, saving John Lennon's life thirty years after the fact simply couldn't have waited another second.

I texted him: *I SENT YOU TO THE YEAR 980.*

Minutes later, the response: *ARE YOU KIDDING?*

I typed in the reversal code. Error code. Nothing. I tried again. I said a prayer. I cried. I punched the desk until my knuckles turned purple.

I CANCELED MY four o'clock appointment with my bar-back Clyde and his twenty-something friends, who wanted to see Nirvana play

Olympia in 1991. I went to the bar. I poured myself a shot of whiskey. I mopped the ladies room. I swapped out an empty keg. I made idle chatter with a dude named Keith who wanted to know where he could get some seed for his bird feeder.

My mother died of cancer when I was a hate-spewing shithead of twenty-three, and I remember very clearly sitting around the Bender familial manse in West Hartford, after the doctors had sent my sister and me home because my mother's suffering was over, watching Brooke lie facedown on the couch in her ham-pink nurse's scrubs, asking her repeatedly if she was still breathing, thinking about how much of my life depended on my sister's lungs taking in air, because without her there wouldn't be anyone permanently responsible for giving a rat's ass about me ever again. Wayne cared about me the way Brooke did in the days after our mom died, needy but sweet, and motivated by losing a parent before we were old enough to comprehend just how barren and raw our mother's early departure would leave me and Brooke in the hardest moments of our adult lives.

Once, I'd offered to set up Wayne with Brooke, now an operating room nurse in Orlando. Both are kind souls and a bit high-strung, and Brooke had been unlucky in love to the tune of one ex serving time for postal fraud and another ex who disappeared with his AA sponsor's old lady a month before his and Brooke's paid-for Disney wedding. Wayne thought that Florida was too far away for a relationship. Brooke said that any man who spent time in my bar was probably an alcoholic lowlife and therefore not suitable marriage material. I told Brooke that Wayne had a Little Mermaid soap dispenser in his bathroom. She still refused. This hurt my feelings.

Due to the bending of time and space, cell satellites are in the sky even in the year 980, so yes, Wayne's phone worked, as long as his phone had power.

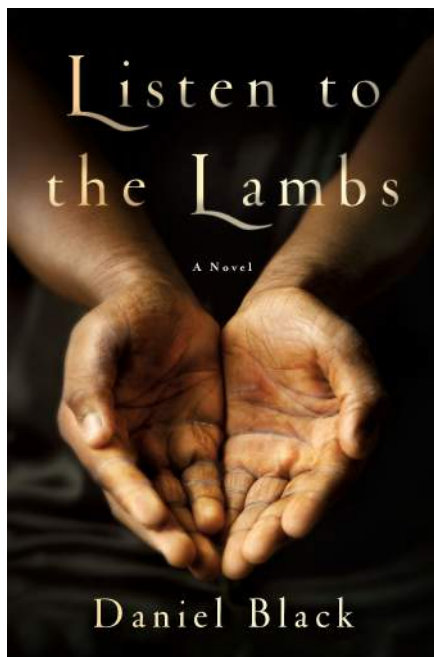
HEY SHITHEAD, he texted, IT'S WINTER HERE AND THERE ARE NO BUILDINGS. I'VE GOT FROSTBITE ON MY SCROTUM AND IT'S YOUR FAULT!

And: YOU'RE LUCKY I WAS A BOY SCOUT. I BUILT MYSELF A HUT OUT OF DIRT AND STICKS. AND AT LEAST I HAVE MY COAT.

And: I GUESS I'LL JUST INVENT ELECTRICITY. NO PROBLEM. OH, RIGHT, NO CONDUCTIVE MATERIAL.

And: RACCOON! IT'S WHAT'S FOR DINNER!

And finally: YOU'RE TOO DUMB TO FIX THIS YOURSELF. GO FIND AN ASTROPHYSICIST.



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St. Martin's Press launched Daniel Black's literary fiction career in 2005 with *They Tell Me of Home*. Since then his critical acclaim has grown with *Perfect Peace* and *A Sacred Place*. It's been five long years since we've heard from Black, so we're thrilled to include an excerpt from his newest work, *Listen to the Lambs*.

Nothing can convince Lazarus Love III to go back to the lifestyle of affluence and social status. Longing for a freedom of the soul that the world of capitalism cannot provide, Lazarus leaves all that he knows--including his wife and children--to achieve the ultimate level of peace and silence living as a possession-less man. When his quest causes him to cross paths with five wanderers, all of whom later call themselves "the family," a shocking, brutal act leaves Lazarus in a dire position and his newfound family must struggle to save him. By doing so, they learn the beauty of sacrificial love.

DANIEL OMOTOSHO BLACK was raised in Blackwell, Arkansas and now teaches at Clark Atlanta University in Atlanta, Georgia. He earned the Ph.D. in African American Studies from Temple University then returned to Clark Atlanta as a professor with hopes of inspiring young black minds to believe in themselves. His heart's desire is to write literature which celebrates the African American presence in America and teaches the world how to be more human. He is the author of *Twelve Gates to the City*, *Perfect Peace*, *They Tell Me of a Home*, *The Coming*, and *The Sacred Place*.

Listen to the Lambs

Beneath the intersection of I-20 and I-75, where stray trash tumbles about carelessly and dreams lay aborted, where coke cans substitute for ashtrays, and discarded, warped, pissy mattresses serve as sleeping quarters for discarded, warped, pissy people—beneath that invisible expanse of earth and sky, dwells a man named Lazarus. Most never see him, but he's a wonder to behold. Short, coarse, stubby black hair covers the lower half of his face, composing a thick, unkempt beard that grows midway down his neck. Sharp, piercing eyes—oh those eyes!—framed by long, elegant lashes, suggest that, under different circumstances, he might've been handsome. People stare at his eyes in wicked envy, as though they don't belong to him or as if they're offensive against such stark, solid blackness. They're lighter than usual, which, on a black man, means striking. Some say copper bronze or muddy brown. Others, russet or cappuccino. A few, golden honey or creamed latte. All agree they're remarkable. And rare. Enclosed in almond-shaped lids, Lazarus's pretty eyes keep others from dismissing him as the useless nigger they think he is. Thick, bushy brows, from which unruly gray hairs spring in every conceivable direction, shield his eyes and rest like grassy mountain ranges beneath a sloped forehead, causing people to glance twice before turning away altogether. A lion's mane of massive, coiled, angry dreadlocks swings from his head in belligerent disobedience. His oval, chiseled face conjures images of masks worn by African ancestors in battle. Meager flesh cloaks his strong, skeletal structure although Lazarus is not thin. People think of him as lanky though not slender, undoubtedly because his strut isn't stereotypically black. There's no rhythm, no syncopation, no glide. It's staccatoed and hesitant, as if, somewhere along life's journey, he lost faith in his feet. And only by his feet, can one know that he'd been meant to be thick and

muscular. They appear clown-like, his wide flat feet, as if, in colossal haste or angelic mockery, God attached the wrong pair. Throughout high school, Lazarus wore a 14, but that was decades ago—when his shoes were new and feet manicured. Now, with bunions, blisters, corns, and talon-like toenails, no telling what size he wears.

His other distinguishing feature, besides those pretty, golden eyes, is his ivory-white teeth. They stand perfectly even and ordered, moving, whenever he chews, like disciplined soldiers in a regiment. Upon smiling, Lazarus upsets viewers' initial perception of him as yet another wretched, homeless soul. Many frown with apparent disbelief that a man of his station, with nothing and nobody, actually cares about dental hygiene. Yet Lazarus has vowed never to walk about with teeth so disagreeable they embarrass him. Black gums and brown, half-rotten molars are inexcusable, he believes, when a toothbrush is practically free. Toothpaste, too! At least baking soda. Shit! Who can't get that? *Being* homeless is one thing, Lazarus always says: *looking* homeless is quite another.

Most days are spent watching cars, pickup trucks, and SUV's go by. He imagines the lives of passengers, sitting at Thanksgiving dinners, gorging themselves and laughing around their abundance. Or perhaps fixing plates and going to separate rooms where they enjoy self-induced solitude. Either way, they drown in excess and that's what almost killed Lazarus—the weight of excess—so he dropped it all and never looked back.

It wasn't an easy decision. He'd never dreamed he'd sleep on the streets like some unknown vagabond. All he'd wanted was to simplify things, to stop wasting life's energy on the accumulation of useless junk, but he'd built the expectation, and his family wouldn't release him from it.

Deborah, his wife, didn't understand why hating a job meant quitting it. "After all," she explained, "Everyone hates their job, or some aspect of it, don't they?" Lazarus didn't respond. "What gives you the right simply to walk away?" That's how the argument began. It ended with Lazarus toting a packed suitcase of clothes and toiletries, which, after kissing his son and daughter lightly on their foreheads, he carried through the front door. Deborah didn't worry. She believed his good senses would return. But they never did. He simply walked into another life as if the previous had been a fleeting, momentary thought.

In his mind, he chose homelessness because he was dying. Years of corporate America, wining and dining, seminars and evaluations, left him believing his life was spiraling downward. The harder he worked, the more he neglected his family, the richer his bosses became until, one day, he simply said, "I can't do this anymore!" and walked out. The next morning, he woke in a panic. How would he pay bills? How would the family eat? He could've had his job back—He was sure of it!—but he couldn't swallow his last modicum of pride. *Lazurus oh Lazarus* his mother used to sing whenever she couldn't figure him out. She'd always end the melody with a question like *What's wrong with you, dear Lazarus?* Now, the refrain echoed, like a scratched record, in his memory and reignited longing for a mother he could never have again.

Deborah could have it all, he'd said, although he'd meant to say she *was* his all. The look of rage, lingering upon her face, made him know that an attempt at reconciliation was futile. He loved her far more in his head than his heart, and once he began to despise his previous life, he despised her along with it. He'd tried to separate the two, the life from the love, but the day he quit his job and Deborah didn't understand, the two entities blurred into one lump of disgust.

The real reason he quit was because he lost everything. Overnight, just like that, the economy bottomed and when he woke, his life's savings had dwindled to nothing. Every month,

hundreds of dollars had been drafted into 401ks and money market accounts, and suddenly his hope of financial security was gone. Dissolved. Vanished. It didn't matter that others lost everything, too. They weren't him. They didn't know what was at stake for a black man who had risked everything, who had trusted America, who had done the *right* things. Now, he didn't know what to do. But he knew for sure he wouldn't do *that* again. Now he understood why granddaddy had hid cash beneath his mattress. No, he didn't earn interest, but he didn't lose anything either.

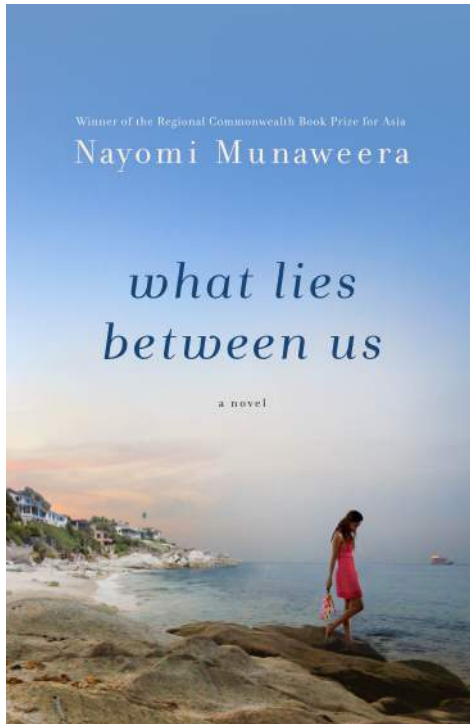
The meeting with his broker was quick and solemn. The man assured him the economy would probably rebound—"This is America, after all!"—if he'd just let things be. He understood that the hit was hard—more than 70 percent of his savings lost—but, again, America had had recessions before. Lazarus nodded easily, like a man in trance. None of the words had reassured him of anything, except that he would never work and save like that again. His hope had vanished. His faith was gone. The word of his broker's that rang in his consciousness was *probably*. That was enough to seal his resolve to go in another direction, live a different life. And that's what Lazarus did.

He sat in his office in the dark for the next three days. He didn't bathe, he didn't eat, he didn't say a word. He simply pondered why he'd spent his life working like a mule. Was he trying to prove something to himself? To his father? His Grandfather? His mother had warned against it, saying, "One day, son, when you have your family, spend time with them. Don't let them long for you." He hadn't really understood what she'd meant. His father's contradictory words had taken deeper root: "A man who can't provide for his family is worse than an infidel." He didn't know what an infidel was, but it sounded bad enough, so, at 17, he prepared to sacrifice everything in exchange for comfort and security.

And he did. But now he hated himself for it. His father never said it could slip away overnight. He never said a man could wake one morning and all his efforts be gone. That's how Lazarus felt. That everything he'd ever worked for had suddenly disappeared. His pride had no strength; his ego mocked him in flight. If not for his kids, he probably would've walked out the front door and never looked back. But he'd never leave his kids. That was non-negotiable. He adored them like Christ adored the church. But he'd teach them something different now, something contradictory to the way they'd once lived. It would be abrupt, he knew, and certainly they wouldn't prefer it, but it was right. And if it wasn't, it was what Lazarus now believed, so it was what the family would do.

He didn't worry. Lazarus IV, called Quad, and Lizzie worshipped their father. The boy was seven, the girl five. They especially enjoyed when he tickled them until they peed. That was the sign of his absolute adoration—if he could persist until their laughter left them hoarse and yellowy wet. Tired or not, he played the game whenever the children desired, and they felt enormously blessed to have such a remarkably committed daddy. Grown now, and having missed their father for years, they were more pissed than ever.

Yet Lazarus had been looking for something. He couldn't articulate it, but in the bowels of his belly, in every pore of his being, he knew it was out there. The desire had tumbled around in his soul until, at age 50, it simply wouldn't be denied. He discovered that the pain of life hadn't been in pondering things; it had been in not knowing. Thus his dream: to spend his latter years knowing, creating things of substance, constructing a life of meaning. He'd had enough of emptiness and counterfeit joy. He wanted the real thing, and he wanted it now.



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Nayomi Munaweera is an exceptionally talented author St. Martin's Press launched in 2014. Although *What Lies Between Us* is her second novel, we just had to share our excitement for this new literary talent.

In the idyllic hill country of Sri Lanka, a young girl grows up with her loving family; but even in the midst of this paradise, terror lurks in the shadows. When tragedy strikes, she and her mother must seek safety by immigrating to America. There the girl reinvents herself as an American teenager to survive, with the help of her cousin; but even as she assimilates and thrives, the secrets and scars of her past follow her into adulthood. In this new country of freedom, everything she has built begins to crumble around her, and her hold on reality becomes more and more tenuous.

When the past and the present collide, she sees only one terrible choice.

From Nayomi Munaweera, the award-winning author of *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*, comes the confession of a woman, driven by the demons of her past to commit a single and possibly unforgivable crime.

NAYOMI MUNAWEERA was born in Sri Lanka, and grew up in Nigeria. She emigrated with her family to the United States in her early teens, and now lives in Oakland, CA. Her first novel *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* won the 2013 Commonwealth Book Prize for the Asian Region and was longlisted for the 2012 Man Asian Literary Prize.

What Lies Between Us
By Nayomi Munaweera

Prologue

A child is nourished upon her mother's blood. If it is a time of starvation in the village, the crops lean, the riverbed dry, a mother takes what food there is and gives it to her child. She denies herself, mortifies her flesh, suffers in silence rather than let her child feel the smallest discomfort. All creatures abide by this law. This is the way of nature. To be otherwise is to be unnatural, to be a monster, outside the pale.

In a region stretching from the Himalayas to Japan lives an animal called the moon bear. It is named for the luminous sickle moon glowing in the midst of its midnight chest. The moon bear is the genetic originator of every bear on the planet; it is the great ursine ancestor, content to wander within its secret realms. It lives in the treetops, climbing high to huff at that celestial orb by which it is claimed. It lives on a fairy diet of acorns, honey, termites, cherries, and mushrooms; it is a peaceable citizen of these wild and lonely places.

The moon bear is not just ancient and magnificent, it is also in possession of something treasured by humans. In Chinese medicine the moon bear's bile is believed to remove heat from the body, curing tragic ailments of the liver and the eye. A kilogram of bear bile is valued at half the price of that other, shinier human obsession: gold.

Thousands of moon bears are captured and stuffed into small "crush cages." In these devices they are unable to stand upright or turn around. They may be kept in this condition for decades. Periodically each bear's stomach is slit and into the incision is inserted a tube that

drains the precious health-giving liquid. Human beings ingest the bile and swear by this tonic for their various and painful afflictions.

Some years ago, at a Chinese bile farm, a mother moon bear did something thought to be outside the realm of her animal nature. Hearing her cub crying from inside a nearby crush cage, she broke through her own iron bars. The terrified men cowered, but she did not maul them. Instead, she reached for her cub, pulled it to her, and strangled it. Then she smashed her head against the wall until she died.

Why do I tell this story? Only because it tells us everything we need to know about the nature of love between a mother and a child.

Chapter One

The walls of my cell are painted an industrial white, like albumen. They must think the color is soothing. Where I come from, it connotes absence, death, and loneliness.

People write to me. Mothers, mostly; they spew venom. That's not surprising. I have done the unthinkable. I have crossed the veil into that other unseen country. They hate me because I am the worst thing possible. I am the bad mother.

But here's a secret: in America there are no good mothers. They simply don't exist. Always, there are a thousand ways to fail at this singularly important job. There are failures of the body and failures of the heart. The woman who is unable to breastfeed is a failure. The woman who screams for the epidural is a failure. The woman who picks her child up late knows from the teacher's cutting glance that she is a failure. The woman who shares her bed with her baby has failed. The woman who steels herself and puts on noise-canceling earphones to erase the screaming of her child in the next room has failed just as spectacularly. They must all hang their heads in guilt and shame because they haven't done it perfectly, and motherhood is, if anything, the assumption of perfection.

Then too, motherhood is broken because in this place, to be a good mother is to give yourself completely. It is to erase yourself. This is what I refused to do. So they shudder when they hear my name, but inwardly they smile because they have not failed in the way I have.

There are others who write. Men who find the grotesque act I have committed titillating. They send propositions and proposals of marriage that I tear up into scraps of white that match the walls of my cell. I hate their unknown, unseen faces. They remind me that in this country,

celebrity is courted no matter the cause. The fact that strangers have heard your name and know the secrets of your life is supposed to be pleasing.

I never wanted this macabre interest, this unsettling notoriety. I never asked for it. I would have preferred to have been locked up and forgotten. Instead, I have become a known thing. My name, the one I had before, is gone. Instead I am named by the act I have committed. To be named thus is to be pinned down onto the corkboard with a needle piercing one's abdomen and a curl of paper underneath with one's genus and species on it in slanted writing. I have been named, and therefore you think you know my story, why I did what I did. To this I object. Perhaps this narrative is a way to undo your knowing, to say the truth is somewhere else entirely, and I will tell it in my own voice, in my own time.

And so, as all stories must open, in the beginning, when I was the child and not yet the mother . . .

#

Birth. My face was pressed against the bones of Amma's pelvis, stuck there, so that instead of slipping out, I was bound like a lost fish in a too-narrow stream. It wasn't until the midwife, tiring of my mother's screams, reached in with her forceps, grabbed the side of my head, and wrenched me out that I was born and Amma was born into motherhood, both of us gasping from the effort of transformation.

For three months after, there was a hornlike protrusion on the left side of my head. It subsided eventually, but for those months my parents were alarmed. "We didn't know if it would ever go away. I didn't know what sort of child I had given birth to. You were the strangest

creature. A little monster,” Amma admitted. “But then the swelling went down and you were our perfect little girl.”

After that, the doctor looked at my mother’s slimness, her girlish frame, and said, “No more. Only this one. Any more will wreck you.” She had wanted scores of children filling the grand old house. She had wanted so many to love her. The love of an entire army she had created herself. She rubbed her nose against mine and said, “ Only you to love me. So you must love me double, triple, quadruple hard. Do you see?” I nodded. She kissed me on the forehead, searched my eyes. I was blissful in the sun of her love, my entire being turned like a flower toward her heat.

Yes, I could love her more. I could love her enough to fill up the hole all those brothers and sisters had left by never coming.

#

I was born in Sri Lanka, a green island in the midst of the endless Indian Ocean. I grew up in Kandy, the hill city of the Buddhists. A city held high like a gem in the setting of the island. Mahanuwara, meaning the great city, is the name of Kandy in Sinhala. Or even Kande Ude Rata, the land on top of the mountain. It is the last capital of the Lankan kings before the British came to “domesticate and civilize,” to build railroads and scallop the hills into acres of fragrant tea. In their un-sinuous tongue, Kande Ude Rata collapses, folds into itself, and emerges as Kandy. But not candy sweet in the mouth, because this place has a certain history.

In the capital Colombo’s National Museum in a dusty glass case lies the sari blouse of one of the last noblewomen of the Kandyan Kingdom. Splotches of faded red stain the moldering fabric of each shoulder. The last Kandyan king was fighting the British when his trusted adviser

too turned against him. Enraged, the king summoned his adviser's wife. His men ripped her golden earrings out of her flesh, so she bled down onto this blouse. They beheaded her children and placed the heads into a giant mortar. They gave her a huge pestle, the kind village women use to pound rice, and forced her to smash the heads of her children. Then they tied her to a rock and threw her into Kandy Lake as the king watched in triumph from the balcony of the temple palace. Soon after, the British conquered Kandy and took over the island for centuries.

This is the history of what we do to one another. This is the story of what it means to be both a child of a mother and a child of history.

#

The house I grow up in is big and old. It has belonged to my father's family for generations. It has rooms full of ebony furniture, polished red floors, white latticework that drips from the eaves like lace, and dark wooden steps that lead to my little bedroom upstairs. A wrought-iron balcony hangs outside my window under a tumble of creeping plants. If I stand on its tiny platform just over the red-tiled roof of the first floor, I can see our sweeping emerald lawns leading down to the rushing river. Along the bank a line of massive trees stretches upward toward the monsoon clouds.

#

In the living room is a small slightly moldy taxidermied leopard. There are very much alive dogs in the house, but the leopard is my infant obsession. This is because the leopard lets

me ride him, while the dogs do not. Amma says I should call him Bagheera, for Kipling's black leopard, but the name Kaa, for Kipling's Indian rock python, is what I choose. The sound is easier and there is something slithery in his yellow marble eyes. Exactly between these eyes is the neat bullet hole that my father's father put there. The hunting guns are locked away in a chest in my father's study, but the leopard is here as evidence of their presence.

A formal portrait of my grandparents hangs above the leopard. They are old already. My mustachioed grandfather is in a three-piece suit, my grandmother in a Kandyan osari over a Victorian blouse, ruffled and buttoned against the tropical heat. My father is a boy in short trousers, the only child of the five my grandmother gave birth to, to have survived the ravages of malaria.

#

The house is a kingdom divided into dominions, inside and outside, and ruled over by the keepers of my childhood, Samson and Sita. In the kitchen, Sita shuffles about in her cotton sari, her feet bare. She has been with my father's family since he was a baby. She and her sister came as young girls. Her sister was my father's ayah, while Sita set up court in this kitchen, which she has never left.

Samson is Sita's nephew. His mother has returned to the village down south they came from so long ago, but Samson stays to wrestle our garden. Once a week he cuts the lawn, balancing on his heels, sarong pulled up along his thighs. He swipes the machete back and forth as he makes his crab-legged way across the grass. His skin shines wet eggplant, and at his throat a silver amulet flashes in the sun. "Inside this. All my luck!" he says. He has pulled it open

before to shown me what it holds, a tightly rolled scroll of minuscule Sinhala script, a prayer of protection bought by his mother from the village temple at a great price. She believes it will keep him safe from the malevolent influences, the karmic attachments that prey upon the good-hearted.

#

I am eight years old, tiny and spindly, and Samson is my very best friend. After school I race to throw off my uniform, kick away my shoes, slip into a housedress and Bata slippers, and escape into the garden. The red hibiscus flower nodding its head, yellow pistil extended like a wiry five-forked snake tongue; the curl of ferns; the overhead squawk of parrots—these are the wonders that welcome me home.

Samson speaks to me in Sinhala. He says, “Ah, Baby Madame. Home already? Come!” He swings me onto his shoulders. My thighs grip the sides of his throat, my legs hook behind his back. I reach both hands up into the guava tree to catch the orbs that are swollen and about to split, a wet pink edge in their jade skins. I grab, twist, and pull. The branches bounce and the birds rise, squawking in loud outrage. His arm reaches up to steady me. When my pockets are bulging he gently places me on the ground.

I bite into sun-warmed guava, that familiar sweet tang, small gemlike seeds crunch between my teeth. Samson is cutting away dead leaves from orchids suspended in baskets from the tree trunks.

I ask, “Why do they call these flowers Kandyan dancers?”

I already know why. These small yellow orchids are named for the dancers of this region because with petal and stamen the flowers imitate perfectly the headdresses and the sarongs, the drums and white shell necklaces that the twirling dancers wear. But I ask because I want to hear him talk and also because I want to show off what I have learned in school. I want to show how much more I know even now at eight years old because I have gone to school and he has only ever been a servant in our house.

He says, "This is the name. No? What else can we call them but their name?"

"No! I mean, did they call the flowers after the dancers or the dancers after the flowers?"

"You are the one who goes to school, Baby Madame. How could Samson know these things? Ask your teachers? Ask someone who knows these big-big things." A perfect yellow flower loosens its grip, tumbles to the grass. He stoops and picks it up between thumb and forefinger as gently as if it were a wounded insect, places it on his palm, and holds it out to me. I tug the rubber band at the end of my plait loose and settle the flower there.

He says, "Come, Baby Madame. I need your small fingers to work in the pond today."

We walk over and he sits on the edge while I kick off my rubber slippers, hike up my dress around my thighs, and slip into the water. My feet in the mud, I reach into the water up to my armpits, follow the fibrous stalks of the lotus plants down to their main stem. I pull so the plants tear loose, the mud releasing the roots reluctantly. The koi come to investigate this curiosity in their midst. Their silver, orange-streaked quickness flashes all about me, their mouths coming up to nibble at whatever they can find, shins, calves, fingers. I work my way across the cool muddy water, throw the too-fast-growing lotuses onto the bank, where a mound of uprooted leaves, stems, and unfurled flowers lay open to the sky. Samson gathers the beautiful debris. He will burn it with the evening's other rubbish.

Other days I am the watcher and he the worker. I squat on the bank with a bucket as Samson wades in. He spreads his fingers wide to catch yards of gelatinous strands studded with shiny beadlike eggs, then returns to deposit these offerings in the bucket, which turns quickly into a shuddering viscous mass. Waist-high in the deepest part of the pond, he says, “Bloody buggers. Laying eggs everywhere. Pond is chockablock full already.”

I say, “In France people eat them.”

Astonishment on his face. “What? No, Baby Madame, don’t tell lies. Who would eat these ugly buggers? What is there to eat?”

“Yes they do. Our teacher said. They eat the legs.”

He stares at the water between his own legs he says, “No. Can’t be. Legs are so thin. Nothing there to eat . . . Maybe the fat stomach, no?”

“No. The legs. She said.”

He shakes his head. “Those people must be very poor. I might be poor like that if I wasn’t with your family.” A little nod acknowledges all the years he has lived with us—all my life, all his much longer life, “But even if I was on the street I wouldn’t eat these buggers.”

“But they are a delicacy there. In France.”

“Shall we try, Baby Madame? We can catch them and give Sita to make a badum. Badum of frog.”

“No!”

“That’s what Baby will eat tonight. Just like the people in Fran-ce. Fried frog curry with rice.” He raises his arms, trailing streams of jelly in the air; he looks like a tentacled creature rising from the depths and shakes his fists so the water sparkles, lands on my bare thighs. Our laughter echoes across the pond.

In the monsoon months, the gardens are a different place, the ground sodden, the pond swollen. The sky lights up in the midst of dark stormy days as if a mighty photographer is taking pictures of our little piece of earth. It isn't unusual to come upon a flash of silver and gold, a koi flapping on the wet grass, swept out of the pond by the onslaught of rain. The river is dangerous at this time. It rushes by carrying all manner of things—furniture, quickly rolling trees with beseeching arms held out to the sky, drowned animals. It is a boiling, heaving mass. The banks could crumble inward, the ground falling away under your feet. We all know this; in these months we keep away from the garden and the river.

#

Evenings in the living room, the brass cutwork lamp throws a parade of shadows on every surface. My father reads student papers; he is a professor of history at the University of Peradeniya and always has this stack of work to bury himself in. I read books in English. Stories of boarding schools and midnight feasts featuring foods I've never tasted, but wish desperately for. I read about children who have to put on scarves and mittens and hats to go outside and wish I too had a pair of mittens. What would they look like covering my small hands? What would they feel like? How exciting to live in a snowy place and eat crunchy red apples and chocolate digestive biscuits. How exotic, how enticing. How boring my life is in comparison.

Here then are my father and I, each of us wrapped in these other worlds. My father is reading about some atrocity of the raj, shaking his head now and then, sharing out bits and pieces with us. This is how, of course, I first heard of the Lankan lady mashing up her children's heads. My father is denouncing colonization and the history of imperialism while I, thoroughly

colonized by the very books he had approved for me, secretly dreamed of some other more desirable and colder childhood. But a third person is with us, and it is her presence that brings us all together.

My mother sits and stares at a page in a Mills & Boon novel. Sometimes she sighs loudly, declaratively. Sometimes she leaps up, puts on music, grabs my hands, sends my book flying, says, “Come, child! Dance.” Anxiety and joy flood through me in equal measure. Joy at her closeness, anxiety at the thought of what my ungraceful feet are doing under me.

She holds me, her hands on my haunches, pushing them one way and then the other. “Like this, like this, sway your body, move, child. Don’t be so stiff. Move around.” My elegant, beautiful mother. I can read the messages in the arch of her supple, fluid body: “How is this my child? So different from me, so stiff and so serious?” I can’t tell her that I am not serious. That it is only this unexpected closeness to her that is making me awkward and gawky. In the garden with Samson, in the kitchen with Sita, I can dance mad baila like an undulating dervish. I can lose myself and be just a whirl of motion. I can be silly and unfettered and ridiculous. But here with her, I am tongue-tied and thick-footed.

Her hands push me away. Quick footsteps. The bedroom door slams, reverberating through the house. My father looks up from his papers and says, “Your mother is delicate. We need to treat her carefully. You understand this, don’t you? The need for care.”

Of course I do. She is my mother. I know better than anyone that she must be handled with diligence, like all things precious and dangerous.

#

Sometimes on the weekends when I wander down to the kitchen she is already there. She says, “We don’t need Sita today. I sent her to the market. I’ll make you breakfast myself.” I sit at the table and watch. She talks fast, her housecoat wrapped over her nightdress, her hair pulled into a gushing ponytail on the very top of her head, cascading down in an inky waterfall to her elbows. She says, “I’ll make pancakes. The way you like. Thin. Crispy like an appa.” Her fingers crack eggs on the rim of the bowl, slide them in with one quick motion. “Just the way you like.”

<tx>I watch this mother, the one that appears sometimes. She is demonstrative, coming over to hug me, so I open my nostrils wide to inhale her scent—like nothing else, the smell of this woman. She pushes a bowl at me. “Here, you whip the eggs.” She heats oil, tilts the pan to coat it. Pours the batter onto the hot oil and swirls it so that the thinnest of crepes emerge. She flips these onto a plate, sprinkles sugar granules on the hot surface, squeezes a lemon over it, rolls up the little package, and passes the plate to me. I love the sweetness and the bite of the lemon, the hot delicious crepe. She watches me with hungry eyes. She never eats while I do. Watching me is enough for her, she says.

#

This too happens. I’m playing outside her locked door, waiting and wishing for her. I’m being careful, but somehow the big doll slips from my fingers, falls banging on the wooden floors. Her bedroom door whacks open and she comes for me. The clutch of her fingers around my upper arm is like a tourniquet. Her face close to mine, she hisses, “I told you to be quiet. I need to rest. I *need* to sleep. Migraine is splitting my head apart. You *need* to be silent. Do. You. Understand.” Important information is being transmitted. Yes, I understand. I must not make

noise. I must be quiet; I must let her rest. By the age of nine I have learned the lesson of silence perfectly.

#

In every house on this island, in a frame as extravagant or as meager as the family's fortunes can afford, is the talisman of the wedding portrait. Without this photograph the house cannot stand.

The wedding photograph of my parents is in a heavy gold frame poised in the center of the living room wall. It shows my mother enwrapped in a Kandyan osari, her eyes huge, the gleam of lipstick on those virgin lips. Her neck is weighed down by the seven concentric gold necklaces that go from encircling her throat to dangling at her waist. Her hair is bisected by a ruler-straight part, on one side of it an ornament in the shape of a dazzling sunburst and on the other a curved crescent moon.

Next to her, my young father-to-be wears the costume of the Kandyan kings. In later decades it will become fashionable for all young grooms to don these garments, but during this period, the early 1970s, they are still reserved exclusively for the old Kandyan families. So he wears it not as fashion but as a marker of a certain heritage, a certain history. Here on his feet are the curved slippers, and above that, the various complicated sarongs. Eyes move upward to the maroon matador jacket studded at the shoulders with sequined lions. On his head is a tricornered crown, itself topped with a small golden bodhi tree. The only costume in the world perhaps where the male's outshines the female's.

They don't look at each other, these two. They face the camera and barely touch. They are not smiling; smiles were not requisite in those days. This is one of the only photographs that has survived, so it remains here large on the wall. If my mother had had another, she would have replaced this one, but she doesn't, so it is the one that endures.

#

When Amma is in a bright mood she tells me how matches are made. We are Sinhalese Buddhists, and this is how it has always worked. When a son comes of age, a mother makes inquiries. The matchmaker comes to the house wearing his cleanest white sarong and swinging his black umbrella, sheaves of astrological charts and photographs of girls in his battered briefcase. He sits in the best chair and makes his pronouncements. "The Kalutara Ratnasomas have four daughters of marriageable age. No sons. The mother must have very bad karma. The eldest girl is ready and they are eager to find a boy for her so that they can also start looking for the younger three."

When he leaves, the women of the family gather to compare the girls he has suggested. Beauty, lineage, docility, and culinary skills—these are the subjects of comparison. And then a girl is chosen. For a doctor son, an engineer son, a mother can expect a pretty, fair-skinned daughter-in-law from a good family. For a son who drinks or who is lame, who shouts so the neighbors can hear, a dark girl or one who has done badly at her O levels will do. A dowry of course changes everything. A father will collect money for years to marry off a daughter. A father of many daughters is an unlucky man: he will work tirelessly, and after his girls are married off, will have nothing to show for it.

Everybody knows that happiness in marriage is not expected. It is a possibility, of course, but it is not the reason one gets married. If it happens, one is lucky, but marriages are arranged for many reasons—financial, social, as a calming agent on the hot tempers of young men and the possible waywardness of young girls. Happiness is hoped for but is never an expected consequence.

#

Amma says, “We didn’t do it like that. We broke the rules.” I can tell she is both proud of and ashamed about this. They had been on an up-country bus. My father, a young man on his way to the university; Amma, a girl of unknown pedigree, certainly not someone his parents if they had been alive would have approved of. He had seen her, her bare arm snaking up out of her sari blouse sleeve to hold on to the swaying strap of that bus, which moved like a boat. She was willowy in her printed sari, her feet in leather sandals, the toenails painted the lightest blush of pink. He had looked at these toes and then dared to look at her face, and she had not looked away, as almost any other young woman would have done. Instead she had held his gaze for the briefest moment, and he had been snagged on that glance.

<tx>She says, “He had a nice shirt. I knew he was a Peradeniya boy, and that was all the difference.” She continues, “He passed me notes after that. On the bus. He was so nervous. He didn’t even need to take the bus. He had the car. But that one day it had broken down and he had taken the bus, and from then on, every day he took the bus and I was there.”

He’d had his friends make inquiries. They learned that she was poor. Her sister and she were living with relatives after the parents had been lost in some typhoid complication. Her

dowry was meager. What she did have was beauty, and for my father, who owned this house by the river, whose own parents had died, and even more important, who was rich enough to do as he pleased—including studying something as useless as history, getting a doctorate in it, and then teaching it at the university—this was enough.

They saw each other on the bus for months. He passed her notes that declared his undying passion, slipping them into the open mouth of the shopping bag at her feet or into the cheap unclasped bag under her armpit. She never responded either in word or through letters of her own. She never even looked at him again. That initial meeting of his gaze, that was all she could declare. After that everything was up to him. “A girl can’t be cheap.” she says, “You have to maintain yourself. Do you understand? You have to keep your pride. Without that, a girl is nothing.”

#

They met formally thrice before they were married. He went to her relations’ small, battered house and was fussed over and served weak tea and plain cake on two occasions. Once he had escorted her to the cinema, where a thin, sweating aunt had sat between them and they had watched the earnest Professor Higgins labor over the guttersnipe Eliza Doolittle’s vowels before falling in love with her. The young professor sat in the dark and wondered if he could enact a similar metamorphosis with the girl who sat on the other side of the thin aunt. Meanwhile, the girl was rigid with terror and excitement at the spectacle of the moving giants above her. It was her very first movie. She was seventeen years old, and her suitor was twenty-nine.

After the movie they went for falooda and Chinese rolls and the thin aunt had gone off to the bathroom and the young man had realized that what he had seen in her eyes when she first met his gaze on the bus had not been passion or rebellion but desperation. It was frightening to realize this, but it did nothing to assuage his desire. He was hooked.

They were engaged and her relations were jubilant. Most incredible, this bridegroom had not asked about dowry, had not mentioned the requisite plots of land, refrigerators, or houses that were usually expected. His own family was livid. An extensive collection of aunts and uncles and cousins and assorted jetsam of the far-flung family refused to come to the wedding. There were only the groom's colleagues and their wives. On the bride's side, only her older sister, some of her badly dressed family, and a few of her young school friends, shy around the older people. It was a truncated and odd assortment in a country where extravagant weddings were a national pastime. And then even in this small gathering, all around the couple, a hum of gossip,

One professor's wife bows her head close to another's, says, "Do you know? They met on a *bus*?"

The other takes a shocked suck of air. "What? Can't be."

"It's true. I heard from Sujatha's's son."

"These modern girls. They'll do anything to catch a good one."

"Yes men. Can you imagine if his parents were alive to see?"

"They must be turning in their graves. Such a good old Kandyan family."

"Yes. What to do? The world is not what it was. All the old rules are broken."

They, the newlyweds, heard the whispers and ignored them. They ran out to his car in a hail of rice. No more buses for them. Then they were alone. They were not used to each other's scents or tastes. The bride had only ever shared a bed with her older sister. They had never kissed

or held hands. But this was normal and natural. For it to be otherwise would have been unthinkable. In this place and time, one did not dip a toe into marriage; one plunged into it, fully dressed.

There is only one other wedding picture in the house. It sits on my mother's dressing table, and when she sees me looking at it, she says, "I was just a child. Only seventeen. And I had you the next year. You were with us from the very beginning. It was always the three of us." She considers the picture and tells me the story yet again. "Only those two photographs. The photographer went out and got drunk after the wedding. Got in a fight and destroyed his camera. All the rolls were ruined. I cried for a week when they told me. Thank god, at least Aruna Uncle had a camera. Otherwise even these two we wouldn't have."

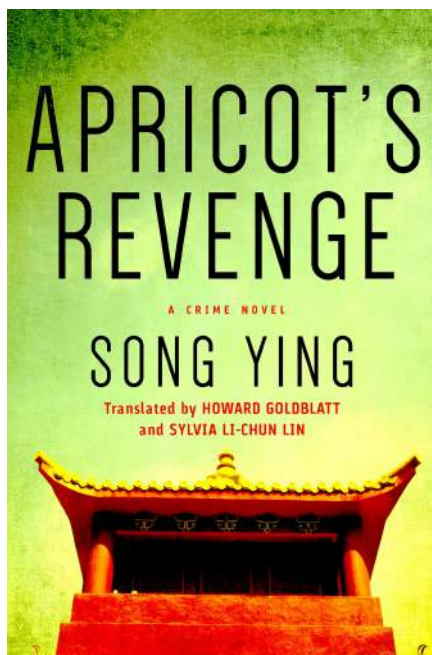
Beneath the glass of its frame, the photograph still shows off its cobwebbed crinkles. I had been small, maybe four or five. I had awoken in the middle of the night to loud voices. I had slipped out of my narrow bed and gone to stand in the hallway that led to their bedroom. I saw his arm raised and this photograph in its previous frame hurled across the room. Heard the crash of it against the wall. He saw me then. He came to the door, put his finger to his lips. *Shh*, he was saying, I must be quiet, I must be good and go back to bed. He closed the door.

Later either he or she had taken the picture, unfurled it, and put it in a new frame. It was something I learned then. That you could take the crumpled remains of something destroyed and smooth them into newness. You could pretend certain things weren't happening even when you had seen or felt them. Everything done can be denied.

#

Sometimes at twilight she goes out to stand at the line of trees by the river's edge. She watches the dark water flow by her bare feet. I watch from a window. I know my father is watching her from a different window in his study. His hand is curled around a glass of arrack. He will drink for hours and then he will fall asleep in his chair. I have found him there, his head lolling on the student papers, the empty glass dropped from his nerveless fingers onto the floor, making a pungent puddle by his bare feet. I don't wake him. I have done this before and he had looked at me with some terrible warning in his eyes, so now I always let him be.

Now from our separate windows, we watch her. She does not belong to us, but to some other state, some other mood, and even if we called to her, she would ignore us or stare back at the house, past us in the windows as if we did not exist. When the sun drops as suddenly as a shot bird, all we can see are her earrings, jagged lines of silver that dart from the tips of her earlobes to the silhouette of her rounded shoulders. We watch these lightning flashes until they too disappear.



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A business tycoon, Hu Guohao, is found dead in Shenzhen, China, apparently of a heart attack while swimming. The police have three suspects: Zhou, the vice president of the company who is in line to take over his position; Zhu, his young widow who stands to inherit a huge amount of wealth; and Hong, his arch business rival. But then Hong is found dead in his office, and the police find a drawer full of death threats.

The police hit a dead end until Nie Feng, a young investigative reporter, discovers a new suspect who is not on the police's radar. Zhong Tao is the personal assistant of Hu and there's a connection between Zhong, Zhou and Hong: All three men were working on a farm in a remote area of China over 30 years ago and Zhong has been plotting his revenge ever since. *Apricot* uses a clever plot to address social problems in modern China and to remind readers of the horrible and chaotic years China once endured.

SONG YING is an award-winning author in China of both fiction and nonfiction. He has published five novels and 15 nonfiction books.

The team of HOWARD GOLDBLATT and SYLVIA LI-CHUN LIN have translated the work of virtually all the major Chinese novelists of the post-Mao era--in all more than 50 books. Together they have received three translation awards from the NEA, and a number of prizes. They translated *POW!* and *Sandalwood Death* by Mo Yan, who won the 2012 Nobel Prize in Literature

Prologue



Hu Guohao swallowed a mouthful of brackish seawater as he felt a wave pull him under. Swimming for an hour or two was normally a breeze, why was it so hard now?

That floating white line ought to be the shark barrier. He knew he'd be all right if he could make it that far.

Hu fought to stay above water, but his head weighed him down and he choked on another mouthful.

He was starting to black out. Damn it! Where am I? Have I died and gone to Hell?

He thought he saw a great white gliding up from behind, eyeing him menacingly as it slowly opened and shut its mouth. He struggled to keep his arms moving, but everything he did was like a slow-motion movie scene, unreal and futile. The more he struggled, the faster he sank. A dozen faces—boys and girls, pale with dazzling smiles—floated up from the recesses of his memory. . . .

Now it was flames, licking in the air before his eyes. Were they real? An illusion?

A wisp of green smoke rose up lazily, spreading across the surface like bleeding ink.

Then the scene began to blur.

He tried to open his eyes, but a white mist clouding his retinas blocked out everything. Haze that would not go away turned into a gloomy, sinister abyss, sending shudders through his body.

He could sense that the Angel of Death was inching toward him. His mind was swirling as he heard a faint voice from somewhere up above say, "He's dead."

His heart erupted in a violent spasm, and he began to sink. That was the last thing he knew.

ONE

Fog Over Lesser Meisha



— 1 —

Lesser Meisha, an enchanting beach.

A famed seaside resort in Shenzhen, it was known as the “Hawai’i of the East.” Swarms of vacationing tourists came every weekend to relax on the sand, ride the waves, or just play in the water.

A line of beach tents along the water’s edge created a unique scene as night fell. Shaped like yurts or pyramids, they came in a variety of colors—reds and blues and yellows—and from a distance looked like flowers blooming in the setting sun. At eighty yuan a night, they were the favorite lodging choice for young tourists and lovers on vacation, both because they were so much cheaper than the five-hundred-a-night Seaview Hotel and because they were much more romantic. The tents were thrown up as dusk descended, when a pleasant breeze blew in from the sea. Young vacationers began to sing and dance, while others slept to the relaxing accompaniment of ocean waves. Was there anything better than that?

Six o’clock, or thereabouts, on the morning of June twenty-fifth. Dawn had barely broken when a couple emerged from one of the tents. Lovers, apparently. He was wearing glasses and was dressed

in jeans that failed to hide his beer belly. The woman, in a yellow T-shirt over a short white skirt, was not pretty, but her youth made up for that. He had his arm around her waist, contentment from a night of pleasure written all over his face. She smiled shyly and playfully pushed him away. They had arrived the previous afternoon. Beer Belly managed a computer company; she worked as his secretary or, to use the popular term, his Secret Sweetheart.

Obviously still savoring their night together, they looped their arms around each other and strolled along the misty early-morning beach, padding pleasurably across the spongy sand in bare feet. Gentle waves left rings of white foam on the sandy shore.

The jutting rocks of Chao Kok were visible through the thin layer of fog that lay over the ocean.

“Dapeng Bay is such a beautiful spot,” the woman said.

“All my best to you, O eternal ocean! The sound of your waves reminds me of my hometown. . . .” Beer Belly spread his arms melodramatically as he declaimed lines of poetry.

“What’s with you this morning?” She mocked him with a smile.

“That’s a poem by Heine.”

“Who’s Heine?”

Beer Belly smirked. “You don’t know Heine, the famous German poet? Then you probably haven’t read his ‘Ode to the Sea.’”

“No.”

“I’ll show it to you next time.”

“I won’t read it.”

“I should think you’d be bored with Murakami by now.”

“I like him. Especially *Dance Dance Dance*. It’s beautiful.”

“Right, that Sheep Man again. He’s weird.”

“I don’t care. I like him.”

“Hey, look up there.” Beer Belly pointed into the sky.

She looked up in time to see white birds passing silently overhead.

“Seagulls. They’re so pretty,” she said with a squint.

“Wrong again. Look carefully, they’re egrets.”

The birds were a picture of grace and ease, long legs stretched out behind them.

“Why are there egrets at the beach?”

“Because they want to dance dance dance,” Beer Belly teased.

“Stop that!”

“See those nests in the trees?” He pointed to a spot at the far end of the beach, where Qitou Ridge rose a hundred meters into the sky and cast a verdant shadow.

With a cry, the egrets flew off toward the ridge.

At the base of Qitou Ridge was another of Lesser Meisha’s selling points—Lovers’ Lane. Sandwiched between the hill and the beach, it meandered around a towering banyan tree and led to Guanyin Cliff at the top of the hill, where, after continuing down a dozen paces or so, it crossed a small wooden bridge that led to Chao Kok, the area’s best spot for ocean viewing.

Following the direction of the flying egrets, they headed west, leaving fresh footprints in the sand.

The crags of Chao Kok, which extended into Dapeng Bay, slowly emerged from the morning fog.

They stopped just before they reached the pier at the far end of the beach, having spotted what looked like a naked man lying in the sand near the stone jetty. Not far from where he lay, craggy rocks nestled up against a breakwater that rose to about the height of an average adult. Above it was Lovers’ Lane.

Curious, Beer Belly and his lover walked up to the stone jetty, suddenly sensing that something was wrong with the man.

Barefoot and wearing only a red bathing suit, he lay facedown, his legs spread out away from the water; apparently, he had washed up on the morning tide. His head was resting on his right arm, facing away from them.

Beer Belly squatted down and placed his finger under the man’s nose. Nothing.

He touched the man’s bare arm; it was cold.

“He . . . he’s dead!” Beer Belly said in a shaky voice.

The woman's face paled; she couldn't speak.

The man looked around, no one else was in sight.

"Should we call the police?" he asked.

"What do you think?"

Their secret tryst would be exposed if they became police witnesses.

"I guess we should," Beer Belly concluded.

She nodded, reluctantly.

They rushed back, found the white cabin with a LESSER MEISHA TOURIST OFFICE plaque on the door, and woke up the night clerk.

"A drowned man washed up on the beach last night," Beer Belly said—shouted, actually.

"What did you say? Someone drowned?" The stunned clerk rubbed his sleepy eyes.

To ensure swimmers' safety, watchtowers staffed with lifeguards had been installed all up and down Lesser Meisha Beach. That, of course, was no guarantee of safety, and accidents did occur from time to time, especially when all the bathers looked like dumplings bobbing up and down in a pot. The lifeguards could not see everything, and were only on duty during the day, anyway, so people who enjoyed an evening dip took their chances. No one but an experienced swimmer or a die-hard skinny-dipper would risk going into the water alone at night.

The clerk called the local police station.

Fifteen minutes later, two uniformed cops arrived.

Since the body had been discovered near the pier, beyond the designated swimming area, the policemen reported the situation to the Public Security Bureau. Half an hour later, Cui Dajun, head of the Y District Criminal Division, drove up with a team of officers and technicians. They parked their blue-and-white Jetta police cars behind the Lovers' Lane railing above the scene and cordoned off the area with yellow tape.

deserted except for a few early risers down at the far end gathering seashells.

Cui Dajun, a man in his midthirties, wore his jacket unbuttoned, exposing a white-striped T-shirt. Though he was short—under five feet seven—he had eyes that could bore right through a person. He asked Beer Belly and his lover to describe how they'd discovered the body, while his young assistant, Officer Wang Xiao Chuan, took their statement. Another officer, a woman by the name of Yao Li, stood next to Cui and watched intently as the eyewitnesses told their story.

The two local cops were posted at the restricted area marked by the yellow tape.

After the questioning, Wang had Beer Belly and his lover sign their statement.

“We'll contact you if we need more information.”

They nodded, and Cui told them they could leave.

Meanwhile, the investigation was under way: a tall man in a vest stenciled with the word POLICE took a camera from his black case and began taking pictures from all angles.

The dead man, in his mid to late fifties and wearing only a red Lacoste bathing suit, had a medium build, though he was slightly overweight. The body lay on a smooth stretch of beach near the craggy rocks, not far from the roadbed beneath Lovers' Lane. Traces of white foam from the rising tide were visible four or five meters from his feet.

There were no footprints on the beach except for those left by the eyewitnesses, but even if there had been before that, they'd have been washed away by the incoming tide. No personal effects or clothing in the vicinity. Not far from the body, a stone jetty stretched from the pier into the water. At high tide, waves crashed against the jetty, producing a rhythmic roar from crevices among the rocks.

someone remarked that the dead man's face looked familiar. Grains of sand were stuck to his broad forehead and the tip of his nose. The face was a purplish gray; so were his lips.

"He looks a little like the CEO of Landmark Properties, Hu Guohao," the chunky young officer, Wang Xiao Chuan, muttered.

"You know this man?" Cui gave him a questioning look.

"I think I saw him on TV a few nights ago, on the show *Celebrity Realtors*. There was a close-up of him," Wang said.

The tall officer with the camera came to take pictures of the dead man's face.

"I think I've seen his picture, too," Yao Li, the other officer, commented.

"I guess it does look like him," Cui said after studying the man's face carefully. He continued with a surprised voice, "but how can that be?"

— 2 —

Hu Guohao was a prominent Shenzhen realty tycoon, the helmsman of Landmark Properties, South China's realty flagship. As a wealthy and influential businessman in Southern Guangdong, he was always in the limelight, was a member of the Shenzhen Political Consultative Conference, had been selected as one of the outstanding entrepreneurs of Guangdong Province, and was on the top ten list of Southern China's realty celebrities.

If it was indeed Hu Guohao, the news would rock the city.

Cui took out his cell phone and dialed 114 for information.

"I need the switchboard number for Landmark Properties . . .

"Hello?" The operator sounded as if she had just gotten up.

"Is this Landmark Properties? I'd like to speak with your CEO."

"I'm sorry, but everyone's off today," the operator said lazily.

"There's no one in the office."

Cui's face hardened as he shouted into his phone: "Are you telling me that in a big company like yours no one works on Sunday?"

"Er, hold a moment."

The call was transferred to a duty office, where a man with a deep baritone voice answered.

"May I ask what this is about?"

"I'm with the Public Security Bureau, Y District," Cui said. "I need to speak to your CEO. It's urgent."

"Oh, he's not in on Sundays."

"How can I reach him?"

"Well," the man paused. "I can give you his driver's cell number."

Two minutes later, Cui had Hu's driver, a fellow named Liu, on the phone.

"Is this Mr. Liu? Where are you at the moment?"

"Who's this? I'm home, in Beilingju."

"This is Cui Dajun, head of the criminal division of the Y District branch of Public Security. I have an urgent matter to discuss with your CEO, Mr. Hu Guohao."

"Oh, Mr. Hu went to Greater Meisha yesterday."

"Greater Meisha? What time was that?"

Cui signaled Xiao Chuan with his eyes that it must be Hu Guohao; they both tensed.

"Yesterday afternoon. I drove him there."

Greater Meisha, another beach resort on Dapeng Bay, abutted Lesser Meisha. According to Liu, Hu Guohao had gone there to swim the previous day, something he did on most Saturdays, sometimes with clients, other times alone. He'd spend the night at the Seaview Hotel and return home Sunday afternoons. Liu had driven him to the beach in his black Mercedes the day before, Saturday, arriving

at three fifteen. A room had been reserved under his name. Liu returned to Shenzhen after Hu told him to pick him up Sunday at four.

“Something may have happened to your boss. Come to Lesser Meisha right away.”

“Did you say Lesser Meisha?” the driver asked.

“Yes. Lesser Meisha.”

Cui closed his cell and told Xiao Chuan and Yao Li, “Go check out the Seaview Hotel at Greater Meisha.”

“We’re on it.” They left, following the shoreline.

The sun was up and shining brightly by then, and people were beginning to appear on the beach. Curious tourists wanting to get a closer look were stopped by the two local cops, who kept them beyond the yellow tape.

Cui looked at his watch, telling himself that news of a dead body on Lesser Meisha would soon be all over Dapeng city.

About a half hour later, Hu’s driver drove up to the Seaview Hotel in the Mercedes. He seemed pale and anxious, and his red polo shirt seemed out of place at the scene.

He identified the body—as expected, it was Hu Guohao. “Mr. Hu liked to swim at night,” he stammered, looking quite distressed. “He said the water was cooler.”

“Was he a good swimmer?” Cui asked.

“Yes. He could swim five or six kilometers with no problem.”

“So that means he could swim all the way from Greater Meisha over here to Lesser Meisha?”

“I’m pretty sure he could.”

“But why did he drown?” Medical Examiner Tian asked.

“That’s a good question.” Liu was still in shock. He hesitated. “But Mr. Hu did have a history of heart problems.”

“Heart problems?” Cui mulled that over.

Xiao Chuan drove up with Yao Li from Greater Meisha in one of the Jettas. He’d barely parked the car before jumping over the railing with his report.

“We found Hu’s hotel registration and some other important information at the Seaview Hotel.”

“All right, tell me what you’ve learned.” Cui led them away from the crime scene.

Xiao Chuan told Cui that, according to the hotel staff, room 204 had been reserved under Hu’s name on Friday and that he’d checked in Saturday afternoon at three twenty. The hotel was a stone’s throw from the beach, an ideal spot to enjoy an ocean view and convenient for swimmers. The room rates were high, but Hu was a frequent guest. Xiao Chuan was told that Hu was relatively free with his money and enjoyed flirting with the female staff. He was well known there. Someone had seen him enter the hotel and take the spiral staircase to the second floor the day before. Ah-yu, a waitress in the Seaview Restaurant, told them that Hu had had dinner with a tall man the night before. They’d talked for a while before Hu left alone. The tall man had sat for another ten minutes before getting up to leave.

“Did you get a name?” Cui asked.

“Yes, we did,” Xiao Chuan said, looking pleased with himself. “Hong Yiming, General Manager of Big East Realty.”

“You’re sure?” Cui persisted.

“Yes.” Yao Li added, “The hostess at the restaurant, a Miss Bai, knew Hong by sight. Both men were frequent guests at the hotel.”

“Very good.” Cui was pleased with the report. “Did anyone see Hu go out for a swim after seven o’clock?”

“There were too many swimmers at Greater Meisha last night, and no one noticed a thing. We even went to the locker room, but didn’t find Hu’s clothes or anything left behind by other swimmers.”

Cui liked the way things were moving.

“Hong Yiming might have been the last person to see Hu Guohao alive. Find him as soon as possible and see what he knows.”

If only he could convince himself of that. Greater Meisha was four or five kilometers from the tourist center of Lesser Meisha, and he was puzzled why Hu's body would wash up so far from where he'd started. Besides, they hadn't found his clothes or any personal effects either on the beach or in the locker room.

The only possible explanation was that he'd swum from Greater Meisha across the shark barrier, had suffered a heart attack and drowned. The tide had then carried his body up to the beach.

As Cui was turning to leave, his gaze fell on the stone jetty that jutted out into the bay. But why had the body washed up so close to the pier?

— 3 —

Room 707 at the White Cloud Hotel in Guangzhou.

Eight a.m., Monday morning. Nie Feng woke up to the sound of a ringing telephone.

"This is your wake-up call, sir."

"Oh, thanks." Nie yawned and leaped out of bed.

A journalist and special-feature writer for *Western Sunshine* magazine, Nie Feng was a swarthy, athletic-looking man in his early forties. Sporting a crew cut, he had a likable, smiling face. As a top student in Sichuan's C University School of Journalism, with a double major in psychology, he was highly valued by his editor-in-chief.

He'd worked until three that morning to finish a special feature for *Western Sunshine*, accomplishing the task that editor-in-chief Wu had been pushing him to wrap up. Now he could finally relax. A business trip to the Pearl River Delta area was a rare treat, so he'd made prior arrangements to visit a publisher friend in Zhuhai and see how well the magazine was doing in the south. *Western Sunshine*, a newcomer from the southwest, was a broad-ranging, full-

color magazine with a cultural focus, and an influential publication with both domestic and foreign circulation. Wu was a seasoned pro who placed stringent demands on his contributors; it was he who'd come up with the *Western Sunshine* mission statement: *Unique viewpoint—New ideas—A Showcase for the cultural tastes of China's West.*

Nie quickly washed up and went downstairs to the White Cloud Terrace for morning tea.

The Cantonese love their morning tea; diners can choose from an array of dim sum in steamers on small carts pushed around by smiling waitresses. A dazzling display of steaming, bite-sized items appears when the bamboo covers are removed: green-crystal buns, shrimp dumplings, golden chestnut cakes, mara layer cakes, and so on. Naturally, each meal translates into a hefty charge. Back in Chengdu, two meaty buns, a bowl of congee, and a plate of pickled cabbage cost no more than one and a half yuan, while in Guangdong, a bowl of congee, two steamed vegetables, and a dessert easily cost thirty or forty yuan. Since breakfast was not included in the room charge, Nie rarely splurged for morning tea when he checked into a hotel to write one of his feature articles.

He walked into the crowded restaurant, where natty businessmen in groups of four or five or as few as two were smoking and talking on their cell phones or with one another. There was also a family that spanned several generations, out for morning tea and happily sending snippets of melodious but incomprehensible Cantonese his way.

Nie took a seat in a red cloth chair in a side room; a waitress in a checkered blouse came over with a tea menu.

“What kind of tea would you like, sir?”

Opening the menu, he was shocked by the prices.

Gold Brand Iron Buddha, 138 yuan per person.

Ginseng Iron Buddha, 60 yuan per person,

Royal Century, 38 yuan per person.

The list went on.

He quietly turned to the second page, where he found and ordered the common High Mountain Iron Buddha, at ten yuan a pop. Later he learned that ordering tea was not required.

After the tea arrived, the waitress placed a yellow order form on the table, with the detailed prices for dim sum. He checked off several breakfast items: congee with lean pork and a thousand-year egg, steamed chicken feet with shredded peppers, spareribs steamed in preserved soy sauce, and a steamer of tiny meat buns.

It took hardly any time for the food to arrive, and Nie set to work. The chicken feet had a strong flavor and were quite tasty.

A newspaper rack displaying local as well as Hong Kong and Guangdong newspapers stood against the wall by the next table.

As he ate his congee, he reached out for a Guangdong morning paper.

South China newspapers are known for their more elevated approach to journalism, with serious cultural content and economic sophistication; they rarely rely on gossip and exotica to attract readers. They were Nie's favorites.

The major front-page news of the day:

CHINA "JOINING THE WORLD" ENTERS THE
SUBSTANTIVE PHASE OF MULTILATERAL TALKS;

"WIND AND CLOUD" SATELLITE IS SUCCESSFULLY
LAUNCHED.

There was also an item about the human genome map. According to the Associated Press, two American research groups would make a joint announcement that the map was essentially completed. Experts described the research as biology's equivalent of the Apollo Project; understanding the human genetic makeup would eventually lead to miracle drugs, and one day, the mysteries of the human aging process and illnesses would be unveiled.

When he turned to the second page, Shenzhen News, a bold headline above a half-column story jumped out at him:

“Hu Guohao, CEO of Landmark Realty, Accidentally Drowns while Swimming.”

Nie’s gaze froze, shocked to read that Landmark Realty’s CEO was dead. He was incredulous, because a mere four days earlier he had interviewed Hu.

Putting down his congee bowl and the newspaper, he waved the waitress over.

“Check, please.”

She handed him his check for 46 yuan, including the tea.

After paying, he left the restaurant and crossed the street to a Friendship Store newspaper kiosk, where he bought several Shenzhen and Guangdong newspapers.

He scanned them for news of Hu’s drowning, and found it under bold headlines:

SHENZHEN BILLIONAIRE HU GUOHAO DIES
UNEXPECTEDLY AT LESSER MEISHA BEACH

Was the cause a heart attack?

With Hu Guohao’s death, who will take over Landmark?

Landmark CEO dies at Lesser Meisha, leaving many unanswered questions.

According to one of the papers:

Mr. Zhong, assistant to the CEO of Landmark Realty, confirmed that Hu Guohao, CEO and Chairman of the Board of Landmark Realty, passed away on June 24 at the age of 58. Sources say that Hu drowned while swimming beyond the shark barrier at Lesser Meisha Beach. Experts are trying to determine if it might have been a result of a heart attack. No definitive cause has yet been announced.

Another paper included Hu's portrait photo; he was dressed in a suit, with closely cropped hair and a radiant smile.

It was a smile tinged with mockery, familiar to Nie Feng. On the morning of June twenty-second, he'd interviewed Hu for three hours and had just finished the article that morning under the title "The Westward Strategy of a Real Estate Tycoon in South China." Nie could still recall Hu's ambitious buy-out plans, his insightful views on real estate development in western China, as well as the tycoon's expansive manner. How could such an energetic heavyweight die so suddenly?

On the day of the interview, Hu had commented liberally on a wide range of topics, talking and laughing with confidence. He had no doubts regarding Landmark's upcoming development in the Yantian seaside district, and although Nie sensed that beneath his expansive demeanor, Hu was feeling either pressure or fatigue, he detected no omens of misfortune.

Why in the world would such an important businessman risk his life by swimming beyond the shark barrier, only to be swallowed up by the waves of Lesser Meisha?

Perhaps owing to his instincts as a journalist, Nie felt that Hu's death was too sudden.

Even though he'd eaten only half his breakfast, he raced back to his hotel room.

Endless questions flooded his mind as he dialed the number for the CEO's office.

"Landmark Realty, may I help you?"

It sounded like Ah-ying, Hu's assistant.

"Hello, this is Nie Feng."

"Oh, hello." There was a hint of reluctance in her voice.

"Is the news about Mr. Hu true?" he asked.

"Yes . . . it's true."

"How could he have just drowned?" Nie was puzzled.

"It came as a total shock to us all. It seems that the police . . ."

Ah-ying sounded evasive, obviously a sign of her own disbelief, but Nie was able to confirm Hu's death.

"Have the police reached some kind of conclusion yet?" Nie sensed something unusual.

"It seems that . . ."

She used "it seems" again. Was she puzzled or was there something she could not say?

Since there was no point in continuing, he hung up. After mulling over what to do next, he decided to leave for Shenzhen.

He rang his friend at Zhuhai Publishers.

"Sorry, pal, but something came up and I can't see you today."

"What's so urgent?"

"I'll tell you later. I can't talk about it over the phone."

"It's a scoop, isn't it?" His friend had a reporter's nose.

"Maybe, maybe not. It's got something to do with my special piece."

Then he called his editor-in-chief in Chengdu, telling him he'd finished his article late the night before and had already e-mailed it over. Nearly all of Nie Feng's stories appeared on the first page.

Wu sounded pleased on the phone, as he said brightly, "Perfect! Just in time for the next issue. I'll treat you to a meal at Lao Ma's Hot Pot when you return."

"No need for that, just up my fee for this one," Nie said half jokingly, recalling how the editorial committee underpaid him each time.

"No problem. This is a special feature, so you'll get a special fee. Say, when are you coming back?"

"I was going to take the train tomorrow, but something's come up."

"What's that?" Wu's ears pricked up.

"I'm not sure yet, I'll let you know tomorrow."

After hanging up, Nie packed his bag and checked out of the

hotel, then took a taxi to the Guangzhou Train Station, where, half an hour later, he boarded T757, a special express train for Shenzhen.

Guangzhong's gray buildings and undulating highway overpasses flew past his window, and as the train rumbled along, Nie kept thinking back to the interview at Landmark four days earlier.

He remembered every detail about his meeting with Hu. Particularly unforgettable was the luxurious office, which must have occupied at least two hundred square meters. He felt as if he'd entered a palatial hall the moment he stepped into Hu's office. In the country's interior, not even a provincial governor could boast such an impressive office.

All the furnishings were of the finest quality, including the carpet, with its auspicious design, and the linen wall hangings.

Hu had sat in his black leather chair behind a massive desk, looking quite poised as the interview began.

Dressed in a dark blue suit, he was tie-less. A bulbous nose and broad, bold face gave him a somewhat aggressive appearance, but he was personable and approachable, quite easygoing, in fact. An enormous photograph of the Landmark Building hung on the wall behind him. Glass cabinets on both sides were filled with trophies and books; a gold-plated pen set, a desk calendar, and a black record-a-phone rested on the desk, in front of which sat a gleaming lifelike black wood carving of an African crocodile, its mouth open wide.

Hu gave a brief account of Landmark's business ventures and its successes. It had started out as a small real estate company in Hainan, but with tenacity, hard work, bold vision, and an unbending will to win, he had turned it into a megacompany after years of fierce competition. Hu did not bother to conceal his pride when he talked about his rising fortunes in Hainan years before.

"Ten years ago, when I was selling real estate with a friend in Hainan, there were more than fifteen thousand real estate agencies. It was so crowded it felt like a marketplace. If a steamed bun had

dropped from the sky, it could easily have killed more than one Realtor.”

Hu, who spoke with a Henan accent, swatted away the imaginary steamed bun with his hand.

“But the number of agencies dropped to a few hundred, and we were one of them. Ha-ha. Luck has been with me.”

As a complacent smile creased the corners of his mouth, Hu exuded a roguish charm.

As for China’s real estate development, he believed that now was the time to move westward. After ten years of large-scale development, China’s real estate market was well organized and ripe for further investment, so it was simply a matter of time before outside developers came in. Whoever moved first would reap the greatest profits. Now there were two keys to success in Western China. The first was capital, the second brand name. Hu then described Landmark’s ambitious acquisition plan; the first step was to acquire land in the Tiandongba area along the shore.

“The value of that land will definitely climb.” A sly glint shone in his beady eyes.

The second step was to move westward. “Didn’t you say there’s no Landmark building in Chengdu? Well, I’ll build a Landmark Building West on Renmin South Road. What do you say to that?”

Witnessing the style and behavior of a true real estate tycoon, Nie Feng realized the importance of bold vision and impressive bearing in the success of a private businessman. It was obvious that Hu was in total control of the conglomerate.

When asked about his hobbies, Hu said he liked to swim and jog, and didn’t play golf.

“That’s a pastime for cultured people.”

As the interview near its end, Ah-ying came in with a glass of water.

“Chairman Hu, it’s time for your medicine.”

Hu shook out two white tablets from a small bottle on his desk,

tossed them into his mouth, took the glass from Ah-ying, and downed the pills.

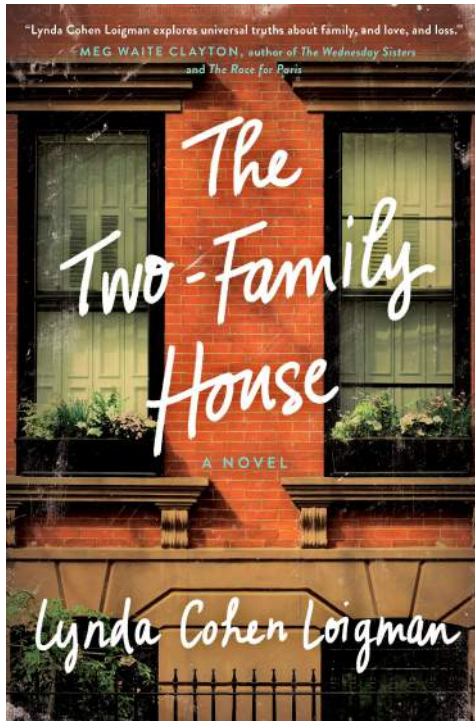
“Aspirin, a cure for everything,” he said in a self-mocking tone.

“Do you have a cold?” Nie asked.

“No, Mr. Hu has a heart condition,” Ah-ying answered for him.

“The doctor told me I have coronary heart disease. That’s utter nonsense. Do I look like I have a heart problem?”

“No.” Nie said, and meant it.



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Brooklyn, 1947: in the midst of a blizzard, in a two-family brownstone, two babies are born minutes apart to two women. They are sisters by marriage with an impenetrable bond forged before and during that dramatic night; but as the years progress, small cracks start to appear and their once deep friendship begins to unravel. No one knows why, and no one can stop it. One misguided choice; one moment of tragedy. Heartbreak wars with happiness and almost but not quite wins.

From debut novelist Lynda Cohen Loigman comes *The Two-Family House*, a moving family saga filled with heart, emotion, longing, love, and mystery.

"Two families, both living in one house, drive an exquisitely written novel of love, alliances, the messiness of life and long buried secrets. Loigman's debut is just shatteringly wonderful and I can't wait to see what she does next." - Caroline Leavitt, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Is This Tomorrow* and *Pictures of You*

"No good deed goes unpunished. In a single, intensely charged moment, two women come to a private agreement meant to assure each other's happiness. But as Lynda Cohen Loigman deftly reveals, life is not so simple, especially when it involves two families, tightly intertwined. *The Two-Family House* is sympathetically observed and surely plotted all the way through to its deeply satisfying conclusion." - Christina Schwarz, author of *Drowning Ruth* (an Oprah's Book Club pick) and national bestseller *The Edge of the Earth*

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The Two-Family House
By Lynda Cohen Loigman

Prologue

She walked down the stairs of the old two-family house in the dark, careful not to slip. The steps were steep and uneven, hidden almost entirely beneath the snow. It had been falling rapidly for hours and there had been too much excitement going on inside the house for anyone to think about shoveling steps for a departing midwife. Perhaps if the fathers of the two babies born had been present, they would have thought to shovel. But the storm had prevented them, and neither had been home.

She breathed in the cold night air, happy to be outside at last, away from the heat and closeness of the birthing room. How grateful she was for the sudden burst of wind that slammed the door shut behind her, shaking her out of her exhaustion and signaling the finality of the evening. She loved her work, and cherished the intimacy of it. But it was not a pleasure outing.

Before today she thought she had seen every permutation of circumstance: the girls who cried out for their own mothers even as they became mothers themselves; the older women who marked themselves as cursed, suddenly bursting with joy over a healthy child come to them at last. She thought she had heard every kind of sound a person could make, witnessed every expression the human face could conjure up out of pain, joy or grief. That was what she thought before this evening.

This night was different. Never before had she seen such longing, pain and relief braided together more tightly. Two mothers, two babies, born only minutes apart. She had witnessed tonight what pure woman strength could accomplish, how the mind could control the body out of absolute desperation.

She had watched, and she had ignored. She had taken charge, yet she was absent. She let them believe that her confusion was real, that she was tired. But she was never confused. She was not too tired to comprehend their hopes. The fragile magic of that night had not been lost on her.

She breathed in the air again, crisp and cold, clearing her head. It had been a good night, two healthy babies, born to healthy, capable mothers. She couldn't ask for more. What happened now was out of her hands. Wholly and completely she put it out of her mind, said her goodbyes to the house on the steps, and made her way home to go to sleep. There would be more babies tomorrow, she knew, and the constancy of her work would keep her thoughts from this place. She promised herself to never think of it again.

Mort (May, 1947)

The domestic, feminine scene unfolding before Mort did nothing to improve his spirits. Upstairs, in his brother's apartment, substantial preparations were being made. Not just the brushing of hair and the tying of sashes. Serious words were being spoken from man to man, from father to son. Mort pushed away his breakfast plate and frowned.

Thirty minutes before they were supposed to leave, there was a thudding of footsteps down the stairs and a quick knock on the door. "Got to go! See you there!" Abe's voice rang with excitement. Mort had assumed they would all walk over to the synagogue together. "What do they need to get there so early for?" he grumbled at his wife. Knowing better than to defend her brother-in-law, Rose shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know," she answered.

Mort had been dreading this day, the day of his nephew's bar mitzvah, for months. In the weeks leading up to it, the increased noise and activity of his brother's family overhead agitated him. He found himself imagining different scenarios to go with every thud and thump he heard. Was Abe's wife Helen testing out a new cake recipe? Was his nephew Harry, trying on his new suit? What were the other boys laughing about? Mort tortured himself in this manner for several weeks. He was a sharp, thin man, and in the month before the bar mitzvah he lost at least ten pounds. His increasingly angular appearance alarmed his wife, but everyone else was too busy to notice.

Rose had been up earlier than usual that morning to make sure the girls were ready on time. Hair ribbons were neatened and his three daughters, clad in matching yellow dresses, were lined up in front of him after breakfast. "They're like a row of spring daffodils," Rose entreated. "Don't you think so?"

Mort looked up, but he was an unappreciative audience. Judith was almost twelve, and seemed too old for matching dresses. She was fidgeting in the line, anxious to get back to the book she had been forced to leave on the kitchen table. Every week, Mort insisted that Judith present him with her chosen pile of library books for approval. Every week, Judith asked Mort if he wanted to read one of her books too, so they could discuss it. Every week, he declined.

Mimi, the prettiest of the three, was the most comfortable on display. She was only eight, but already she carried herself with a stylish grace that Mort found unfamiliar. Mort thought she looked the most like Rose. Mimi was forever making cards for friends and family members with pencils and crayons that she left all over the house. Last year, she found her father's card in the kitchen trash pail the morning after his birthday. She ran crying to him with it, waving it in her hand and asking why he had thrown it away. "My birthday is over," he explained. "I don't need it any more."

Dinah, the baby of the family, had the most trouble keeping quiet during Mort's inspection. She was only five, and though she had been taught not to ask her father too many questions, she couldn't seem to help herself. "What's your favorite color?" she blurted out, eyes wide with anticipation. Mimi, hoping the answer might give her some insight regarding the design of next year's birthday card, seemed eager for the reply. But the response was of no help. "I don't have one," Mort said.

After Mort nodded his silent endorsement of the girls' appearance, the family was ready to go. He usually took the lead during outings like these, leaving everyone else struggling to match his quick strides. The girls knew better than to try to walk alongside him. Even Dinah had stopped trying to hold his hand years ago. Instead, they had taken to walking single-file on family outings, like unhappy ducks in a storybook, with Rose bringing up the rear.

Today, however, Mort was so out of sorts that he lagged behind the rest and stayed at the back of the line. Despite the warm weather, he found himself shivering in his baggy suit. His face grew increasingly grey with each step that he took. Rose walked ahead, slow and uncomfortable in the lead position.

The policy of the synagogue was to seat men and women separately, even children. Once they arrived, Rose and the girls headed upstairs to the women's section, while Mort joined Abe and his nephews on the ground floor. While he was relieved to be unburdened by the flock of women that constantly surrounded him, Mort also felt strangely alone. He had been in the sanctuary countless times, but today he felt out-of-place and insignificant.

The service continued without incident. It was not a stellar reading by any means, but it was not the worst performance he had heard from a bar mitzvah boy either. He felt a secret burst of delight with each mistake his nephew uttered, but no one else seemed to notice. When Mort looked around the room he saw only smiling people, nodding their heads. They were all on Harry's side.

The walk home was painful. Mort walked behind Abe's family, counting the cobblestones, trying to remember important business matters. He felt strongly that he should be using his time more efficiently that day, not wasting it on celebrations. He counted invoices and orders in his head, thinking about how busy he would be on Monday, and made a promise to himself to work on Sunday in order to get a jump on the week's work ahead. At one point he called out to Abe, offering a reminder of an order that needed to be shipped out in a few days. Abe waved his hand in the air, brushing the reminder aside. Abe would not speak about business today.

Back at the house, Mort said hello to relatives he hadn't seen for months. He accepted compliments on his daughters, praises for their dresses and smiles, but nothing could improve his mood. He took a glass of wine and sipped it. When Rose came over to him with a plate of food, she reminded him to give Harry the envelope they had brought. After that he sat alone, feeling self-conscious and clumsy as he tried to balance the plate on his lap.

The party went on that way, silent and empty for him, until it was almost time to leave. He was on his second glass of wine when he felt a strong arm around his shoulders. It was Helen's cousin Shep, a bearded, hulk of a man a few years older than Abe. "Morty!" he said, squeezing with his oversized hands. "Good to see you!" Mort tried to pull away, but it was impossible to escape Shep's grip. "Guess what Morty? No, you'll never guess. I got married! Never been better! Meet my wife, Morty, and my son!" The next minute Mort was being dragged to meet Shep's chubby wife Alice, and their even chubbier baby boy. "Nice to meet you," Mort said.

Alice was quiet, a perfect match for the outgoing Shep. "I tell you Mort," he boomed, "being a father is the best thing for a man! Ah, what am I yapping to you for? You know all about it!" He grabbed Mort for one more stifling embrace. "Nice to see you," Mort muttered, retreating as quickly as possible.

In his haste to escape, Mort turned into the kitchen by mistake. Rose was there with several other women, wrapping up food now that the desserts had been set out. She looked over at him and pointed, motioning through the doorway to Harry, who was standing with one of his brothers.

Mort patted his pocket; the envelope was still there. He might as well get it over with so that he could go home. Over the din of the crowd he heard Shep's booming voice again. Shep,

that idiot, had a new lease on life! He was holding up his son, swooshing him around like a kid with a toy airplane. What Mort noticed next confounded him. Men and women alike turned their heads, this way and that, to catch a glimpse of the baby. For a few seconds at least, the guests were transfixed, their eyes tightly set on the infant in the air. For a moment, maybe more, everyone else was forgotten, even the bar mitzvah boy himself.

When Mort looked back at Rose in the kitchen, desire leapt at him for the first time in months. He felt suddenly generous and surprisingly hopeful. He approached his nephew and patted him on the back. "Nice job, Harry," Mort told him, slipping the envelope into his hand.

With his task completed, Mort gathered his family to leave. At the door he let Helen kiss him on the cheek, and shook Abe's hand for a moment longer than usual. Abe and Helen looked at each other, but when Helen raised her eyebrow, Mort pretended not to notice. He guided Rose through the doorway, and, with daughters in tow, they left.

Helen

The day after Harry's bar mitzvah, Helen woke early. When the clock ticked toward 5:00 am, she decided it was reasonable to get out of bed. Abe and the boys wouldn't be up for hours, and she would have some time to herself. She walked down the hall to the kitchen, treading softly so as not to wake Rose's family below. Helen often thought she and Abe should live on the bottom floor, especially considering the amount of jumping and stomping that went on in her apartment. She was certain one of her boys was going to end up crashing through the floor boards into Rose's living room one of these days; she just hoped he would end up on the couch.

Helen turned on the light in the kitchen and cringed. There was still so much to clean up from the party. Rows of glasses, left overnight to dry, had to be boxed up. Covered plates of cookies and pastries had to be frozen or given away. If they stayed on the counter, the boys would devour them all before lunchtime and have stomachaches for the rest of the day. Helen measured out the coffee for the pot and sat down at the table waiting for it to brew.

Thank goodness the day before had been a success. Earlier in the week the Rabbi had spoken to her quietly, taking her aside to express his concerns. The Rabbi didn't usually talk to the mothers, so Helen knew it was important. He assured her that Harry was a wonderful boy, but that she shouldn't expect too much. He tried to tell Helen what she already knew. She just hoped it wouldn't be too disappointing for Abe.

The night before the service, Abe practiced with Harry at the dining room table. Over and over Harry repeated the prayers, just as he had done for months. Harry never got upset when he made a mistake, but he never really improved either. It was, Helen knew, impossible to be upset with Harry because he never got upset with himself. He never uttered obscenities or threw

his books or even frowned. He knew the bar mitzvah was something he had to get through, and he was determined to manage it with as little upset as possible. Harry instinctively avoided anything unpleasant.

Girls were *not* unpleasant for Harry. Even at thirteen, he knew how to talk to them. It was a puzzling thing, Helen thought, to be the mother of such a boy. She saw how the older girls, girls of 15 already, looked at Harry. And even more surprising was the way he looked back at them, meeting their gazes, as if he had answers to questions they had not even thought of.

Helen watched Harry as if she were two people. As his mother she was proud of him, proud of his looks, his confidence. But when she watched him as the young girl she once was, she ached for the girls whose hearts he might break one day. Part of her wanted to warn them against his charms, shoo them away for their own sakes, and take their side against him. But the mother-side of her held this part back, and she was unable to set any obstacle in front of him. That was why she bought him a tie for the bar mitzvah that set off the color of his blue eyes exactly. And why she never let the barber give him buzz cuts in the summertime.

On the morning of the bar mitzvah, all eyes had been on Harry. The congregation was accustomed to awkward, gangly bar-mitzvah boys, boys made self-conscious by their first burst of hormones and newly grown acne. But Harry had stood in front of the congregation that morning with all the confidence of a rabbi, even if he had none of the knowledge of one. There were many mistakes, of course, but Harry never hesitated for a moment. When it was over, everyone agreed it had been a lovely service. And his father, who heard every mistake with his ears but not with his heart, was beaming.

Family and friends came back to their house for a luncheon that turned into dinner. There had been congratulations for all involved, even Harry's three younger brothers, who didn't

quite know what to make of the half-strangers speaking to them. Harry shook each hand and kissed each cheek, accepting the compliments and gifts of every guest.

Halfway through the party, a small group of girls from Harry's class came over to him, giggling. One of them, a pretty blond whose name Helen didn't know, stood closer than was necessary. "You did great today," she said. She whispered something in Harry's ear that Helen couldn't hear and Harry smiled. When he whispered something back, the girl blushed.

Helen's heart, so recently filled with pride, had suddenly deflated. What had Harry said to that girl? She felt disconnected from him in a way she had never experienced, and grabbed at the dining room table for support. She found herself breathless, unable to collect enough air in the crowded space.

"Helen? Are you alright?" It was Abe, at her side in an instant.

"I'm fine."

"You look like you're going to pass out. Sit down." He pulled a chair over for her and bent down to look at her. "What is it? What's wrong?"

She had closed her eyes to give herself time to think, to find an acceptable answer to the question. There was no time. She had a house full of guests, platters to bring out, people to feed, a party to run. What could she possibly say? That in watching her son flirt with a girl, she was suddenly terrified, overcome with emotions she could not fully describe? That her knees caved in when she found she could no longer define her role in Harry's life? That the emptiness she felt at that moment was a faceless guest, unwanted and sour, who had snuck into her home and ruined her celebration?

When she didn't answer, Abe told her not to move. "I'm getting you something to drink," her insisted. But he didn't have to. Rose was already there, with tea and a plate. Helen

drank the tea and took a few bites. She felt better, and she shook off the emptiness. She was hostess once again.

It had been a wonderful party. The food was delicious. The cake, which Helen made herself, was a spectacle of sugar and love. But no matter how many compliments she received, Helen still hadn't been able to breathe in as much air as she needed. Harry was hers no longer, and the realization of the change had been a terrible blow.

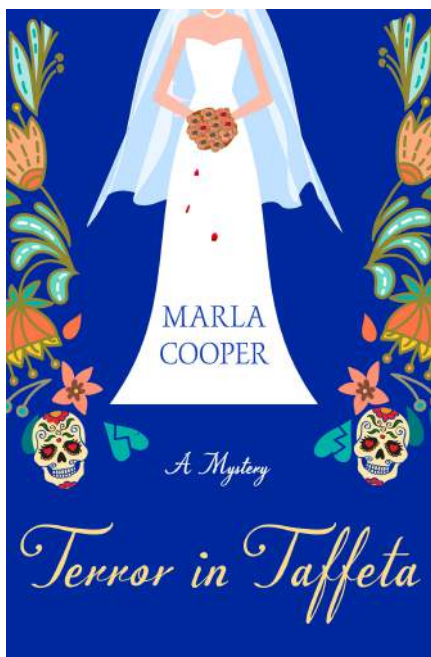
Now, the morning after the celebration, Helen was faced with only a day of housework to look forward to. Her heart ached a little as she filled up her coffee mug. She cut a few slivers off the end of one of the pound cakes, gulped down her coffee and took out her apron. It was time to start cleaning.

When the kitchen was done, the living room was next. Helen wiped and dusted, collapsed folding chairs and card tables, and moved small pieces of furniture back to their proper places. She didn't want to wake anyone with the vacuum, but when she ran her broom underneath the sofa, she found a tiny blue sock that had gotten swept up with the crumbs. She tucked it into her apron pocket, and made a mental note to call Alice, her cousin Shep's wife, to let her know she had it. She would put it in the wash tomorrow.

It was only when Helen opened the windows to air out the living room that she thought of it. The idea floated in with the crisp morning breeze, erasing the staleness that had filled her lungs. A new resolve elated her, and she stopped for a moment to savor it. She was only 35 for heaven's sake. Why not?

After that, the rest of her morning chores flew by. By the time the boys woke up, clamoring for food, Helen was giddy with newfound purpose. Abe wandered into the kitchen a few minutes later. "You made a beautiful party," he said, leaning forward to kiss her, already

recalling his favorite moments of the previous day. She returned the kiss and played along, but Helen had no interest in reminiscing. The bar mitzvah was behind her, and her heart was hungry for what would come next.



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Wedding planner Kelsey McKenna is just a few hours away from wrapping up her latest job: a destination wedding in the charming, colonial Mexican town of San Miguel de Allende. The reception is all set up, the tequila donkey is waiting outside, and the bride and groom are standing on the altar, pledging their eternal love. But just as the priest is about to pronounce them husband and wife, one of the bridesmaids upstages the couple by collapsing into a floral arrangement. Worst of all, Kelsey discovers that she hasn't just fainted-she's dead. The demanding mother of the bride, Mrs. Abernathy, insists Kelsey not tell the wedding party; she paid for a wedding after all, not a funeral.

Losing a bridesmaid is bad enough, but when the bride's sister is arrested for murder, Mrs. Abernathy demands that Kelsey fix the matter at once. And although she's pretty sure investigating a murder isn't in her contract, crossing the well-connected mother of the bride could be a career-killer. Before she can leave Mexico and get back to planning weddings, Kelsey must deal with stubborn detectives, another dead body, and a rekindled romance in this smart, funny cozy debut perfect for fans of Carolyn Haines.

MARLA COOPER is the pen name of a professional writer who has written everything from advertising copy to travel guidebooks to the occasional haiku. While ghostwriting a book on destination weddings, she found inspiration for her first novel, *Terror in Taffeta*. Originally hailing from Texas, Marla now lives in Oakland, California, with her writer husband and her polydactyl tuxedo cat.

CHAPTER 1

The sea-foam green bridesmaids' dresses had been a mistake. Not for the obvious reason—that sea-foam green bridesmaids' dresses are almost always a mistake—but because they added a sickly tinge to Nicole Abernathy's three very hungover bridesmaids.

I'd warned them not to overindulge the night before the wedding, begged them to have their bachelorette party back home instead of waiting until they got to San Miguel de Allende, but no one listens to the wedding planner when it's time to start drinking.

"Kelsey, I don't feel so hot," Nicole said as I helped her step into her wedding dress.

"I'm not surprised," I said. "You've barely eaten all week."

"I've barely eaten all month," she said, studying herself in the mirror. "But at least the dress fits."

I laughed. Nicole couldn't have been any more than a size 6, and the forgiving corset dress she'd chosen would have fit even if she'd been bingeing on cupcakes all month. "What are you talking about? It looks amazing on you. Always has. Promise me you'll eat something at the reception?"

"I should be hungry, but the thought of food right now . . . ugh." Nicole clutched her stomach and shook her head. "I should have listened to you and had the bachelorette party back in San Francisco."

"That's okay," I said with as chipper a smile as I could muster. "Being sick on your wedding day is good luck."

"Really?" Nicole's big brown eyes searched mine.

"Sure," I lied. "Now hold still."

I felt bad for her, and I tried to be extra gentle as I tightened the satin ribbons that crisscrossed the back of her dress.

"Owww," Nicole whined.

Okay, so I wasn't gentle enough.

"Sorry. Warn me if you're going to pass out or something."

"No, that's okay." Nicole took a deep breath. "Pull tighter."

After two or three more tugs, I tied off the ribbons and tucked them down into the dress, leaving behind a tidy herringbone pattern.

I spun her around for a final inspection. Her freshly highlighted honey-blond hair was pulled into a perfectly executed chignon, and the makeup artist had not only made her look downright dewy but had hidden all evidence of the dark circles under her eyes.

"Well, you might not feel well, but you look amazing."

As Nicole turned to admire herself, Zoe Abernathy ducked between the bride and the full-length mirror.

"Hey," Nicole said. "Move it, lady."

Zoe laughed as she checked herself in the mirror. "Maid-of-

honor privileges. Or sister privileges. Or, I don't know, hungover-person privileges." She tried to smooth her short, messy hair, but her surfer-girl layers could not be repressed. "Did I mention I'm never drinking again?"

"Only about thirty times," said Dana Poole, a testy redhead who'd been hogging the other mirror while she applied the finishing touches to her makeup. The girl had been peevish all week, and the hangover wasn't exactly bringing out her best qualities.

"Well, I'm gonna say it thirty more times, so get used to it."

"I don't even want to hear it," Dana said, pointing her mascara wand accusingly at the bride's sister. "It's your own fault, you know."

"What do you mean?" Zoe said, batting her eyelashes innocently. "Nicole wanted a bachelorette party. And you can't have a bachelorette party without a cocktail or three."

"Yeah, but we're not in college anymore. We could have done without that last round of shots."

Zoe shrugged. "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

Dana scowled as she screwed the cap back on her mascara and tossed it back into her makeup bag. "Well, next time, keep your good ideas to yourself."

"C'mon, Dana," said the bride, taking a playful tone with her cranky friend. "You have to admit it was pretty fun."

Dana shrugged. "I guess so. Kelsey, will you get us some sparkling water? San Pellegrino, preferably."

Wait—was she really demanding that I drop what I was doing and go find refreshments? "Sorry, I've kind of got my hands full here, but there's some flat water over there in the cooler."

"Whatever," she sighed.

Dana had been a late addition to the wedding party, having originally turned down the invitation to Nicole's destination wedding altogether. But after Dana found a last-minute plane ticket

to Mexico, Nicole said *of course* it wasn't too late to join the bridal party.

I'd spent way too much time the previous week hunting down an extra bridesmaid dress and having it FedExed to the villa we'd rented to house the bridal party for the week. Plus, we'd had to promote one of the guests to groomsman, because the bride's mother thought an uneven number of attendants would be "tacky."

Of course, no one would ever know how hard I'd worked to pull it all off. I was the magical fairy who made things happen, and if magical fairies do their job right, everyone has a great time and the bride has a perfect day.

At least, that's how it's supposed to work.

Instead, Dana had been huffing around all morning, complaining about one thing after another. "Why do we have to get ready in this cramped little room?" *It's a two-hundred-year-old chapel, and it wasn't built for your convenience.* "Why don't my shoes match the other bridesmaids'?" *You're lucky to have shoes at all on such short notice.* "Why aren't there any vegan options on the menu?" *Um, because . . . shut up, that's why.*

I'd managed to bite my tongue for Nicole's sake, but Dana was being a total bridesmaid-zilla.

From somewhere behind me, the third bridesmaid let out a moan. She'd been so quiet all week and had caused so little trouble, I was blanking on her name. What was it again? Kristen? Kirsten? Christy? Whatever it was, she put her head down on top of her folded arms and declared that she was dying.

"Okay, Pepto-Bismol all around," I said, heading to my emergency kit. Wedding planners have to be prepared for anything—especially *destination* wedding planners. You can't just run to the nearest drugstore in a foreign country and assume you'll find what you need. I always made sure I had double-sided tape to hold errant straps in place, clear fingernail polish to fix runs in

pantyhose, and anti-nausea medication for getting girls down the aisle after a night of drinking.

“Bottoms up,” I said as I passed out the tiny plastic dose cups. With a little luck and two tablespoons of the thick, pink syrup, they’d be able to get through the service.

Nicole scrunched up her face, looking as if she’d just knocked back another tequila shot.

“Sorry, Nicole.” I took the empty cup from her. “It’ll all be over soon.”

Poor Nicole. I felt terrible for her, being sick on her wedding day. I genuinely liked the bride, and had ever since we’d met a year earlier, back in San Francisco.

The mother of the bride, Mrs. Abernathy, had dragged the young couple into my office against their will, thinking I’d be the perfect person to put together the exquisite wine country wedding she’d always assumed her daughter would have. I knew immediately that she was going for elegant. A strikingly chic woman, she was perfectly put together, from her sleek bobbed hairstyle down to her high-heeled Ferragamos.

But when I mentioned that I’d planned weddings from Napa to Mexico to Europe, Nicole’s face brightened and her fiancé, Vince Moreno, looked up from his iPhone for the first time since he’d gotten there.

“Mexico?” Nicole asked as Vince’s face broke into a grin.

“Napa!” her mom corrected, with a slightly sharper than necessary nudge and an “Isn’t that what you meant to say” look in her eyes.

Mrs. Abernathy hadn’t realized that Mexico was on the table—neither had I, frankly, until that moment—or she probably wouldn’t have brought her daughter to me.

“Mexico would be so romantic!” Nicole squealed, exchanging excited looks with her fiancé and her sister, Zoe.

Zoe nodded enthusiastically. “And fun, too! Remember that time we went to Playa del Carmen?”

I pulled a fat binder from a shelf behind my desk and flipped through some photos. “You could get married on a Mexican beach, or you could go for a colonial town like San Miguel de Allende. It’s really beautiful, very European.”

They looked through some glamour shots of the romantic, colonial town with cobblestone streets, and I showed them a thick notebook full of vendors I could personally recommend in San Miguel.

“Oh, these flowers look so . . . professional!” Mrs. Abernathy said. “Do they have, you know, *electricity*?” She whispered the last word to make sure she wasn’t offending anyone.

“They have just about everything you could possibly need.” *It’s Mexico, not Burundi*, I wanted to add but didn’t. “And what we can’t get there, we can have brought in,” I reassured her.

“That sounds good to me!” Nicole said. “Vince? What do you think?”

“As long as you’re there, I don’t care where we go,” he said, giving his intended a spontaneous peck on the cheek. “But Mexico does sound pretty awesome.”

Despite Mrs. Abernathy’s initial misgivings, everything looked amazing now that the day had actually arrived. I’d peeked out earlier and seen the guests nodding their approval as they filled the wooden pews, taking in the charming, centuries-old church. The flowers were perfect, the groomsmen were all in place, and the tequila donkey was waiting patiently outside to lead the procession to the reception at the Instituto Allende.

Mrs. Abernathy didn’t actually know about the tequila donkey yet, but the groomsmen had enlisted me to help pull off the surprise. She wasn’t going to like it—having a burro laden with bottles of tequila being part of the proceedings—but since it

was technically a gift for the newlyweds, she didn't get veto power. Personally, I couldn't wait to see her reaction; I'd told the wedding photographer, Brody Marx, who also happened to be a close personal friend of mine, to make sure not to miss the moment, under the threat of death.

But first, we had to get through the ceremony. Luckily, the Pepto-Bismol had started doing its job and the bridal party was beginning to perk up a bit.

"You ready?" I asked Nicole.

"Ready," she replied.

I guided her and the three bridesmaids toward the arched doorways at the back of the chapel, where Mr. Abernathy stood waiting for his elder daughter.

He smiled proudly and kissed her on the cheek. "You look beautiful, sweetheart."

"Kelsey," Dana said, interrupting the moment. "I have to use the bathroom."

"I'm sorry, Dana, but can't it wait until after the service?" I'd already given the nod to one of the groomsmen to seat Mrs. Abernathy, and the quartet was waiting for my cue to start the processional.

"I don't think it can." Dana said as she tossed me her bouquet and bolted down the hall.

I'd told them all to use the facilities before they got into their Spanx. Why hadn't she listened?

Zoe stared after the bridesmaid, incredulous. "That girl—"

The thought was interrupted by the slam of the bathroom door and the muffled sound of someone being sick coming from down the hall.

Okay, so she really *couldn't* have waited.

"Should one of us go check on her?" asked the third bridesmaid, whom I'd decided was definitely named Kristen.

“That’s okay, Claire,” Nicole said. (*Claire! That was it!*) “They can’t start without me, right?”

“That’s right,” I said, as I tried to distract her with some unnecessary, last-minute adjustments to her veil.

Dana returned a minute or two later, her face blotchy red and droplets of water spattered across her shoes. No matter—all eyes would be on the bride.

Okay, *whew*. Now that we had everyone accounted for, the wedding could finally begin. I fluffed Nicole’s gown around her, adjusted her veil one last time, and handed her the luscious bouquet of orchids and roses we’d picked out.

She was perfect.

“Okay,” I said, “let’s do this.” I opened the chapel door, gave the nod to the musicians, and ducked back out. The sound of trumpets pierced the quiet of the church; then a violin, a guitar, and a *vibuela* joined in, signaling the start of the bridal procession.

Dana glanced back toward the bathroom, but I spun her around and gave her a little shove toward the center aisle. She tottered at first, then fell into the slow rhythm of the processional march.

Claire came next, followed by Zoe, both smiling gamely for the throng of guests who twisted in their seats, eager to catch a glimpse of the girl in the white dress.

“Okay, Nicole,” I said, “remember to keep your bouquet low so you don’t cover up that gorgeous gown, and don’t forget to breathe.”

She smiled and nodded, took her father’s arm, and stepped into the chapel, entering to a collective murmur of admiration.

Vince stood waiting near the altar, looking absolutely smitten. I could see why Nicole had fallen for him. Dark hair, dark eyes, muscular build—he could have a bright future as a tuxedo model if the whole media rep thing didn’t work out.

After Nicole's father had gotten her halfway down the aisle, I collapsed in the back pew and kicked off my strappy sandals. Everything was out of my hands, at least for the next fifteen minutes.

I pulled my hair up off my neck and fanned myself with a wedding program, wishing I could have a do-over with the hair-stylist. She'd generously offered to style my chestnut mop into an elegant updo—although I was pretty sure it was at Mrs. Abernathy's urging—but I'd known it wouldn't last twenty minutes with all the running around I had to do, and I'd told her not to bother.

Whew. It was nice to have this little break in the chaos.

As Father Villarreal spoke about the bonds of marriage, I went through my mental checklist of reception to-dos. Food? Check. I had stopped by earlier and seen the caterer busily preparing the hors d'oeuvres. Music? Ready to go. The couple had opted for a DJ, and he was all set up. Flowers? We'd practically smothered the courtyard of the former-convent-turned-art-school with roses, lilies, and other colorful blossoms. I couldn't wait for Nicole and Vince to see the finished product.

I relaxed a bit and listened to Father Villarreal's deep, mellifluous voice. What a find he'd been. I'd never worked with him before—he was a last-minute replacement priest who agreed to fill in—but he brought just the right amount of gravitas to the proceedings. I allowed my mind to wander as he spoke. I hadn't talked to my assistant, Laurel, since the day before, and I made a mental note to call her later to make sure everything was going okay back at the office.

"If anyone sees any reason why these two should not be wed," Father Villarreal said, "let them speak now or forever hold their peace."

I stifled a laugh. No one used that line in wedding ceremonies

anymore. I looked around to see if there were any objections, other than my own to his antiquated question.

My break came to an end all too soon. Father Villarreal pronounced them husband and wife and told Vince he could kiss the bride. I stretched my legs and wiggled my toes. Time to put my shoes back on. As I bent down to fish them out from under the pew, I heard a gasp.

Uh-oh. Gasps are never good news.

I shot out of my seat in time to see Dana lurch forward, holding her stomach. She looked like—no. Really? She looked like she was going to barf again, right there on the altar.

Dana tried to steady herself by grabbing a tall bouquet of orchids, but to no avail. She pulled the vase down with her, causing a loud crash as they both hit the stone floor.

“No, no, no, no, no,” I whispered. “This cannot be happening.”

I signaled to the mariachi quartet to start playing again as I rushed to the front of the church, ready to do whatever I could to minimize the damage.

By the time I reached the front, Zoe and Nicole were crouched down next to Dana.

“Come on, get *up*,” Zoe demanded, shaking the bridesmaid’s limp body.

“It’s okay,” I whispered. “Go back to your spots.”

A panicky feeling rose up in my chest. Dana must have been sicker than I’d realized. I had to think fast. Addressing the congregation, I announced in my most confident voice, “She’s fine, everyone.” I fanned her with a wedding program, which I hoped would make her magically spring back to her feet. “She just fainted.”

Reading the pleading look in my eyes, Father Villarreal raised his hands, and his voice boomed across the sanctuary: “I now present to you Mr. and Mrs. Moreno.”

On cue, the mariachis began playing the recessional, prompting Vince and Nicole to begin their uncertain walk back down the aisle, followed by two pairs of attendants. The remaining usher stood awkwardly, unsure what his role was now that he was devoid of anyone to usher. I shooed him down the aisle as I mouthed, "Go! Go!"

The guests filed out, glancing back to see me hovering over Dana while trying my best to look upbeat. Once they were all safely outside, I felt Dana's wrist. I couldn't find anything, but then again, I wasn't an experienced pulse taker.

This could not be happening. I frantically felt up and down her forearm, but all I could feel was my own heart thudding in my chest.

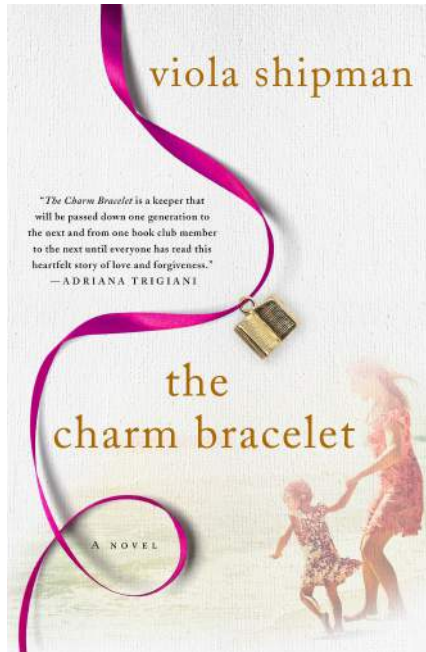
"Dana, come on, wake up," I said, shaking her slightly. She didn't move.

I lifted one of her eyelids, not sure what I was looking for, and was greeted with an empty gaze.

Father Villarreal returned from closing the church doors with a questioning look on his face. "*Enferma?*"

Stunned, I shook my head as I sank down onto the floor.

"No, I—I think she's dead."



on-sale 3/29/16

Publicity Contact: Katie.Bassel@stmartins.com

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Through an heirloom charm bracelet three women will rediscover the importance of family, love, faith, friends, fun and a passion for living as the magic of each charm changes their lives.

Lolly, still lives in the family cabin on Lost Land Lake where her mother gave her the charm bracelet that would become Lolly's talisman and connection to family past and Lolly hopes the present, but her daughter, Arden, and granddaughter, Lauren, haven't visited in years and time is running out for Lolly.

Arden, couldn't wait to leave her small town life behind for Chicago, but now divorced and burned out at work, she's simply trying to make it from day to day. In the rush of life she's let the years and all the things she once enjoyed slip away. When she receives an unexpected phone call about her mother she must decide if she can face going home.

Lauren, a talented young painter buries her passion to study business in the hopes of helping her mother after she discovers that her father left Arden struggling to make ends meet, but Lauren is slowly dying inside and doesn't know how to tell her mother the truth.

VIOLA SHIPMAN writes regularly for *People*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and *Coastal Living*, among other places, and is a regular contributor to *All Things Considered*.

prologue



The Half-Heart Charm



To a Life Where We're Never Separated



July 4, 1953—Lolly

Fireflies blinked, illuminating the steppingstones to Lost Land Lake. “You see that, Lolly?” My mom laughed in the twilight. “Mother Nature is giving us a preview to the fireworks.”

I smiled and inhaled.

My whole world smelled of summer: Suntan lotion and sparklers, barbecues and pine needles.

By our ears, dragonflies fluttered, as if an orchestra of violins had been sent, just for my mom and me, as we walked to our dock.

I had just blown out the candles on my tenth birthday cake, and my dad was busy building a bonfire for s’mores. He had given me his gift, my first fishing pole, so I could spend Sundays with him, but now it was time for my mom’s gift. And she always gave it to me at the end of our dock.

In the quickening dusk, I felt for her hand as we walked, our wrists colliding, setting our charm bracelets jangling. I giggled. Out of habit, I began to feel for her charms, trying to guess each one by touch rather than sight. It was a game I had invented years ago.

“My baby shoe!” I said excitedly.

“To a life filled with happy, healthy children,” my mom said.

“A key!” I yelled.

“Because you unlocked my heart,” she said.

“Snowflake?”

“Yes,” she said. “To a person of many dimensions.”

My fingers kept flying, and my mom had a story and explanation for every charm. I knew almost every one by heart, and I spun my fingers until I found my favorites, the ones I always played with: The grand piano with the lid that opened and closed, the turtle with green gemstone eyes whose head moved back and forth, and a wishing well with a moving crank.

“To a life filled with beauty, a life filled with slow, meaningful decisions, and a life where all your wishes come true!”

As we neared the end of the dock, my fingers felt a charm I couldn’t identify.

“What’s this one, Mommy?” I asked. “I don’t know it.”

“That . . .” My mom hesitated, and her voice broke.

“Are you okay?”

“That’s my rocking chair,” she explained.

“What’s it for?”

“It’s for . . .”—again, she stopped, catching her breath, as if she had just finished a long swim across the lake—“. . . a long and healthy life.”

We took a seat at the end of the dock, and dangled our feet in the water, just as the fireworks started.

“Ooooh!” I said, as much for the chill of the water as for the fireworks. “Woooooww!”

My birthday fell on the Fourth of July, just like our nation’s, and I was a child of summer.

“All those fireworks are really for you!” my mom would always whisper, the explosions booming overhead and echoing off the water. “The world is celebrating your uniqueness!”

Every year, for as long as I could remember, I received a charm from my mother on special occasions: Christmas, trips, school accomplishments. And every birthday, my mom would add another charm to my bracelet.

This year was no different.

“Happy birthday, Lolly!” my mom said, pulling me into her arms and kissing my head. “You ready to recite our poem first?”

I shook my head no.

“Why not?”

“Mom! I’m getting too old.”

“You will never be too old. Let’s do it together then!”

*This charm
Is to let you know . . .*

My mom’s face lit up as she started the poem. Suddenly, it was like jumping into the lake on a hot day, I couldn’t resist. So I joined in:

*That every step along the way,
I have loved you so.
So each time you open up,
A little box from me
Remember that it really all
Began with You and Me.*

My mom hugged me, radiating with joy. “Here you go,” she said, pulling a small package from the pocket of her jacket.

I ripped open the tiny box, and, as usual, there was a silver charm sitting atop a little velvet throne.

“What is it, Mommy?” I asked, squinting in the darkness.

“It’s half of a heart. To a life where we’re never separated.”

I pulled it out of the box and studied it, rubbing my hands over its delicate outline.

“Where’s the other half?”

“Right here,” she said, showing me her bracelet, which was as heavy with charms as our Christmas tree was with ornaments. Then she took my wrist, added the charm and placed my hand on her heart. “And right here. You will always be a part of me.”

I smiled and leaned into my mom. She was warm, safe, and smelled like a mix of peonies and Coppertone.

“See, when you put our charms together,” she said, connecting the two halves of our heart, “they read ‘mom and daughter.’ They complete each other. So no matter what happens from now on, I will always be a part of

you, and you will always be a part of me. Will you promise me something, Lolly?”

“Anything, Mommy.”

“Promise me you will always tell our story and you will always be you.”

“I promise, Mommy,” I replied.

My mom smiled and looked out over the lake as fireworks illuminated the night sky, and put her arm around my shoulder, drawing me even closer.

“I will always be with you, Lolly. Especially when you wear your bracelet. It will always be filled with memories of our life together. No one can ever take that away.”

She kissed my cheek as the fireworks exploded overhead.

“I will always love you, Lolly,” she said.

“I will always love you, too, Mommy.”

A breeze rushed across the water and over the lip of the dock to jangle our bracelets.

“You know, some people say they hear the voices of their family in this lake: In the call of the whippoorwill, the cry of the loon, the moan of the bullfrog,” my mom whispered. “But I hear my family’s voices in the jangling of my charms.”

The way she said that gave me goose bumps. It was so beautiful, I had to look at my mom. Flashes of light from the fireworks illuminated her curly, blond hair and the freckles on her rosy cheeks. It was as if a million cameras with a million flashbulbs were taking her picture, so I’d never forget how she looked at this moment.

I looked even closer, and it was then that I noticed tears streaming down her face.

A year later, my beloved mother would be gone, dead of cancer.



July 4, 2013

Fireworks boom overhead, knocking me from this memory.

I am now seventy. My mother and father are long gone. My husband is dead, my daughter, Arden, grown and on her own in Chicago five hours

away, my granddaughter, Lauren, is in college. For too many years now, I have celebrated my birthday alone. And yet when I look into the night sky, I am still mesmerized by the simple beauty of summer fireworks, overwhelmed by memories.

As my head tilts upward, I can feel tears trail down my face.

My mother may have taken half of my heart with her, but I got to keep all of her charms, and she *was* right: The charm bracelet is a constant reminder of her love for me.

I vowed to myself I would share our family stories with Arden and Lauren because none of us ever really dies as long as our stories are passed along to those we love. I started to tell them about our family when (they were both little girls) but then they got so busy, and life—as life does—quickly skips away like a flat piece of shale across Lost Land Lake.

I try to remind them of our history and traditions through the charms I still send, but my daughter has shrugged off our past and me, as if we were a jacket she no longer likes to wear. And her absence stings, like the first frosty day in October.

So while I pray they will return home, I continue alone: I still read my mother's poem out loud to the lake on my birthday every Fourth of July as fireworks explode. And, without fail, the wind will rattle my charm bracelet—now even heavier than my mom's ever was—and I will shut my eyes, and listen to the charms.

Happy birthday, Lolly, I can hear my mother say.

part one



The Hot Air Balloon Charm



To a Life Filled with Adventure

One



May 2014—Arden

Arden Lindsey realized too late that she was shouting. She got up and slammed the door to her office at *Paparazzi* magazine, fuming over the terribly written article just submitted by her youngest online staff writer.

*Beyoncé rocked her “recently unpregnant stomach” with sushi?!
Are you kidding me?*

Simóne was always more interested in champagne and backup dancers than writing bubbly headlines and flowing sentences.

“And how many times can you use some form of the word ‘sing?’” Arden continued to yell. “Sing? Sang? Song? Singer? Songstress?”

Arden took a deep breath.

“*And* could you even attempt to code the article for the website?” she mumbled to herself.

Arden plopped back into her chair, the momentum causing her black bob to swing in front of her face and her thick, black eyeglass frames to bounce on the bridge of her nose.

She removed her glasses, closed her eyes, and rubbed her temples. She could already feel the dull thump of a headache approaching even before it arrived, just like the vibrating tracks of the El train that ran outside the hip

River North warehouse offices of *Paparazzi* magazine announced the train's arrival.

You can't stop this train, either, Arden thought, pulling two ibuprofen from her bag as the El suddenly roared by her window.

Arden popped the pills into her mouth and drained the remnants of her latte. She inhaled deeply, attempting to channel her inner yogi, pushing her glasses high onto her nose and positioning her fingers over her Mac like a trained pianist.

Behind the Scenes with Beyonc[ACUTE "e"]!
(Only [ITALIC "Paparazzi"] Was There!)

By Simóne Jaffe

[P]

Are you ready to party, single ladies, because [CELEBRITY_LINK "Beyonc[ACUTE "e"]"] is!

[P]

The pop diva, who will perform her [LINK "Mrs. Carter Show"] Friday and Saturday at the [LINK "United Center"], held a private bash at [LINK "Sunda"] to celebrate her arrival in [LINK "Chicago"], where she dined on sushi and saki with [BUSINESS LINKS "hubby"] [CELEBRITY_LINK "Jay-Z"] and celeb BFF's [CELEBRITY_LINK "Gwyneth Paltrow"] and [CELEBRITY_LINK "Alicia Keys"].

When Arden Lindsey was in a zone like this, it was as if her soul had suddenly left her body and now hovered over her watching from above with the exposed ductwork and the wood beams of the drafty warehouse ceiling.

She could see her hands fly across the top row of her keyboard, using keys few ever touched.

Brackets and parentheses, number signs and ampersands.

Arden had a job few even realized existed.

Arden spent her day editing and rewriting, creating search engine optimization, click-throughs, coding, links, all the things that nobody considered when they read the magazine from their laptop, iPad, or cell, but which

made advertisers happy and made *Paparazzi* the most searched celebrity website in the world.

Arden began to click through the pictures that *Paparazzi*'s photographer had sent at dawn: Beyoncé hugging Gwyneth. Jay-Z in shades. Impossibly tall Kimora in high heels.

Of course, Simóne was stunning, too.

Simóne looked like she belonged in the pages of *Paparazzi*: Lush, dark hair, pale skin with emerald eyes, exotic yet accessible, a sort of step-Kardashian. In person, Simóne was maybe five feet tall, perhaps a hundred pounds. But in photos, she looked like a star.

And she acted like one, too. She could chat with celebs in a way that made her seem as if she belonged in their inner circle. She could get them to say things after a few drinks.

That is, if she remembered to take notes, Arden thought.

As Arden studied the pictures, she suddenly caught her own image in the reflection of her laptop screen, her pale face and dull dress juxtaposed against the beauty of Alicia Keys and Kelly Rowland.

She stared more closely at Kelly Rowland's hair, studying it, wondering if her sleek mane was actually a wig.

Now, that's a good wig, *Mother*, she chuckled, remembering the embarrassing wigs her own mother wore to entertain tourists in her resort hometown.

[PHOTO CODE: "TZQ189&04L"]

Arden gave the article one final review, then uploaded it to *Paparazzi.com*, a stunning photo of Beyoncé and Gwyneth hugging the top of the page under a red banner that danced and screamed, "BREAKING NEWS!"

Arden picked up her coffee cup and arced it into her trash can. She stood and walked over to her eighth-floor window, which offered a peek—between the elevated tracks of the train and the high-rises around her—of Lake Michigan.

It was a beautiful, Mid-May day, and the sunlight turned the surface of the water into a kaleidoscope.

Arden watched the deep green waves rock the boats dotting the lakeshore.

She had grown up on Lake Michigan, seemingly a million miles

away—“on the other side,” as Chicagoans sometimes referred to their Michigan counterparts.

It was only one lake, but it was, truly, a “great” lake to Arden, and it had seemed to separate her from the rest of the world when she was a kid.

“I can’t smell salt,” LA and New York celebrities would always say when they visited Chicago. Or, “You mean you can’t see the other side?”—unable to comprehend the vastness and freshness of Lake Michigan.

“Nice job on the Beyoncé story.”

Arden turned at the sound of her boss’s voice.

“Thanks,” she said to Van, noting his Zac Efron hair and bow tie.

“Online a couple of minutes, and it’s already gotten a few thousand views,” he said. “Jay-Z already texted me to thank us for adding all the links to his corporate ventures. We do a great job, don’t we?”

We? You may be the editor of Paparazzi.com, and we may cover the royals every single day, but that still doesn’t give you the right to use the “royal we” in regard to my work, Arden thought.

“Yes,” Arden said, instead. It was all she could do to keep from rolling her eyes.

She hesitated.

“Is there a chance you’d let me cover her after-party tomorrow night?”

“Sounds like a great idea, but we need you here,” Van said, smiling, in the same sweetly condescending way her ex-husband used to speak to her when she talked about writing her novel.

Even a decade later, Arden still couldn’t believe that her ex fought with her about everything—writing, money, the news—everything except for his own daughter. In the end, he didn’t even fight for custody. He didn’t want Arden. He didn’t want Lauren. His iciness had frozen Arden, paralyzed her ability to stand up to him and, as a result, she walked away with little financial support. Now, her ex had a new family, a new wife and a new life without them.

“How would we survive without you?” Van asked.

Arden smiled at the irony of his question, before turning to look out the window in an attempt to hide her disappointment and frustration.

“Let Simóne do that,” he continued. “She lives for that sort of stuff. She’s going to be our next feature writer anyway.”

Arden winced, as if her boss had suddenly walked over and slapped her. Out of habit, she tugged at her earlobe, a quirk that had started years ago watching *The Carol Burnett Show* with her mom. It had morphed into a nervous habit when she first went to kindergarten and was too scared to leave her mom.

“Just tug your earlobe like Carol,” Lolly had told her outside the classroom door. “It’s your silent way to tell me—and yourself—that everything is going to be all right.”

Arden kept her back to Van until she could hear him walk away. Van was—*what?*—a decade her junior and her seventh boss in the last decade? They all came and went, like pretty toy soldiers, putting in their time until the New York office called them up, or they landed at *People*, *EW*, or *Entertainment Tonight*.

No one wants to be a writer anymore, they want to be a celebrity, just like the ones they cover, Arden sighed.

“Mail!”

Arden heard a loud plop, and turned to find a mountain of mail already sliding across her desk. She walked over and began to rifle through it.

“Same ol’, same ol’,” she said, shuffling through press releases and early samples of celeb perfumes. A return address on a padded envelope caught Arden’s eye, and her pulse quickened. Arden’s desk began to rumble, and as she looked out her window to see the El screech by again, its tracks shaking violently, she could feel her headache begin anew.

Arden picked up the puffy package and nabbed a pair of scissors from a *Paparazzi* coffee mug on her desk to cut it open.

A little card came tumbling out.

Arden’s heart leaped into her throat. Her mother’s beautiful handwriting was no longer the looping, expressive cursive of her youth. Instead, it was jagged, slanted, hunched.

She read the card:

THE MAD HATTER:

Have I gone mad?

ALICE:

I’m afraid so. You’re entirely bonkers.

But I’ll tell you a secret. All the best people are.

How's the writing going, my dear?

Remember, we all must go a little CRAZY sometimes to find our happiness.

Hope you can visit this summer. I miss you and love you with all my heart!

All my love to Lorna Lauren.

Mom

Arden's heart began to beat in her temples, then in her eyes.

Lorna? Oh, Mom, Arden said to herself, seeing her mother's mistake. How could you get your own granddaughter's name wrong?

Arden picked up the envelope and turned it upside down. A little box rolled across her desk. She popped it open and sitting atop a velvet throne was a silver charm of the Mad Hatter.

"Alice in Wonderland!" Arden smiled. *"My favorite book!"*

Arden studied the charm, placing it in her palm and rubbing her fingers over it.

Still with the charms, Mom? Still believe they're somehow magical?

She thought of her mother's charm bracelet, thick with charms, the one she never removed, the one that drove Arden crazy growing up with its incessant jangling.

How long has it been since Lauren and I have been home to Michigan? Where does time go? Arden felt a tinge of guilt and then her laptop dinged.

Deadlines. That's where.

Arden picked up the card and reread it.

"Hope you can visit this summer."

Her mother rarely asked for anything, much less a visit. Visiting home was tough for Arden, a lot like, well, Alice falling down the rabbit hole. It had not been easy for Arden growing up in small-town America. She had been an awkward kid, and it had not been easy having a mother like Lolly Lindsey.

"It's not that she's a bad person," Arden said to the charm, as if it were a therapist. "It's just that she's . . ."

"Debbie Reynolds!"

Yes! Exactly!

Bigger than life. Always on stage, Arden thought.

“Arden?”

Arden jumped and turned to find Van standing in her doorway, his blue bow tie adorned with yellow boats twitching around his neck.

Wait. I didn't say that? she realized.

“Debbie Reynolds is dating a twenty-five-year-old! Story's coming now! We have an exclusive. We'll need it online in less than fifteen minutes!”

“Of course,” Arden nodded. Van was already walking away when she called, “But when I'm done, I think I'll take an early lunch, if that's okay. I need a little fresh air.”

Van stopped, moonwalked back three steps, and checked his watch, before shooting a finger at Arden.

“Sure thing. We need you fresh. But it's still too early. Make it a late lunch, okay? We have a lot happening today. No plans tonight, right? Or this weekend? That promotion to web news director is still up in the air . . . ,” Van added.

Arden opened her mouth to respond, but Van was gone.



on-sale 4/5/16

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As the Titanic and her passengers sank slowly into the Atlantic Ocean after striking an iceberg late in the evening of April 14, 1912, a nearby ship looked on. Second Officer Herbert Stone, in charge of the midnight watch on the SS Californian sitting idly a few miles north, saw the distress rockets that the Titanic fired. He alerted the captain, Stanley Lord, who was sleeping in the chartroom below, but Lord did not come to the bridge. Eight rockets were fired during the dark hours of the midnight watch, and eight rockets were ignored. The next morning, the Titanic was at the bottom of the sea and more than 1,500 people were dead. When they learned of the extent of the tragedy, Lord and Stone did everything they could to hide their role in the disaster, but pursued by newspapermen, lawyers, and political leaders in America and England, their terrible secret was eventually revealed. *The Midnight Watch* is a fictional telling of what may have occurred that night on the SS Californian, and the resulting desperation of Officer Stone and Captain Lord in the aftermath of their inaction.

Told not only from the perspective of the SS Californian crew, but also through the eyes of a family of third-class passengers who perished in the disaster, the narrative is drawn together by Steadman, a tenacious Boston journalist who does not rest until the truth is found. *The Midnight Watch* is a powerful and dramatic debut novel--the result of many years of research in Liverpool, London, New York, and Boston, and informed by the author's own experiences as a ship's officer and a lawyer.

DAVID DYER was born and raised in Shellharbour, a small coastal town in New South Wales, Australia. He has served as an officer in the Australian merchant navy and worked as a litigation lawyer at the firm that represented the owners of the Titanic in the aftermath of the disaster. His access to countless documents and artifacts has informed and inspired his work in *The Midnight Watch*. He lives in central Sydney and Katoomba, a small mountain town in New South Wales.

Chapter 1

In the early years of the 20th century, my father heard that there was good money to be made in Venezuela. He had reliable information – from a Spaniard who knew a cattle-herder who knew the Venezuelan president personally – that petroleum seeps had been discovered and that concessions would soon be granted. Although I was living in Boston and had profitable work as a journalist, I agreed to go with him. His plan was to explore the seeps, obtain concessions and sell them on. ‘A year’s work to make a fortune,’ he said. He also said my wife Olive and two young children could come too. It would be perfectly safe.

But it was not safe. A month after our arrival my baby son had a fever and a week later he was dead. He was only four months old.

On the morning that he died, the local women came to help my wife dress the tiny body in white robes and rub red powder into his cheeks. They placed him gently amongst flowers and candles. Olive would not let me touch the baby: I had killed him by bringing him here; I had no more rights over him. The baby stayed where he was for the whole day, and then another. I was not allowed to bury him.

On the third day, I took Harriet, our six-year-old daughter, to my father’s office – a ramshackle building on stilts a few miles north along the shore of Lake Maracaibo. My plan was to keep her busy and to show her that life went on. We visited nearby seeps, unpacked equipment and spoke to local workers. At dusk we watched the Catatumbo Lightning: great sheets of electricity that danced among the vapours rising from the mouth of the Catatumbo River. The effect was dramatic and unearthly; Harriet squealed and clapped her hands. I was pleased. I wanted her to see that the spark that was no longer in her brother existed elsewhere, that there was energy all around.

But when we arrived home in the early evening we saw that the family chickens had been slaughtered in their pens. They lay in the mud featherless and mutilated. Harriet – who had tended these birds, given them names and collected their eggs – slipped her quivering hand into mine. She said nothing. Perhaps she knew what was coming.

As we climbed the stairs we heard rhythmic clapping and the singing of songs in Spanish. I held Harriet’s hand tight and opened the door. The mosquito nets had been removed from the windows and candles placed on the sills. A makeshift altar of taller candles had been built on the

floor, around which local women – half a dozen or so, all dressed in white – sat on boxes. When they saw us they sang and clapped louder, rocking back and forth.

In the centre of the room, on the floor near the altar, sat my wife. Perhaps she had drunk liquor, because she did not seem to notice us.

Harriet began to cry. At first I did not know why, but then I saw. Her mother was holding thin hemp strings that ran up to the ceiling through a crude system of blocks and pulleys. I followed the strings upwards and saw, suspended from the ceiling's central beam, the body of my son. He was dressed in white and covered in feathers. Bird wings, still bloody at the root, were attached to his shoulders and they opened and closed as my wife pulled the strings.

A woman came to Harriet, dabbed at her tears with a rag and said, in faltering English, 'No tears – no tears – tears wet the wings of the angel – he cannot fly to heaven.' The woman turned to me: my son was an *innocente*, an angel baby. His place in heaven was certain, and there could be no greater happiness. No one must cry. The other women clapped and sang. '*Nada de lagrimas. Nada de lagrimas.*' Olive joined in the clapping, applauding the dead little body creaking on its contraption of wires and pulleys.

It took only seconds for me to pull it all down. The women screamed; I felt one beating me hard on my back. I ignored them and held the tiny corpse in my arms. At first I was repulsed by this grotesque parody of my son – even after I tore away the feathers and bloodied wings, its strange, deadweight stiffness appalled me. But as I looked into the face I became mesmerized. His eyes were open and he looked out into the world just as he had when he was first born: staring into the middle distance with unfocussed eyes; seeming to see everything but nothing; so physically present but so absent too. There is a strange, profound wisdom in the gaze of the newly born and the newly dead. They seem able to see two worlds at once.

Olive tried to take the baby from me but I pushed her away. She slapped me hard across the face and said she would not let me take him from her a second time. There was hot blood in my cheeks and stinging tears in my eyes, but my wife's face was blank and dry. Not then or ever after did I see her cry a tear for our poor son.

'There is a better way,' I said, turning from her and taking the small body outside to be washed by the rain.

* * *

I buried the baby on top of a green and gentle hill overlooking the lake. Harriet stood with me as I did so and said a quick prayer of goodbye. A week later we returned to Boston. Olive refused to speak to me about our son, but I began to show her some brief sketches I had made of him in words: the way his tiny fingers had curled tightly shut when she tickled his palm with her breath; how he had been soothed by the smell of orange skins.

I began to write of our son's life in more detail. I tried to imagine his inner life, to give a richer sense of his being. I began, even, to extend his life a little by imagining his future. I published a small portrait of him in a Boston magazine in which he grew into a young boy and flew in an airplane. Olive read my work, but she never forgave me. I might be able to convey something of a likeness of our son, she said, but I would never be able to show how much she had loved him. That was something beyond words.

In time, I began to write about others who had died. First, people I had known personally, but then strangers too. I began to specialise in floods, fires and catastrophes. At the *Boston American*, where I worked, I became known as 'the body man'. If there was a disaster, they would call me. I wrote about the Terra Cotta train wreck, the *General Slocum* disaster, the Great Chelsea Fire and more. When I tried to diversify – to report on commerce or politics – my writing lacked – well, the *life* of my body stories. The city editor said I should stick to what I did best, and 'follow the bodies' became my motto.

But I want to say at the outset that I was never a ghoul. I respected the dead. I always sought out the truth of how they had died, and when I wrote about them I thought always of my own son and how much I loved him. I wanted to give the poor, mangled bodies of this world a voice. I wanted to make them live again. My writing was an act of justice.

In 1911 I happened to be in New York when the Triangle Shirtwaist factory caught fire and killed almost 150 people, most of them young immigrant girls. I saw the building ablaze at Washington Place and watched the girls jumping from the ninth and tenth floors. I saw five girls jump together from a window, their hair and dresses on fire. I saw another girl hang as long as she could from the brick sill until the flames touched her hands and she let go. I watched another girl stand at a windowsill, throw out her pocket book, hat and coat and step out into the cool evening air as calmly as if she were boarding a train.

When the bodies were taken to a ramshackle pier adjacent to the Bellevue Hospital I followed them. They were lined up in neat double rows, either side of the long dock, some in

open boxes, others simply laid on bare planking. I walked up and down. I said sorry on behalf of my country to those poor girls who stared back at me in open-eyed surprise, and I took notes. In the following weeks, I found out the truth of what had happened to them. I told the world how Max Blanck, the factory's owner, had climbed a ladder to a building next door and left them to die. I brought the girls to life as best I could, publishing stories in Boston, New York and London. Like a courtroom sketch artist, I tried to capture their likeness in a few finely observed strokes – a phrase here, a sentence there. It worked. People read my little portraits and felt the injustice of it all. They said such a thing must never happen again. At the *Boston American* the city editor passed a note to his juniors: 'If there are bodies, call Steadman.'

* * *

So when my telephone rang at two o'clock one Monday morning just over a year later, I knew it would be my newspaper and I knew there would be bodies. I wasn't disappointed. The duty editor told me an extraordinary thing: the new *Titanic* had struck ice and had been seriously damaged. People may have been killed in the collision. The station at Cape Race had heard the ship calling for help. The duty editor assured me he was perfectly serious. It was not a joke.

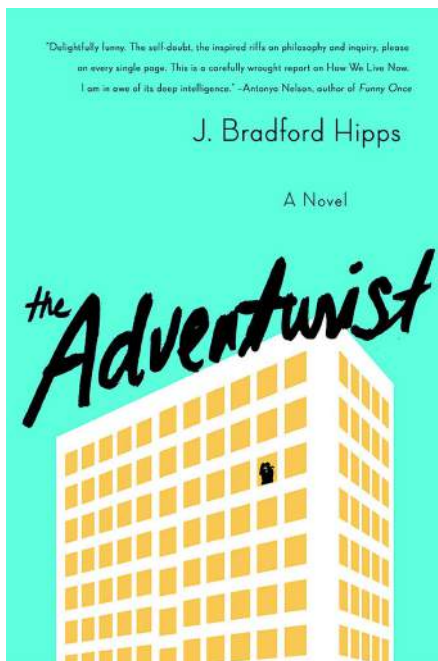
I dressed quickly and walked the mile and a half from my apartment to the *Boston American* offices in Washington Street. The streets were deserted. There was no moon, and shreds of cold mist drifted in from the harbour like floating cobwebs. I could smell salt and mud. In downtown Boston the North Atlantic always felt close and alive, but at this hour it seemed especially so. I thought about the *Titanic* out there somewhere, her hull plates crushed, some crewmen caught in the mangled steel. I began to plan how I might get aboard when the ship limped into port.

When I arrived at the office Krupp, the city editor, was already there, shouting at newsboys and dictating cablegrams. Tickers clattered and telephone bells rang. As soon as he saw me he told me to get downstairs and get hold of someone from White Star in New York on the long distance line – preferably Philip Franklin himself. But the line was overloaded. The operator could not get me through. I tried instead to get a call through to Dan Byrne, my friend at Dow Jones, and then to the Associated Press, but the lines were busy.

'Never mind about the telephone then,' Krupp said, interweaving his fingers so his hands looked like a strange mechanical bird trying to take flight. 'Go down there – to New York, on the

first train – and get it all from Franklin direct. There are bodies here, John, I can smell 'em.' He laughed at his own joke.

An hour or so later, as the first streaks of pale grey began to lie along the horizon and a feeble crescent moon showed itself in the eastern sky, I boarded the first train out of Boston for New York. I was excited. Something told me that Krupp was right: there was a good body story for me here. I felt a tingling energy in my fingers, as if they were already beginning to write it.



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In the anonymous office park of a modern software company, Henry Hurt is a man in the middle: of life, of career, of self-assessment. Mired in his corporate responsibilities, Henry's deathless office existence is torpedoed by the loss of his mother.

Haunted by her death, and by a strange angst he describes as "the pall," Henry seeks escape in a quest for love and heroic purpose occasioned by a crisis in his company's fortunes. Dodging an Iago-like rival, he finds love with a colleague in his department, endangers his bond with his family, and finally confronts the urgent question of his life.

The Adventurist is a story about relationships: Henry has complicated ones with his sister, his lover and a tantalizing potential girlfriend. But his relationship to his corporate and familial responsibilities ballast him, too.

A former programmer, J. BRADFORD HIPPS turned to fiction after a ten-year software career. He received his graduate degree from the University of Houston Creative Writing Program, where he was awarded the Inprint Michener Prize, the program's top writing honor, as well as nomination for Best New American Voices. He lives with his wife and children in Texas.

1

More and more I have been thinking: What this country needs is war.

Don't misunderstand. I'm not pining for another foreign adventure. I mean an honest reckoning, here on our own pilgrim dirt. One of the company's Finance men is forever reading military journals and wringing his hands over the Chinese, a billion-strong infantry or something, cinches for any war of attrition, etc. Whenever I bump into him, I make it a point to hear him out. "Chuck," I might say, "worst-case scenario: no way the People's Army makes it past Nevada." "Oh ho. You just keep thinking that. Here's a tidy little fact for you. Last year Chinese defense spending more than tripled the previous five years' total . . ."—this while I slide into dread anticipation like a warm bath. Mind you, I'm not winding him up. I want to be convinced. The more an old saber rattler like Chuck frets, the more I think: Let them come.

Later I am always ashamed. War is torture chambers, and fathers killed in front of sons, homes burned while children scream from the attics—what is the matter with me? But just moments ago I caught in the rearview mirror a glare from my fellow citizen. It was a look of such opprobrium, such astonished offense (I changed lanes too abruptly), that I would have the nerve, the *gall* to interrupt even for a moment her progress in the world, and back I am to thinking, Yes: tank treads and the tromp of boots, here on our courteous soil. It is the only

remedy.

At last the Cyber tower rounds into view and I forget all about my military fantasies. This is a place anyone would be glad to work. A thirty-story functionalist construction, our building stands demurely aside from the steel sails and ribbons of the last boom—to say nothing of those glass three-stage rockets that sprang up across the Sunbelt in the futurist eighties. Its apartness is literal: the building is quite clearly removed from the skyline's huddle of commercial A-space. However, the difference is not more than a few blocks. The downtown district is scarcely big enough to get lost in. It would take some real trying, anyway. No, I do not deceive myself that this is a sprawling capital city. Ours is a first-rate building in a not quite first-rate town. I'm not complaining. The city is all the better for it. I have traveled to so-called world capitals and found the inhabitants only too aware of themselves as such—that is, as movers in a world capital.

The lobby is a cavernous glass place with red granite floor. A gigantic Christmas tree still looms in the atrium entrance. People stride for the elevators in a billow of coattails and trailing scarves. The morning light comes in like snowfall. I am especially brisk of step this morning. Earlier I received a call from my manager's assistant. A summons at that hour, and from her, could mean only some wonderful or terrible bit of news. Except she gave nothing away. Her voice was colorless:

“Keith would like a word this morning.”

“Of course,” said I, just as soberly. We bid each other good-bye in tones gone positively funereal. Anyone listening would think what serious business this is, to be subpoenaed by the boss. Only not really. Keith and I are friendly.

Off the elevators and into a waking office. The floor plan is like an open range: elevators in the center, offices at the perimeter, desks among low divider walls everywhere else. Our

eighteenth-story perch is generously windowed. Beyond the warren of cubicles is a bright winter sky. Small clouds stand in the blue like flak burst. Sunlight ricochets off downtown glass and beams upward through the windows. People attend the blinds, their heads looming like *moai* statues on the white drop ceiling. Others shuck jackets, greet neighbors, lift phones, punch buttons. Computers pop to life. It is a good bunch. Whatever stories we tell ourselves, it's the one about the American work ethic that is observably true. A rare instance of treasured impression borne out by facts. Some of the most satisfying days I've known have occurred inside these walls. Just yesterday while searching my computer for a document, I came upon an old slide whose bold-boxed message read, *Relentless focus to reduce waste, improve quality, and increase customer satisfaction*. Its font colors were a kind of Mediterranean blue. I was cast back years ago to the moment of creation: hunched with my cohorts in a conference room on a midafternoon in summer, the sun in the blinds and the smell of carpet fibers and fresh paint. Four centered youths, our brains keen and college-minted, eager to be of use.

This regard for work surprises some. My sister, for example. In her mythology a corporate job is a necessary evil, to be tolerated only until a person finds what he was Meant To Do. I once felt the same. I landed a job with Cyber Systems straight out of college, and no sooner had the hiring manager handed me a security badge and shown me to my computer than was my radar wheeling around for a destiny. What changed my mind was love. Of money. I am only partly joking. There may be satisfactions like a thick wallet, but you need a thick wallet to have them. It's no good avowing one's regard for money, I know. You set yourself up as a satirical creature. And in fact money was not the only thing: also my destiny never resolved itself. There's no lack of good to be done in the world, and as soon as any noble thing presented itself, it was replaced by another. To pick one and run is fine if there is nothing else. But when a person

has already obtained a kind of momentum—it didn't take long to see that acquiring a skill, linking arms with others to fix problems, fulfilling one's duties with aplomb, all toward a commercial end, is its own kind of nobility. The nobility of no pretensions. Gretchen, my sister, works in Minneapolis for a charity shop whose wares are made by indigenous peoples guaranteed a living wage. It is a good mission. I must say, however, that her co-nonprofiteers are a fairly self-satisfied bunch. One of them, a Young Werther in East German frames, once told me that although his work might barely feed him, it would always sustain him. When I mentioned this later to Gretchen, she wasn't surprised. My sister is perfectly clear-eyed. She allowed that if he of the politburo (I don't recall his name) occasionally gave himself to stirring performances, it was all "positively directed." She guessed that Cyber Systems must have a similar type: heroes who stayed late, worked weekends, sure of a hallowed cause. This was no hypothetical, of course. I explained, not for the first time, that as an industry, Internet security software was as dear to me as it was to her: not at all. The day I hold forth on digital security at a dinner party is the day I quit. What moves me to work is money's comforts, yes, and also a community of smart, mostly efficient people; the sense of place that a good office gives. If this sounds mundane, so much the better. Gretchen, in a dear little-sister way (she is thirty to my thirty-four), won't accept that I feel no tug to heroism. And in a way she is right. Only my heroes are the mundane sort: good managers, home owners, taxpayers.

Keith is on the phone, frowning. His office is a corner one. Windows for walls; the city hustles beyond. I am motioned into a chair. His desk is a polymer thing with a vast black surface shaped like an apostrophe. It is bare but for computer and telephone.

"That's not the point," he says.

And then: "Right. Barry—I understand the algebra."

Ah. Barry is my counterpart in Sales. Sales is under tremendous pressure at the moment. Last quarter was horrendous, and this one has started no better. The responsibility for this ultimately lies with Keith. He has been General Manager a short half year, promoted from elsewhere to take over from the previous GM, who was shown the plank. I should explain that here “General Manager” retains its meaning. Cyber has so far avoided the usual arms race over position titles, the sort that ushers in dozens of “Chief” officers to the executive suite. Here each business unit is appointed one GM, and one only. They are the Mayors of the Palace. It’s true that Keith is answerable to an opaque tier of masters installed somewhere in far-off Dallas. But locally there is no higher power. At Cyber it is simple: there is the General Manager, there are the Directors, charged with running the various departments (I am one; Barry is another), and there is everyone else.

“Listen to me,” he says into the phone. “I get it. Going to bat for your team is what good managers do. But only to a point. Because at the end of the day, *you* own the number. And if this guy isn’t getting it done—”

There comes a tinny volley of apologetics. Barry is nothing if not persistent. Keith plants a heavy elbow on the table, laying his ear to the receiver. He is tall, big-bellied, broad-shouldered, broad-faced; heavy. Against the broadness of his face, the lips stand out. They are Cupid’s-bow-like, and oddly sensual. Then there is the gaze. Perhaps if you were to pass him in an airport or hotel bar, you’d notice little more than his ample frame and draping oxford shirt, the lank black hair attached to thinning part: one more Southern salesman nearly gone to seed in discount brokering or life insurance. But he is no Babbitt. There is the gaze, and it moves over the devices of the world, and it does not forget.

Now he is nodding testily. “Look,” says Keith. “My rule? Never carry a salesman longer

than his mother did. You're profitable in nine months, or you're out." The receiver goes back into its cradle.

"How's the weekend?"

I report the weekend was fine.

"Yep." The irritation of their back-and-forth has carried over into the room; he is not really listening. "Mine I spent doing honeydew chores. Not you, I know. No honey to tell you what to do."

"The chores were here."

"And? How turn the wheels of Engineering?"

"The team made some good progress over the weekend."

"No thanks to their Director." An absentminded jab. Really he is absorbed in his monitor.

"I'm single-handedly keeping this place afloat."

Harmless banter, but immediately I see it is a stupid thing to say, the worst possible rejoinder in light of the last quarter. He looks up.

"Aha." His eye goes past my shoulder. The door. "Shut that, will you?"

Now comes the first inkling that all is not well. At the doorway his assistant shoots me a curious glance. There is time only to offer an apologetic smile before the light of the wider office is sealed off.

"So," Keith says. "We're only as good as our last quarter. That's the cold hell of business. Let's start there."

I wait. When nothing else comes: "Meaning right now we're not very good."

He nods. "And another one like it . . ."

"The market doesn't forgive." I surprise myself. The market. What do I know about the

market. I have a team to feed and care for, software to design, code, test. The market I leave to economists.

“No,” Keith says. “The market forgives just fine. Nothing’s got a shorter memory than the market. It’s our bosses we need to watch out for.”

I am silent. Do I imagine it, or is there not an echo of threat in this? Although he may be thinking of Barry. Or perhaps he means pressure being exerted from Dallas on him himself. Having been brought in at no small expense to turn revenues around, and with last quarter failing to show any upward signs, the noose around his own neck may be going tight.

He is distracted again by email. The only sound is the rasp of mouse on desk, the quiet click of its buttons. He swears under his breath.

“Anyway. It’s what we get paid for. If there were only good quarters and better quarters, no need for managers. Now’s when we earn our keep.”

Though I have known Keith only these past six months, already he is the finest boss I’ve ever had. He uses only “us” and “our” and “we.” In the mouths of past supervisors, this team-speak always sounded mealy and euphemistic. Why not with him? I think it is because his sovereignty doesn’t frighten him. The worst managers speak of “us” in hopes of finding refuge among the masses. It is a bid to wish away the responsibilities of hierarchy. Keith has no qualms about the hierarchy or his place in it. We work at his pleasure, and he does us the courtesy of not pretending otherwise.

“To that end,” he goes on, “I need to be sure I’ve got the full attention, the commitment, of certain folks.”

“I see.” I see.

“You do.”

“I think I do.”

“Tell me.”

“The business is shaky right now. You want to be sure managers aren’t poking around at other opportunities.”

“I want to be sure *you’re* not poking around.”

“I’m not.”

“I’ve seen to it.”

Keith digs into his computer bag on the floor and withdraws a sheet of paper. He gives the page a frowning once-over, then sends it hissing across the desk.

CS SALARY ADJUSTMENT FORM.

The contents take a moment to register. My current pay is indicated at top; at bottom, the figure plus twenty percent.

“I’m counting on you. What happens in the next ten weeks will define us for a long time to come. Believe it.”

I am at a loss. He pushes from his desk and heaves round. I rise to meet him. We shake hands firmly and formally. Keith smiles down on me, and there comes a feeling like a pressed knuckle at my throat. Ye lovely saints above. The joy of money is sharp as grief.

I was born and raised in Minnesota, went to college in Virginia, and chose the South to live. A proven decision, I think, not least for the mercy of Southern winters. Today at noon it is sixty degrees in the sun. I sit on a park bench a few blocks from the office, marking time before lunch. It is an attractive place, nearly ten brick-paved acres. Where once leaned tenement houses now are benches and green bandstands, potted conifers and towering obelisks of galvanized steel cut in the shape of torches. In summer, jets of water erupt from blowholes in the plaza’s brick floor

while children frolic like mental patients among the geysers. The bricks themselves are stamped each with a name or short message. A few are engraved in memoriam. Today I found another:

WILLIAM C. DAWES 1982–1985. It reminds me of a trip I made last fall to see a friend in

Charleston. The visit itself was nothing to speak of; what I remember is the drive home. The roads of the low country are tricky things. They wind through realms of gray marshes and haunted forests, and after dark they become especially tricky. In plainer terms, I got lost.

Doubling back, I caught something strange in the headlights. I stopped. The forest ran right along the shoulder of the road, a thick flanking of elephant ears and draping limbs, but here there was a gap. It worked as an entrance, a vestibule of a few trunks' depth beyond which was a small clearing, opened among the trees like a bedroom. It was after midnight; the forest was quiet. No: in fact it was a riot of croakings and chirrings, but these were a solid pattern upon which the smallest exception could be heard. The engine ticked in the heat. Fireflies bobbed and winked their green signals. Soon I could make out the purpose of this place. Laid in a row were five cocoon-like mounds of bleached seashells, each glowing dully among the ferns.

What is my point? In the American South, Death won't be ignored. Slavery and revolution have soaked its clays red. Everywhere one bumps into history, tragedy, and failure. Bandstands on gravestones, but no amount of happy theater will change the facts. This is the South's great comfort, although, surveying the park, I am reminded it may not last. Across the plaza, a crowd of red-hatted tourists are admiring the two-story television marquee on the side of the city's new convention center. Some strange cartoon is showing. The South's major cities have, by tract house and conference center, begun to except themselves from their soil's bony history. No nation ever had less use for a graveyard, and Dixie's mayors know it better than anyone. Conventioneers have no chance at generating sales taxes with Death wheezing on their

necks.

“I’m sorry sir: no sleeping on the park benches.”

“Hm—? Oh. Hullo Barry.”

“‘Hello Barry.’ Now that’s—jeez, that’s a funeral greeting. Let’s try again.”

Barry and I have worked together, not closely, though not by any means at odds, for almost two years. He has a decent, open face and reddish hair that is always neatly barbered. Today he wears gold-rimmed spectacles. I know this to be his academic look, the one he chooses when he is to be called upon to speak with fluency to numbers, as he will later today.

“Come on, Eeyore!” he cries. He really is waiting for me to try my greeting again.

“What? Tough weekend? No, couldn’t be. No honeydews for this guy!”

“Right. No, it was—” A punishing fatigue takes hold. It is all I can do to finish the thought. “—fine.”

The lenses catch the sun and change his eyes to shining discs. Below the discs is a ferocious smile. I begin to fidget. Barry is straight as an arrow but this smile is the smile of a successful pornographer. Some time ago I discovered that certain faces give rise to an urge to smash them. This urge has little to do with personality; it is a reaction to pure physiognomy. With Barry’s, there is the slight poppet bulge to the ears, a particular wetness around the lips . . . Understand, I don’t wish any actual violence on anyone, and certainly not on Barry. Barry aches with good intention. But if I could have a model of his face done in Plasticine or frosted onto a cake, then I would smash it and be satisfied.

I ask after his weekend.

“It was very good. *Very* good. Say, let’s have lunch. Seems I never see you anymore.”

“It’s busy for you these days.”

Some of the wattage drains from his grin. It would not surprise me to learn I've ruined his day. Barry is possessed of an unpredictable wax-and-wane energy. He is not alone in this tendency; others of our coworkers show it too. Its characteristic is manic efficiency one day, ruefulness and exasperation the next. Yet Barry is a special case. When his batteries are charged, he'll hurl himself from meeting to meeting, bullhorning hellos at coworkers. I've seen him startle client prospects with his crazed friendliness, cutting to them across the blue of office carpet, his trouser creases sharp as the prow of a destroyer, hand extended like a cannon. But of late, particularly as sales have proven hard to come by, it feels to me precarious, a kind of supererogatory sweating. Eagerness, not confidence.

"Busy's good," says he. By glancing at his watch and searching out some far-off point behind him, he makes it known the lunch invitation is withdrawn. I am meeting someone in any case. There is a moment of awkward silence. Having nowhere to go with our eyes, we consider a nearby group of men huddled around a chess table. I cannot quite make out the players in their midst except to say that one of them is white, which is unusual. From time to time a spectator will step away from the huddle and silently bite his fist or point skyward. Even from a distance the game makes me uneasy.

"See you at the Management meeting," says Barry. He strides off, I fear bad-temperedly. Except when he reaches the chess match, he stops and takes perch among the spectators. His manner among these men, the sole white in audience to a game whose stakes surely involve the most delicate matters of tribal pride, is easy as you please. He watches the players. Now he shakes his head in marvel, confides some amusing thing to his neighbor, and is on his way.

We sit close as conspirators at our little bistro table. Jane remarks the yellow plaster walls stuck with poster ads for bullfights, the cigar smoke and kitchen's stewy smells. She tells me about a

restaurant from her holiday, a brasserie in the 7th arrondissement. Knowing little of the language and in abject terror of French waiters, she pointed to the first thing on the menu.

“And do you know what I got? I got a big ole bowl of fried sardines. Heads, tails, eyes, everything. I guess you were supposed to munch them like fries, but I never found out.” Here she falls back and sets her face in profile. She squints abashedly at nothing. “Go ahead and say it.”

“Say what?”

“What a rube I am.”

“You’re no rube.”

“No?”

“No.”

“Tell it to my in-laws.”

Jane Brodel works in Marketing. She is very good at her job as best I can gather, though I know nothing about marketing. She shares a similar bafflement where engineering is concerned. This mutual ignorance permits a friendship that is innocent of the usual office angling. Also she is married. Another simplifier.

She raises the menu for study, clucking her tongue softly, absently. There is a smear of blood on her teeth.

“Jane, your mouth. It’s bleeding.”

“What?” She touches her lips. “Lipstick I think.” She runs her tongue over her teeth.

“Gone?”

“Oh. Yes.”

She nods. “Blech. You’re nice to worry.”

The food is very good. Crisply roasted whole chicken, yellow rice, and caramelized

plantains. Parisian café life has suited her: she orders a glass of Chardonnay. A plank of winter sunlight lies across the table and heavily, warmly, in our laps. There is nothing on my schedule until two o'clock. It is pleasant to sit in silence, to slip a little ways forward in time and think of nothing. Dessert is a kind of corn cake with jam. I watch as she tends the jar: a little brutish, this grasping and turning, all arms and elbows. I am reminded of her slightly male slovenliness, a kind of athletic carelessness in her posture and the use of her limbs. Holding the jar to her middle (its lid is stuck), the placket of her shirt opens to show more than is perhaps strictly decent. But there is nothing shameless here. It is simply her absorption in the task at hand, her obliviousness of the body's own effects. The lid pops. One of her knuckles comes away bearing a small blood-colored gem. Into her mouth it goes, the finger sucked clean.

She asks, "What did I miss?"

"It's been quiet."

"Not good."

"No," I admit.

"People are worried. You don't see it until you go away. I met Penny coming up the elevator this morning and she looked just awful. Who helps her if things go south? Is she sitting on a nest egg? What do you suppose she makes?"

"I don't know."

"Twenty-eight thousand, if she's lucky. In *America*."

"Plus benefits."

The warning sign is in her eyes. They are a very deep brown. When she is angry the color stirs, tightens into itself until the eye's gleam is turned impervious, wholly reflective.

"Super. Something else she can't afford to lose."

Clearly I once loved her. And I very nearly made an ass of myself saying so. As near as last summer I was sure the feeling was mutual. What subtexts of longing I parsed from her emails! The most throwaway lunchroom chat crackled with double meaning. Even to pass in the halls, the mere swap of nods as we went about our business felt like some sly tradecraft. But in the end I couldn't budge the hard evidence of her marriage, the professional context of our relationship.

It is not strictly true to say it was love at first sight. I came upon her in a break room, bent over double with her hair down around her face. She was holding her side.

"Ooh," she said.

"Are you all right?"

She stood up straight. The blood had gathered in her face. "No. But it's self-inflicted. I'm a nut for iced tea. This is probably a kidney stone." From the counter she lifted an enormous Styrofoam cup and pulled a mouthful of dark liquid through the straw.

"And that's—?"

"Iced tea." She stuck out a hand. "Jane. I'm new." There followed the normal preliminaries, schools and roles and previous employers, a précis of our corporate existences.

"Which department are you?" I wondered.

"Marketing."

"Ah."

"Marlene's group."

"Yes. Do you know Marlene?"

"Only from interviews."

"You report to her?"

“Doesn’t everyone in Marketing?”

“I mean directly.”

“Yes.”

I nodded. She narrowed her eyes. “What?”

“Nothing. She’s good, very smart.”

“But . . . ?”

I weighed it.

“She eats her own.”

A kind of glee came over her face. It confirmed my hunch. Here was a direct person, with no time for the usual corn syrup.

“Does she now! Well, well . . . Good tip. I’ll watch myself.”

Her color had returned so that it was possible to see her face. It occurred to me that she was one of those people whom you could not describe as pretty but who were nevertheless unusually beautiful. Her mouth was large, it was immodest, and her ears stood out. There was a faint asymmetry in her gaze, the left eye pointed slightly up and away. But you could not miss the gameness, the pulse of human intelligence, it came off her like a red aura, and together with her long-limbed ease, her natural male slovenliness, it was enough. It was plenty.

Jane seems to be waiting. In light of Penny’s concerns, she wants my verdict on the business.

“I’m not really worried,” I tell her truthfully.

“Sure. You can afford it. We both can.”

This is true, especially in her case. I happen to know Jane’s in-laws are what my sister would call pig rich.

“I mean I have faith in Keith.”

Jane thinks on this. “All right. You know him better.” She thinks further. “And Barry. I *like* Barry. He’s done some good things for us, right? Recently I know it’s been not so easy, but . . .” She peers at me narrowly. “No?”

I mention our conversation in the park, my theory of his highs and lows.

“You’re saying, what. Never get excited?”

“This swinging from mountain top to valley and back again—”

“It’s undignified.” She is indulging me.

“Sometimes I feel like I’m watching *The Passion of Barry*. That’s not a dig at his religion.” Barry is quite a loud Christian. “I mean he needs to fall so he can rise again in glory.”

“Ah. Better detachment. Phone in what you have to, disconnect from the rest.”

“Not phone in, no. It’s not a vote for laziness. You can work hard without thinking the sun goes up or down on your effort.”

“He’s unabashed, and it bothers you.”

I say nothing. It was a mistake to bring it up. I am not even quite sure what I mean. Jane smiles, shakes her head.

“Henry Hurt: my dear, repressed friend.”

We laugh together, but I am stung.