

PROLOGUE

After the End came the Beginning. And in the Beginning, there were eight of us, then nine—that was me—a number that would only decrease. We found one another after fleeing New York for the safer pastures of the countryside. We'd seen it done in the movies, though no one could say which one exactly. A lot of things didn't play out as they had been depicted on-screen.

We were brand strategists and property lawyers and human resources specialists and personal finance consultants. We didn't know how to do anything so we Googled everything. We Googled *how to survive in wild*, which yielded images of poison ivy, venomous insects, and bear tracks. That was okay but we wanted to know how to go on the offensive. Against everything. We Googled *how to build fire* and watched YouTube videos of fires being lit with flint against steel, with flint against flint, with magnifying glass and sun. We couldn't find the requisite flint, didn't know how to identify it even, and before we tried using Bob's bifocals, someone found a Bic in a jean jacket. The fire brought us through the night and delivered us into a morning that took us to a deserted Walmart. We stockpiled bottled water and exfoliating body wash and iPods and beers and tinted moisturizer in our stolen Jeeps. In the back of the store we found guns and ammo, camo outfits, scopes and grips. We Googled *how to shoot gun*, and when we tried, we were

spooked by the recoil, by the salty smell and smoke, by the liturgical drama of the whole thing in the woods. But actually we loved to shoot them, the guns. We liked to shoot them wrong even, with a loose hand, the pitch forward and the pitch back. Under our judicious trigger fingers, beer bottles died, *Vogue* magazines died, Chia Pets died, oak saplings died, squirrels died, elk died. We feasted.

Google would not last long. Neither would the internet. Or any of the infrastructure, but in the beginning of the Beginning let us brag, if only to ourselves in the absence of others. Because who was there to envy us, to be proud of us? Our Googlings darkened, turned inward. We Googled *maslow's pyramid* to see how many of the need levels we could already fulfill. The first two. We Googled *2011 fever survivors*, hoping to find others like us, and when all we found were the same outdated, inconclusive news articles, we Googled *7 stages grief* to track our emotional progress. We were at Anger, the slower among us lagging behind at Denial. We Googled *is there a god*, clicked *I'm Feeling Lucky*, and were directed to a suicide hotline site. In the twelve rings it took for us to hang up, we held our breaths for someone else, some stranger's voice confirming that we weren't the only ones living, despite Bob's adamant assertions. There was no answer.

From this and other observations, it was deduced that we were alone, truly alone.

After weeks of running amok, of running aground, we rallied and organized a game plan. Our self-appointed leader was Bob, a short, stout man who had worked in information technology. He was slightly older than us, though by how much it seemed rude to ask. He was Goth when he felt like it. He knew about being alone. He had played every iteration of *Warcraft* with a near-religious fervor; it was as if he had prepared for this, this thing, this higher calling. He held his right arm in a sling close to his chest, tucked inside his shirt, after a botched carpal tunnel surgery. Partly en-

feebled, he was especially adept at directing others to his will. Things needed to be taken care of, we needed to be told what to do. We received his clear, concise instructions like manna.

I have a place for us to stay, Bob said, puffing on his e-cigarette. The scent of French vanilla wafted through the night air. We sat around the bonfire, listening. It was this gigantic two-story complex in Chicago that he and some high school buddies had bought.

For what? Janelle asked, blasé. Just in case the apocalypse happened?

For *when* the apocalypse happened, Bob corrected. We always knew it would, though I personally didn't know it would be this early.

We waited as Bob took another drag on his e-cigarette before continuing. The Facility, he informed us, had everything. It had big, high ceilings. The roof had skylights cut into it, so it got plenty of light. There was a movie theater. Maybe the projector would still work. Everyone would have an individual room.

We considered Chicago. The even-keeled, prairie center of the Great Lakes region, its long, hardy winters rife with opportunities for canning root vegetables and stone fruits, the midwestern sensibilities embodied in the large, beneficent scale of its city layout, especially River North and downtown, the larger blocks, the more spacious buildings, and at sunset, the rich, golden light against its stately, modern architecture, structures that had survived fires and floods, so many fires and floods. Such an environment, Bob advised, could only benefit our better natures. We would set up camp in the lake breeze, lay down roots for our new lives, and procreate gently amongst ourselves. We would love the ensuing offspring created by our diverse ethnic offerings. Chicago is the most American of American cities.

It's actually Needling, Bob said. Needling, Illinois. It's right outside Chicago.

I am not living in the suburbs, Janelle announced.

Why, do you have a better place in mind? Todd scoffed.

Making plans heartened us, and as we stayed up late, drinking, we theorized grandly. What is the internet but collective memory? Anything that had been done before we could do better. The Heimlich maneuver. Breech births. The fox-trot. Glycerin bombs. Bespoke candle making. Lurking in our limited gene pools may swim metastatic brain tumors and every type of depression and recessed cystic fibrosis, but also high IQs and proficiencies with Romance languages. We could move on from this. We could be better.

Anything was better than what we felt. We had shame, so much shame at being the few survivors. Other survivors, if they existed, must also feel this way. We were ashamed of leaving people behind, of taking our comforts where we could find them, of stealing from those who could not defend themselves. We had known ourselves to be cowards and hypocrites, pernicious liars really, and to find this suspicion confirmed was not a relief but a horror. If the End was Nature's way of punishing us so that we might once again know our place, then yes, we knew it. If it was at all unclear before, it was not now.

The shame bonded us. In the morning, we Googled *diy tattoos* and boiled a pan of sewing needles. Soused and sorrowed, we inked small lightning bolts on each of our forearms, near the wristbone, to symbolize our bond. Because it was said Crazy Horse divined that he would be successful in war only if he never stopped to gather the spoils of battle, and to remind himself of this, he tattooed lightning bolts behind his horses' ears. Strike fast, strike first.

The key thing, we reminded ourselves, was never to stop, to always keep going, even when the past called us back to a time and place we still leaned toward, still sang of, in quieter moments. Like the canyons of office buildings all the way down Fifth Avenue.

Like all the Japanese and Swiss businessmen leisuring through Bryant Park, sipping hot chocolate. Like the afternoon sun cast through our midtown office windows, when it was almost time to leave for all the pleasures of the evening: an easy meal eaten standing up at the kitchen counter, a TV show, a meetup with friends for cocktails.

The truth is, I was not there at the Beginning. I was not there for any of the Googlings or the Walmart stalking or the feastings or the spontaneous mass tattooings. I was the last one out of New York, the last one of the group to join. By the time they found me, the infrastructure had already collapsed. The internet had caved into a sinkhole, the electrical grid had shut down, and the road trip toward the Facility was already under way.

It had been the nostalgia-yellow of the Yellow Cab that the group had first spotted, parked along the shoulder of a road in Pennsylvania. NYC TAXI, it read on the car door. It was a Ford Crown Victoria, an older fleet model that cab companies had almost phased out. It looked, Bob later told me, as if I'd driven a broken time machine right out of the eighties. It was my in. Entire highways were clogged with abandoned vehicles, but they had never seen a New York cab out in the middle of nowhere, the meter still running, the fare light on.

I was dehydrated and half-conscious in the backseat. I wouldn't speak.

The truth is, I had stayed in the city as long as I possibly could. The whole time, I had been half waiting for myself to turn, to become fevered like everyone else. Nothing happened. I waited and waited. I still wait.

The End begins before you are ever aware of it. It passes as ordinary. I had gone over to my boyfriend's place in Greenpoint directly after work. I liked to stay over on hot summer nights because the basement was cool and damp at night. We made dinner, veggie stir-fry with rice. We had showered and watched a movie projected on his wall.

The screening was *Manhattan*, which I'd never seen before, and even though I found the May–December romance between Mariel Hemingway and Woody Allen kind of creepy, I loved all the opening shots of New York set to the Gershwin soundtrack, and I loved the scene in which Woody Allen and Diane Keaton get caught in the rain in Central Park, and they seek shelter in the Museum of Natural History, wet and cocooned in the cavern darkness of the planetary display. Just looking at New York on the screen, the city was made new for me again, and I saw it as I once did in high school: romantic, shabby, not totally gentrified, full of promise. It made me wistful for the illusion of New York more than for its actuality, after having lived there for five years. And as the movie ended and we turned off the lights and lay down side by side on his mattress, I was thinking about how New York is possibly the only place in which most people have already

lived, in some sense, in the public imagination, before they ever arrive.

I was saying some of this to him, the shapeless mass lying next to me in the dark, when he interrupted and said, Listen to me. Look at me. I have something to tell you.

His name was Jonathan and he liked to party. Not really. His name was Jonathan and he was high-rolling. He owned a laptop, a coffee maker, a movie projector; everything else went to rent. He ate air and dust. We had been together for almost five years, about as long as I'd been at my job. Jonathan didn't work in the nine-to-five sense. He did odd freelance gigs here and there so that he could spend most of his time writing. Divested of most obligations, he lived cheaply, held jobs when he could find them. Once, for a secret Wall Street club, he was hired to slap middle-aged businessmen for a living. I used to clasp his face between my palms, his expression wrought with worry, with unassuaged anxiety.

Okay, I said. What is it?

He took out his retainer, didn't place it in the mug on the floor but held it there in his hand. It was going to be a short conversation. He said, I'm leaving New York.

What, you didn't like the movie?

No, I'm serious. Be serious for once.

I'm always serious, I deadpanned. So, when are you leaving?

He paused. In another month. Thom is sailing up to this—

I sat up, tried to look at him, but my eyes hadn't adjusted. Wait, what are you saying?

I'm saying I'm leaving New York.

No, what you're saying is, you're breaking up with me.

That's not— He looked at me. Okay. I'm breaking up with you.

Lead with that.

It's not you.

Okay.

No, it's not you, he said, grabbing my hand. It's this place, this city and what it turns a person into. We talked about this.

In the past year, Jonathan had become increasingly disillusioned with living in New York. Something along the lines of: the city, New York fucking City, tedious and boring, its charms as illusory as its facade of authenticity. Its lines were too long. Everything was a status symbol and everything cost too much. There were so many on-trend consumers, standing in lines for blocks to experience a fad dessert, gimmicky art exhibits, a new retail concept store. We were all making such uninspired lifestyle choices. We, including me.

Me, nothing really weighed on me, nothing unique. Me, I held down an office job and fiddled around with some photography when the moon hit the Gowanus right. Or something like that, the usual ways of justifying your life, of passing time. With the money I made, I bought Shiseido facial exfoliants, Blue Bottle coffee, Uniqlo cashmere.

What do you call a cross between a yuppie and a hipster? A yupster. Per Urban Dictionary.

Then he said, You should leave New York too.

Why would I do that?

Because you hate your job.

I don't hate it. It's okay.

Name one time, one time when you really like it.

Every Friday night.

Exactly.

I'm kidding. You don't even know what I do. I mean, not really.

You work at a production firm in publishing. You oversee the manufacture of books in third-world countries. Stop me if I'm wrong.

I had worked at Spectra for almost five years. We worked with publishers who paid us to coordinate book production that we

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outsourced to printers in Southeast Asia, mostly China. The name Spectra suggested the ostensibly impressive range of book products we were capable of producing: Cookbooks, Children's Books, Stationery, Art Books, Gift and Specialty. I worked in Bibles. The company had huge collective buying power, so we offered even cheaper manufacture rates than individual publishers could achieve on their own, driving foreign labor costs down even further. Obviously Jonathan kind of despised what I did. Maybe I did too.

I changed the subject. Where are you going? When? Sometime next month. I'm going to help Thom sail on his yacht. The idea is to end up in Puget Sound.

I scoffed. Thom was Wall Street, a client from the club where Jonathan once worked. I said, Right. Like he doesn't crush on you and expect something in return.

You think like that because you live in a market economy. And you don't?

He didn't say anything. Sometimes, I said, I think you hold it against me for not being more like you.

Are you kidding? You're so much more like me than you think. In the dark, I could see him winking, bittersweetly. Want to do a sumo roll? he said.

The sumo roll was when he would roll across the bed, and when he reached me, he would compress his body into mine, belly to belly, until I was sunken into the mattress, obliterated, and then he would roll away. This repeated until I convulsed from laughing too hard.

No, I don't want to do a sumo roll, I said. Ready?

When he rolled on top of me, he weighed into me fiercely, indenting me into the bedding. He could be so heavy when he

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I made my body stiff as a board, inhospitable. Slowly, I felt him lessening. I felt him stop. He could feel me shaking. He put his dry, hard palm on my forehead, as if he were taking a sick person's temperature.

Stop crying, he said. Don't cry. Please.

He offered me some water but I stood up and retrieved some Evian from my bag. I sat down on the edge of the mattress, taking small, worthless sips.

Lie down, please, he said. Will you lie next to me?

I lay down, next to him, both of us on our backs. We stared up at the ceiling.

Jonathan broke the silence. In a timorous voice, he said he could see clearly now, could see the future. The future is more exponentially exploding rents. The future is more condo buildings, more luxury housing bought by shell companies of the global wealthy elite. The future is more Whole Foods, aisles of refrigerated cut fruit packaged in plastic containers. The future is more Urban Outfitters, more Sephoras, more Chipotles. The future just wants more consumers. The future is more newly arrived college grads and tourists in some fruitless search for authenticity. The future is more overpriced Pabst at dive-bar simulacrum. Something something Rousseau something. Manhattan is sinking.

What, literally? Because of global warming? I snarked.

Don't make fun of me. And yes, literally and figuratively. The thing was, I didn't disagree with what he was saying. It is an impossible place to live. My salary was enough to keep my head above water month to month. Given my rent and lack of financial savvy, I had very little in savings, let alone retirement funds. There was very little keeping me here. I didn't own property. I didn't have family. I'd be priced out of every borough in another decade.

But having heard all this before, I began to tune out, thinking about what I would do next. When he nudged me, I realized he was

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asking me a question. He was saying, Would I consider leaving New York with him? We could do it together.

What would we do? I asked.

We would live together and take part-time jobs, he said. I would write and finish my book. You could work on your art too. I could make a darkroom for you to develop your photos.

Can you even have a darkroom on a boat?

Well, not during the trip. I was thinking that afterward, we could settle in Oregon. There are some cheaper areas out there in the rural Pacific Northwest.

I guess I'll be a nature photographer, I said drily.

Some R&B track with jumpy bass tremored the ceiling. It was that time of night again, when the neighbor upstairs brooded to sad songs with good beats. I didn't think much of my photographs. When I first moved to New York, I had created a photo blog called *NY Ghost*. It was mostly pictures of the city. The intent was to show new, undiscovered aspects of New York from an outsider's perspective, but in retrospect, the pictures just looked clichéd and trope-y: neon-tinged diners, gas-slicked streets, subway train cars packed with tired commuters, people sitting out on fire escapes during the summer—basically, variations of the same preexisting New York iconography that permeates calendars, rom-coms, souvenirs, stock art. They could have been hung in any business hotel room. Even the better, more artfully composed images were just Eggleston knockoffs, Stephen Shore derivatives. For these and other reasons, I hardly updated the blog anymore. I hardly took pictures anymore.

Would you at least consider it? Jonathan asked.

I'm not an artist.

Moving with me, I mean.

You've already decided to move away. You're only asking me as an afterthought, let's be honest.

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I didn't think you would go if I asked, he said sadly.

The song ended, then began again. The neighbor had it on repeat. Jesus. It sounded familiar but I couldn't name it.

We spoke until our voices grew hoarse, deepening and breaking and fissuring. It lasted early into morning. Our bodies curled inward, away from each other, dry leaves at the end of summer.

In sleep it came to me. The name of the song, I mean: "Who Is It." Michael Jackson. My mother used to play it in the car when I was a kid. She loved to drive. She drove down long, unfurling Utah freeways on aimless, drifting afternoons, while my father was at work and I was still too young to be left alone. We would go to other towns to buy just one carton of eggs, one pint of half-and-half that she mistook for milk. I was six, and had only been in the U.S. for a few months, newly transplanted from Fuzhou. I was still dazed at the variety and surplus of the supermarkets, miles of boxes and bottles lit with fluorescent lighting. Supermarkets were my favorite American thing. Driving was my mother's favorite American thing, and she drove in a very American way: fast, down empty freeways before rush hour, skimming through cathedral canyons and red rock, her long black hair billowing everywhere, like in the movies. Why move to America if you can't drive? she'd say, never breaking her speed as we veered toward exit ramps, stop signs, traffic lights.

I woke up like I had a cold, my head heavy, my throat sore. Light peeked in through the blinds of the windows above us, and I heard footfalls on the sidewalk. Right away, I knew that I had overslept. The alarm hadn't gone off, and I was going to be late. In his tiny bathroom, rusty pipes cursed loudly for cold tap. I brushed my teeth, splashed cold water on my face. Put on yesterday's work outfit, a pencil skirt and a button-up shirt.

Jonathan was still asleep, swathed in gray threadbare sheets. I left him there.

Outside, the air was surprisingly cold for a July morning. I walked up the basement stoop and crossed the street to the Polish bakery for a coffee. The woman behind the counter was setting out a pan of something. Apple cider donuts. Steam rose off them and fogged up the windows. All the pedestrians in Greenpoint were bundled up in their cold-weather finery, red autumnal plaids and flourishes of thick, lustrous flannel, even though it was summer. For a moment I wondered if I hadn't just slept for months. Maybe I'd Rip-Van-Winkled my way out of a job. I would arrive to find someone else sitting in my office, my belongings in a box. I would return to my studio and find someone else living there. I would start over.

I walked to the J train, thinking up excuses for being late. I could say that I had overslept, though I'd used that one time too many. I could say there had been a family emergency, except my boss knew my parents were deceased and I had no other relatives living in the States. I could say that my apartment had been robbed, but that was too big a story. Plus, it had actually happened before. They'd taken everything; they'd stripped my bedsheets. Afterward, someone had said, You're officially a New Yorker now, as if this were a point of pride.

Looking out at the gray East River as the J crossed the Williamsburg Bridge, I decided that I'd just claim I was sick. I looked like I was sick, my eyes clustered with puffiness and dark bags. At work, they knew me to be capable but fragile. Quiet, clouded up with daydreams. Usually diligent, though sometimes inconsistent, moody. But also something else, something implacable: I was unsavvy in some fundamental, uncomfortable way. The sound of my loud, nervous laugh, like gargling gravel, was a social liability. I skipped too many office parties. They kept me on because

my output was prolific and they could task me with more and more production assignments. When I focused, a trait I exhibited at the beginning of my time there, I could be detail-oriented to the point of obsession.

At Canal, I transferred to the N to ride all the way to Times Square. A light rain had begun to fall by the time I emerged aboveground. Spectra's glass office, housed on the thirty-first and thirty-second floors of a midcentury building, were located a few blocks away. The rain scattered the tourists as I ducked and weaved through their dense sidewalk congregations down Broadway, accidentally banging my knees into their Sephora and Disney Store bags. A street saxophonist played "New York, New York," his eyes closed in feeling. The cluster of tourists around him seemed moved, if not by the quality of his playing, which was drowned out by the trains roaring beneath our feet, then by his pained expression, a sorrow that seemed more authentic than performative. When the song ended and he emptied his Starbucks cup of dollars, he looked up, straight at me. I hurried away, embarrassed.

You're late, said Manny, the building doorman. He was sitting behind the reception desk, cleaning his glasses with the same Windex he used to wipe down the revolving glass doors every morning and evening.

I'm sick, I told him.

Here. For your health. From a drawer, he put out a pint of blueberries, and I grabbed a handful.

Thank you. Manny always brought amazing fruit to work. Mangoes, peeled lychee, diced pineapple with salt sprinkled all over it. Whenever I asked him where he bought his produce, he'd only say, Not Whole Foods.

You're not sick, he said, putting his glasses back on.

I'm ill, I maintained. Look at my eyes.

He smiled. You don't know how easy you've got it. He said it

without malice, but it stung anyway. I stepped into the elevator, pretending his comment didn't cut me.

When I disembarked on the thirty-second floor and swiped my employee key card at the wide glass doors, the halls were empty. So were the cubicles. The big, sweeping SVP offices that I passed every morning, made of glass as if to suggest corporate transparency, also sat empty. Had I forgotten about some meeting? My heels sank into the newly vacuumed plush carpeting. It was almost eleven. I followed the din of voices down the hall, which opened up to the atrium.

They were in the middle of a meeting. They meaning everyone, all two-hundred-odd Spectra employees standing in the atrium, crowding around the glass staircase that connected the thirty-first and thirty-second floors. The CEO, Michael Reitman, stood on the staircase, speaking into a microphone. Next to him stood Carole, the Human Resources manager, whom I recognized by her severe bob.

Michael was wrapping up a speech. He said: Spectra is a company run by people, and we take your health very seriously. As our business relies on overseas suppliers, especially those in southern China, we are taking precautionary measures with this announcement of Shen Fever. We are working in accordance with the New York State Department of Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In the next few weeks, we will keep you abreast of new updates for keeping you safe. We would appreciate your cooperation and compliance.

Scattered applause rained down on us. I joined the flock as inconspicuously as possible. As I scanned the crowd for friendly faces, Blythe caught my eye. She used to work in Bibles, but since her transfer to Art Books, she sometimes pretended I didn't exist. I'd try my luck.

Hey, I whispered, sidling up to her. What's going on?

Public health scare. She passed me a handout, printed on Spec-

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tra letterhead, labeled "Shen Fever FAQ." I skimmed it, catching the most alarming parts:

In its initial stages, Shen Fever is difficult to detect. Early symptoms include memory lapse, headaches, disorientation, shortness of breath, and fatigue. Because these symptoms are often mistaken for the common cold, patients are often unaware they have contracted Shen Fever. They may appear functional and are still able to execute rote, everyday tasks. However, these initial symptoms will worsen.

Later-stage symptoms include signs of malnourishment, lapse of hygiene, bruising on the skin, and impaired motor coordination. Patients' physical movements may appear more effortful and clumsy. Eventually, Shen Fever results in a fatal loss of consciousness. From the moment of contraction, symptoms may develop over the course of one to four weeks, based on the strength of the patient's immune system.

Shen Fever had been in the news through the summer, like a West Nile thing. I swallowed, remembering how I'd woken up with a sore throat. I tried to pass the flyer back to Blythe, who waved it away.

Carole clapped her hands. Okay, now, let's take questions. Seth, Senior Product Coordinator of Gifts and Specialty, raised his hand. As if reading my mind, he asked, So is this like the West Nile virus or something?

Michael shook his head. West Nile is an easy, but inaccurate, comparison. West Nile is transmitted to humans from mosquitoes. Shen Fever is a fungal infection, so it's transmitted by breathing in fungal spores. And it's not a virus. It rarely spreads from person to person, except perhaps in extreme cases.

Frances, Product Manager of Cookbooks, was the second person with her hand up. Is this an epidemic?

Carole took the microphone from Michael to answer. At this point, Shen Fever is considered an outbreak, not an epidemic. The rate of transmission is not rapid enough. It is fairly contained so far.

Lane, Senior Product Coordinator in Art, said, It says here on the FAQ sheet that Shen Fever originated in Shenzhen, China. So how are fungal spores from China getting here?

Michael nodded. Good question. Researchers aren't sure of how Shen Fever made its way to the U.S., but the popular theory is that it somehow traveled here through the shipment of goods from China to the States. That's why businesses like ours were notified by the health department.

Lane followed up with another question. We handle lots of prototypes and other samples shipped from our suppliers in China, she said. So how do we make sure we're not coming in contact with the fungus?

Carole cleared her throat. The New York State Department of Health has not mandated work restrictions. But, as you know, your health is our first priority, and the company is taking precautions. Can I ask the interns to come around? We are distributing personal-care kits to every employee. I'd like everyone to look through the contents. Inside, you'll find some protective tools, such as gloves and masks to use when handling prototypes.

The interns pushed mail carts piled high with cardboard containers the size of shoe boxes, which they distributed to everyone. The boxes were printed with the company name and its prism logo. We crowded around the mail carts.

Michael wrapped up the meeting. You can send further questions to Carole or me. Look out in your email for any updates to this situation.

We quickly dispersed after receiving our boxes. I opened up my personal care kit on the spot. There were two sets of N95 face masks and latex gloves, each imprinted with the Spectra logo.

There were some New Age-looking herbal tinctures. I opened up the brochure. It detailed an expanded insurance plan. Last, at the bottom of the box, lay a cache of nutrition bars from a health company for which we'd produced a cookbook that contained recipes for transforming nutrition bars into desserts.

I unwrapped a nutrition bar. I hadn't eaten any breakfast.

Out the glass floor-to-ceiling windows, the city didn't look any different, not really. The Coca-Cola sign gleamed, winking. I thought about going downstairs to get a cappuccino before checking emails, but I didn't want to scuttle past Manny and his judgmental gaze. A few employees were talking amongst themselves, the din of their conversation magnified by the respirator masks that they'd put on as a joke.

Hey again.

I turned around. It was Blythe.

I knocked on your door earlier, she said. The Hong Kong office called me, about the Gemstone Bible job. They said they tried to call you.

I stiffened. Maybe the Hong Kong office wanted to tell me that something had gone wrong with the manufacture. They probably called Blythe because she used to work in Bibles.

I'm running a bit late today, but I'll check my messages, I said finally.

She looked at me skeptically. Okay. Well, you know, in our department, we assign two product coordinators per book project—a main person, and another backup. We've found this method pretty helpful whenever one of us is out.

By us, I guess she meant the other girls who worked in Art. The Art Girls, for they were all invariably girls—colt-legged, flax-haired, in their late twenties, possessors of discounted Miu Miu and Prada, holders of degrees in Art History or Visual Studies, frequenters of gallery openings, swishers of pinot, nibblers of canapés—carried themselves like a rarefied breed, peacocking

through the hallways in Fracas-scented flocks. They worked exclusively on the most detail-intensive, design-savvy projects—coffee-table books and color-sensitive exhibition catalogs. Their clients were galleries, museum presses, and, most important, the big glossy art publishers. Phaidon, Rizzoli, and Taschen. Lane, Blythe, and DeLilah. Everyone wanted to be an Art Girl. I wanted to be an Art Girl.

I'll take care of it, I echoed emptily. Did Hong Kong say what was wrong with the Gemstone Bible?

She looked away, embarrassed at my need for specificity. They didn't say. They did mention they want to get a response from New Gate today if possible. With that, she turned and walked away.

I walked back to the Bible department. I unlocked the door of my office, closed the door, dropped all my belongings, and breathed a sigh of relief.

My office was small, the size of a supply closet, with a tiny window. I could close the door and shut out all views of Times Square, though its sounds still penetrated. Back when *TRL* aired, during my first year working at Spectra, in 2006, the afternoon shrieks of bridge-and-tunnel teens outside MTV Studios would resound through the walls. Sometimes I could still hear their phantom hysteria in the afternoons.

The one window was a small circular thing, as if I were aboard a submarine. If I squinted and craned my neck a certain way, I could see Bryant Park. Before the fashion shows moved to Lincoln Center, I would gaze out at the clutter of white tents popping up in the park like umbrellas. The spring collections showed in September. The fall collections showed in February. In this way, five years passed.

My position was Senior Product Coordinator of the Bibles division. No one can work in Bibles that long without coming to a certain respect for the object itself. It is a temperamental, dif-

ficult animal, its fragile pages prone to ripping, its book block prone to warping, especially in the humidity of South Asian monsoon season. Of any book, the Bible embodies the purest form of product packaging, the same content repackaged a million times over, in new combinations ad infinitum. Every season, I was trotted out to publisher clients to expound on the latest trends in synthetic leathers, the newest developments in foil embossing and gliding. I have overseen production on so many Bibles that I can't look at one without disassembling it down to its varied, assorted offal: paper stock, ribbon marker, endsheets, mull lining, and cover. It is the best-selling book of the year, every year.

I sat down at my desk. Once I started, I was good at losing myself. I popped some Tylenol, and the morning passed in a blur. I answered emails. I measured spine widths to the exact millimeter. I ordered updated prototypes of Bibles for clients. I drew up specs for new Bible projects, sent them to the Hong Kong office for an estimate. I calculated the volume and weight of books to estimate packing and shipping costs. I received a call from an Illinois publisher, and assured their team over speakerphone that the paper for their prayer-book series was indeed FSC certified, without the use of tropical hardwoods. I don't remember if I took lunch or not.

All day, I kept putting off doing something I dreaded. The Gemstone Bible, marketed toward preteen girls, was to be packaged with a keepsake semiprecious gemstone on a sterling alloy chain. The Bibles were already printed, but the jewelry hadn't arrived, so they couldn't assemble and shrink-wrap the bundles. Earlier that day, the Hong Kong office had emailed with bad news. The gemstone supplier that Spectra had initially contracted for the job had unexpectedly closed. Several of their workers had developed various forms of lung diseases. A class-action lawsuit had been filed on behalf of the workers, leading to the closure of the supplier.

I Googled *pneumoconiosis* and drew up images of lungs in formaldehyde, lungs that had been X-rayed, lungs shriveled up into morel mushrooms. With the force of the images in front of me, I picked up the phone and called the production editor at New Gate Publishing, based in Atlanta. I took a deep breath and explained the situation.

What's pneumoconiosis? she asked, on the other end of the line.

Pneumoconiosis is an umbrella term for a group of lung diseases, I said. The workers who grind and polish semiprecious stones, they've been breathing in this dust and developing lung diseases, without their knowledge, for months, even years. Apparently, from what Hong Kong is telling me, the lawsuit claims that the workers have been working in rooms without ventilation systems or any sort of respirator equipment.

This doesn't have anything to do with the Shen Fever thing that's been in the news, does it?

This is unrelated, I confirmed. This is a matter of workers' rights and safety. The gemstone granules are tearing up their lungs. That's why it's a particularly urgent matter.

A silence at the other end of the line.

I mean, they're dying, I clarified. The supplier is putting all its contract jobs on hold. Hello?

Finally she spoke, slowly and stiffly. I don't want to sound like we don't care, because obviously we do, but this is disappointing news.

I understand, I conceded, then almost couldn't help myself: But the workers are dying, I repeated, as if I knew.

I mean, the thing is this. There's nothing else like the Gemstone Bible on the market, and we think a title like this is going to do very, very well. So I want you to tell me where we can go from here, as far as the Gemstone Bible is concerned. Can your Hong Kong office find another supplier?

I had to tread gently. We could try, yes, but this is now an industry-wide problem. It's not just one gemstone supplier. This isn't an atypical issue in Guangdong.

Guangdong? Her voice grew incrementally more exasperated. It's a province in China, where all the gemstone suppliers are centered. This isn't an isolated incident. Almost all suppliers are suffering from the same problems and are also suspending production to evade lawsuits.

Almost all, she repeated.

Yes, almost all, I confirmed, then tried a different tack. We could package the Bible with faux gemstone charms instead. We know a plastic supplier—

I could almost hear her shaking her head. No. No. We're committed to the Gemstone Bible. We placed the order with you guys as the Gemstone Bible. We're not reconceiving this entire project on the basis of one supplier failing. She was speaking very quickly, her words stumbling over one another. Obviously, it doesn't reflect well on Spectra that you guys placed this job with a shoddy supplier.

I'm very sorry, I said mechanically. The working conditions—I know. She sighed. Everyone says placing jobs in China is a risk. There are no rules, no enforcement. But that's why we used an intermediary like Spectra, because you guys are supposed to eliminate the risk. Otherwise, we could've just dealt directly with the suppliers ourselves.

I started, Let's try—

So what I need you to do, Candace, she continued, is to replace the supplier, find another gemstone source. It can't be that hard. You need to pull every string you can, call in every favor. Because, honestly, if you can't produce this, then we're going to look elsewhere, maybe even in India. Maybe we'll start working directly with suppliers.

She hung up before I could respond.

It took me a second before I put the receiver down. Then I picked it up and put it down, picked it up and put it down, picked it up and threw it, the receiver unleashing a loud, repeating signal in protest. With both hands, I took the phone and yanked its cords out of the wall, dumping the whole thing into the wastebasket. With my heels on, I jammed my foot into the basket, until I heard plastic crack. I took my foot out, assessed the damage. I took the phone back out of the basket, swabbed it with some antibacterial wipes, reassembled it, and plugged it back in.

I picked up the phone and called Hong Kong. It was six in the morning there, but I knew there would be someone who'd come in early to work. There was always someone. I had been to Spectra's Hong Kong office. Through the sweeping windows, you could see the sun rising over the shops along Causeway Bay, the Tian Tan Buddha, the Hong Kong Cricket Club, Victoria Park, so named after the colonizing English queen herself, over the mountains and over the sea, rising and rising, an unstoppable force, bringing in a new day of work.

2

Let us return, then, as we do in times of grief, for the sake of pleasure but mostly for the need for relief, to art. Or whatever. To music, to poetry, to paintings and installations, to TV and the movies.

But mostly TV and the movies.

Has anyone ever see *Torn Curtain*? Bob bellowed. Who's seen *Torn Curtain*? Raise your hands.

Is that the one with Jimmy Stewart? Todd said.

No. Paul Newman. Bob looked around. C'mon, Hitchcock, guys. Film History 101.

When no one said anything, he sighed. I have my work cut out, I see.

We were clustered around the fire, at night. We sat on logs, huddled in coats and blankets, waiting for dinner to cook in the Dutch oven. Somewhere in Pennsylvania.

Bob continued with his *Torn Curtain* rant. Released in 1966, *Torn Curtain* is a Cold War thriller starring Paul Newman and Julie Andrews. Though overlooked as one of Hitchcock's minor works, it is notable for an extended murder scene that shows a man being killed in real time. In the grim struggle, a man is headlocked, stabbed with a knife, struck with a shovel, and gassed in

an oven. It is gruesome not for the tactical maneuvers, which are no more or less grisly than other homicidal depictions in movies, but for the scene's painfully protracted duration.

All of this is to say, Bob said, that it takes a long time for a human being to die. You have to do a lot of things, an alternating method of deprivation and attack, a winning combination of pressures and releases, levers and pulleys. A human body accumulates stresses. Killing is more an accumulative effect rather than the result of one definitive action.

But what are you saying? Evan asked.

The point, Bob said. The point I'm making is about the fevered. They aren't really alive. And one way we have of knowing this is that they don't take a long time to die.

It was true, sort of. For the most part, from what we had seen, the fevered were creatures of habit, mimicking old routines and gestures they must have inhabited for years, decades. The lizard brain is a powerful thing. They could operate the mouse of a dead PC, they could drive stick in a jacked sedan, they could run an empty dishwasher, they could water dead houseplants. On the nights when we stalked their houses, we wandered through their spaces, looked at their family albums. They were more nostalgic than we expected, their stuttering brains set to favor the heirloom china, set to arrange and rearrange their aunts' and grandmothers' jars of pickles and preserves in endless patterns of peach, green bean, and cherry, to play records and CDs and cassette tapes they once must have enjoyed. Familiar songs drifted out at us from strange rooms. Bobby Womack, "California Dreamin'." The Righteous Brothers, "Unchained Melody," possibly the most beautiful song I have ever heard, more hymnal than anything. But it was not the emotional content of the songs that they registered, we deduced, only the rhythm, the percussive patterns that had worn grooves inside their brains. Dolly Parton, Kenny Rogers, "Islands in the Stream." Tears streamed down their cheeks. Rec-

ognizing their residual humanity, we shot them in the heads but not the faces.

It's like we're in this horror movie, Todd said. Like a zombie or vampire flick.

Bob thought about this, scratching his sling. He frowned. Well, no. Vampire and zombie narratives are completely different.

How are they different? Evan asked, winking at Janelle, who swatted his arm to stop him from egging Bob on.

Bob looked back and forth between the two of them. He smiled benignly. Excellent question, Evan. With vampire narrative, the danger lies in the villain's intentions, his underlying character. There are good vampires, there are bad vampires. Think of *Interview with the Vampire*. Or even *Twilight*. These are character narratives.

Now, on the other hand, he continued, let's think about the zombie narrative. It's not about a specific villain. One zombie can be easily killed, but a hundred zombies is another issue. Only amassed do they really pose a threat. This narrative, then, is not about any individual entity, per se, but about an abstract force: the force of the mob, of mob mentality. Perhaps it's better known these days as the hive mind. You can't see it. You can't forecast it. It strikes at any time, whenever, wherever, like a natural disaster, a hurricane, an earthquake.

Let us apply this, Bob said, to our situation. Let us familiarize ourselves with the fevered.

Wait, I interjected. What are you saying? Because number one, the fevered aren't zombies. They don't attack us or try to eat us. They don't do anything to us. If anything, we do more harm to them.

I surprised myself when I spoke. It was rare that I did. But, having spoken, I felt short of breath, nauseated. Everyone looked at me.

Bob gave me a look. Candace. When you wake up in a fictitious world, your only frame of reference is fiction.

Are you okay? Janelle asked me.

I ran into the woods, where, at the base of a tree, I threw up. The rice and beans we had for dinner, the peanut-butter-and-canned-beet sandwiches we'd had for lunch. Leaning with my hands pressed against its trunk, gasping, I braced myself against another wave of nausea. Whatever was left inside me puckered. The strawberry Nutri-Grain bar we'd had for breakfast, some cold instant coffee. But I didn't stop there. It seemed like I was throwing up a month's worth of food. Like the things I'd eaten in my last days in New York. The slices of hard, old bread that I'd dip into seltzer water to make them more palatable. Powdery mouthfuls of Manischewitz matzo ball mix, spooned out of the box. Tomato soup, made with Heinz ketchup packets and seltzer water. The pallets and pallets of strawberries, dark and spotted with mold, just dumped out on the sidewalk.

Emptied, I wiped my sour, acidic mouth with the palm of my hand and smeared it on the tree bark. I leaned against the trunk for a moment, breathing into the crook of my elbow.

Candace.

I spun around to find Bob walking up behind me. Here, he said. In his hand was a bottle of Pepto-Bismol.

Oh, that's okay, I said, on instinct.

Come on. You need it. Sensing my reticence, he went ahead and opened the new bottle. The plastic shell around the cap crinkled as he tore into and discarded it.

I looked at the plastic piece of litter on the ground.

Littering is only a problem if everyone does it, Bob said wryly. I accepted the Pepto-Bismol. I could feel him watching me as I took a sip. We didn't know each other. I had been the last out of New York, then absorbed into the group quickly. It had only been a week, a week and a half, since they'd found me.

Is that better? Bob asked, as if the wonders of Pepto worked this swiftly.

Think I'm just tired, I said.

Bob's light gray eyes softened. It's hard for everyone here. Luckily we'll get to where we need to be soon, and we can settle in and not do all this traveling.

A burst of laughter from the campfire cut through the air. Bob waited for it to pass.

But speaking more broadly about this situation we find ourselves in, he continued, my advice is to find some form of spiritual guidance.

I nodded politely. Sure. Like a self-help book or something.

Something like that, he said, pausing. Do you practice any form of religion?

My parents were religious, so I did have that upbringing of, you know, Sunday school. But it's been years. I never went to church after high school.

He was silent for a moment. When he spoke, he said: Before this, I wouldn't consider myself religious at all. But lately, I find the Bible to be very comforting. He cleared his throat. What do you think we all have in common in this group?

I don't know, I said. I guess the most obvious thing is, we're all survivors?

He smiled, professorially. I'd rephrase that to something more nuanced. We're *selected*. The fact that we're immune to something that took out most of the population, that's pretty special. And the fact that you're still here, it means something.

You mean, like natural selection?

I'm talking about divine selection.

I shifted uneasily. Who knew what was true. The sheer density of information and misinformation at the End, encapsulated in news articles and message-board theories and clickbait traps that had propagated hysterically through retweets and shares, had effectively rendered us more ignorant, more helpless, more innocent in our stupidity.

The question that had hung over all of our heads: Why had we not become fevered? Most of us must have been in contact with airborne spores that had fevered others. To Bob, it all boiled down to his religious conviction that we were chosen. That's the story to which the group officially subscribed.

To me (and to Janelle and Ashley and Evan), the fever was arbitrary. The fact that we were alive held no special meaning.

On the few occasions I had been caught alone with Bob, I had managed to avoid his religious talks. Now I felt myself rescinding, emptying of all personality, emotion, and preferences, so that he would know as little of me as possible. My eyes flickered back toward the campsite, the campfire visible through the trees. I could hear laughter. He caught me looking.

Either way, I'm just happy to be here, I said, with a forced laugh.

He pressed, How do you like it here so far, being with us, I mean? Do you think we're the right fit for you?

He asked this in all seriousness, as if I had any other choice.

I like it so far, I managed. It's taken some adjustment. The group dinners are a new experience for me. I'm just not used to doing everything together, the group activities and dinners. I've been—I hesitated—alone for a long time.

He leveled his gaze. I'd like you to be more participatory, if possible. Now that you're one of us, we're counting on you.

Sure, I said.

That Pepto you're holding, he continued, that was harvested on one of our stalks. We make lists of our necessities. We take what we need. We divide up our labor. We organize together to live. We stay together. Do you understand?

I nodded.

Well, we should get back, he said. Everyone's probably waiting for us for dinner.

When we returned to the campsite, I saw that everyone had

dishes in their laps, plated with untouched food. The rule was that we couldn't eat until someone, usually Bob, said grace. They were drinking on empty stomachs, half-full bottles of Amstel Light and Corona.

This is quite a spread, Bob said to Genevieve approvingly.

I sat down on a log, next to Janelle, who handed me a bottle of water. You okay? she asked. What did you talk to Bob about?

I shrugged. I uncapped the water bottle and took a giant swig, swallowing along with the water all the residual bile in my mouth. It was seltzer water, the bubbles biting my gums, my tongue. I capped it as I swallowed.

Genevieve passed me a plate of food, baked beans and peas. I was not hungry.

So are you okay? Janelle asked. Ever since I'd told her about my situation, she asked whether I was okay so often that I was afraid the others would figure it out.

Yes, I finally said. I'm fine.

Bob smiled at me from across the campfire, as if we shared an inside joke. He said, loud enough for everyone to hear: Candace, will you lead us in saying grace tonight?

I looked at him. His expression didn't change.

I bowed my head and began.

3

I arrived to the city carried by the tides of others. Most of my college friends were moving there, if they hadn't already. It seemed like the inevitable, default place to go. Arriving, we did exactly what we thought we wanted to do. Jobless, we sat outside at sidewalk cafés, donning designer shades, splitting twenty-five-dollar pitchers of spiked Meyer lemonade, and holding tipsy, circulating conversations that lasted well into evening, as rush hour waxed and waned around us. Other people had places to go, but not us. It was the summer of 2006 and the move itself seemed like a slight, inconsequential event in the grand sequence of things. Which was: my mother died, I graduated college, I moved to New York.

My college boyfriend had joined the Peace Corps. When he wasn't digging wells or developing crop rotation systems in outlying South American villages, he was reading postcolonial theory in chambray shirts, sheltered by the cool, gentle shade of indigenous palms. Across weak, spotty reception, we held obligatory sessions of phone sex, more for the novelty of the thing than the thing itself. (You're a fox. I'm a hen. Chicken coop. Go.) He broke up with me via email after the calling card minutes ran out.

All I did that first summer in New York was wander through lower Manhattan, wearing my mother's eighties Contempo Casuals dresses, looking to get picked up by anyone, whomever. The dresses

slid on easily in the morning. They slid off easily at night. They were loose-fitting and cool, cut from jersey cotton in prints of florals and Africana. Wearing them, I never failed to get picked up but I usually failed to get anything else—not that I wanted anything else, as I told myself and whomever else. Still, I overstayed my welcome in their beds, wondering what they did for a living as they dressed in the mornings. Where they were going.

I was tying this guy's tie one morning. He wanted a Windsor knot. I tried to follow the step-by-step instructions he gave, blundering on the fifth or sixth step every time.

My wife usually does this, he said apologetically. Ex-wife, he corrected. After his divorce, he'd moved out from Westchester to Williamsburg, into one of those sleek gray high-rises that overlooked the East River and boasted skyline views of Manhattan.

What's the occasion? I asked. For the special knot. I'm getting remarried, he said, and laughed when I looked up. Just kidding. No, I'm going to be on TV.

Congratulations, I said, trying not to look too impressed. But don't they have their own wardrobe people to help you with this?

It's local cable. He smiled patiently. I'll call you tonight.

Later, I watched the show. It was one of those political debate programs. They were doing a segment about unemployment rates among youth just out of college. I didn't recognize his face right away, not with glasses on, but I recognized the tie I'd helped him pick out and the knot that had taken three tries to get right. The show identified him as Steven Reitman, an economist and author of *You're Not the Boss of Me: Labor Values and Work Ethic Among America's Millennial Youth*.

Steven looked into the camera, sitting against a backdrop of New York skyline. He spoke with authority: The millennial generation has different values from most of America. These kids coming out of college today, they don't want jobs, they expect trust funds. The host chimed in. What would you say, Steven, to recent

statistics showing that millennials are the most educated generation of the American workforce? Isn't that an indication that the new generation is primed for more advanced professions?

Steven nodded. As I've written in my book, the problem isn't education, it's motivation. It's a mentality issue. What does this mean for the United States as a leading economic force? We should be troubled.

He didn't call me that day. A week passed before he summoned me back to his apartment. We lay in his bed, undressed. He was trying to go down on me. The sun was only just setting outside his loft windows, in shades of lavender and pink. Everything felt too earnest.

He did that thing where he laid me down on my back and worked his way south, kissing my breasts, my rib cage, my belly. I found his overtrimmed facial hair alarming. The loose-coiled matress shifted skittishly underneath me. The only guy I had ever let go down on me was the college boyfriend, and that was under the pretense of love.

Hey. I touched his head, his salt-and-pepper hair. I wouldn't do that. When he seemed not to have heard, I tried again. Maybe we should have a safe word.

The safe word is *yes*, he bristled.

I lay on my back, looking up at his high ceiling, trying to relax. I pretended that it was the end of yoga class and I was practicing corpse pose. But I couldn't do it. I couldn't just lie there.

I'm on my period, I lied.

That's okay. It doesn't bother me.

Really? But, I'm like four days into it. At this point, it kind of tastes like rust, old dried blood.

He looked up, smiling. Okay, I'll stop.

Like licking a rusty barbed wire, I added.

You don't have to get into it. His smile had vanished.

Yeah, but can I say it anyway?

What we ended up doing was something like three-quarters fucking and one-quarter lovemaking—and by lovemaking, I just mean the part that was missionary. That part was in the beginning, when he clasped me, almost tenderly and wistfully, and I shut my eyes against his confused gaze, both paternal and lustful. I didn't want to be part of the meaningful postdivorce narrative he was constructing. Like, *Obligatory Sexual Interlude with Inappropriate Twentysomething*. If he was looking for newfound meaning, I would be the first to tell him this was nothing. I did this all the time, I would say. And if he left cab fare on the nightstand, I wasn't going to take it. I didn't want anything. I didn't need anything.

Turn over, he said.

I turned over.

In the morning, he left a hundred-dollar bill and I used it for groceries.

Instead of taking a cab, I walked home to the Lower East Side, crossing the Williamsburg Bridge. Halfway across, I realized my dress, or my mother's dress, was on backward, and I took it off and put it back on, in front of the rush-hour traffic, my breasts cold and peaked in the morning air.

When I finally arrived home, my roommate, Jane, was watching TV and eating yogurt.

You got a package, she said, gesturing to a big moving box next to the sofa.

When did this come in?

I saw it when I got back last night.

I opened up the box to discover a strangely curated selection of my mother's belongings. I could smell traces of her scent, a mix of Carress soap and medicinal Clinique. Most of our family belongings had been placed in storage, but likely because of a clerical mix-up, the hospice had shipped the remaining "personal effects" to me instead of to the law firm overseeing my parents' estate. The

law firm would have then forwarded this last box to the storage facility that held my family's possessions, from my childhood things to my father's collection of Chinese literature.

Jane knelt down next to me, observing. I unpacked the items slowly. Laid across the scratched wood floor, my mother's belongings looked small, measly, shopworn. There were clothes and jewelry, pictures of ancestral relatives I couldn't name, a silver goose-neck-spouted coffee pot from the silver service we never used, and cooking implements she'd long retired: a brass wire ladle for draining oil, broken sections of a bamboo steamer, small jars of dried star anise and other herbs, and, bundled in a bouquet of tissue paper, a heavy cleaver with a handle made of wood, swollen and split. There was no kitchen in the hospice, and she was definitely not well enough to do any cooking, but these were the items she had chosen to take.

At the bottom of one of the boxes was a plastic Ziploc pint bag filled with what looked like chunks of amber-colored tree resin. I opened up the bag. They were triangular slices, with lin-ear grain and a golden fibrous gleam. Maybe they were hunks of dried shellfish like abalone, the kind you'd find in Asian supermarkets.

What is that, do you think? I asked.

Jane held the bag up to the light. She took out a piece, sniffed. Shark! Shark fins, she pronounced. She smelled again, as if to confirm. For shark fin soup, she added, handing me a fin.

How do you even know this? I asked. I brought a dried husk to my nose. They smelled stale, a tinge of oceanic rust, salt crust. We should make shark fin soup! Jane said, too excited to answer. Restaurants don't serve this stuff anymore because, you know, animal rights. I read that they cut the fins off and then throw the sharks back in the water.

What happens to the sharks? I smelled them again.

They die, obviously. Slow, painful deaths. That's why it's outlawed, and also! That's why we shouldn't waste these.

Yeah, but shark fin soup is so outdated. It's like banquet-hall food, I said, trying to remember if my mother had ever made shark fin soup. I was pretty sure she hadn't. Could she have been saving them for a special occasion?

Jane smiled. So we'll have an outdated dinner party. I know! She almost burst into flames with glee, scheming. It'll be eighties-decadence themed. Sheath cocktail dresses, gold jewelry. The shark fin soup will be the centerpiece. Three courses. For the first course, something totally passé, like salmon puffs . . .

Because Jane and I were bad at planning things—disorganized, prone to grandiose, unrealistic ideas—the dinner party didn't actually happen for several weeks. In the meanwhile, my college friends slowly found their ways to credible internships and entry-level jobs. The group gatherings at sidewalk cafés continued until there were too few of us to sustain the same festive mood. When rush hour rolled in and people started their evening commutes around us, we reached for our drinks, avoiding one another's eyes. Someone stood up. He had to be out early to paddle down the Gowanus. Another person excused herself because she had to attend a dreamcatcher workshop. No one asked questions.

Instead of wasting time with others, I began to waste time alone. I walked. I had a routine. I woke early, did my stretches, and ate a bowl of granola drenched in milk. I brushed my teeth, I washed my face, foaming up a clear brown bar of Neutrogena soap. I shaved my legs. I shaved my armpits. To shave my pussy, I lowered myself into the tub, crouching like a sumo wrestler pre-bout. Like a champion sumo wrestler. I placed a hand mirror at the bottom of the basin; I liked to be thorough. My body chafed easily in the heat. Afterward, I showered with scaldingly hot water, watching all the hair run down the drain. I put on a Contempo Casuals dress.

I took my purse, a small cross-body that only held a wallet, ChapStick, and a Canon Elph digital camera.

Freshly shaved, freshly showered, freshly dressed, I went outside. The morning air was cool against my skin, still red from the shower. I smelled like Neutrogena and green apple shampoo, fruity and medicinal at the same time. I closed the heavy door behind me and started walking, passing by the familiar sights: the used bookstore with its window display of architecture tomes, the coded graffiti tags, the dollar pizza place, the diner featuring the same people sitting at the same window booths, stirring their coffees with tiny spoons. Then out of the Lower East Side entirely, west to SoHo or north to Union Square.

The sun rose. Humidity levels increased. As the day warmed, my breath steadied. My shoulders browned to a crisp, like an athlete's. Blisters formed on my feet. Midday, heat came off the sidewalks, creating an illusory wave effect, as if I were observing the world through a thick pane of glass. To cool down, I'd skim through the air-conditioned lobby of a hotel or museum or department store, like a swimmer taking a quick, splashy lap, slipping past doormen, salesgirls, concierges, docents, security guards before bursting back outside.

Periodically I'd take pictures. Pictures of ordinary things: of trash bin contents, of doormen yawning, of graffiti splashed across subway cars, of poorly worded advertisements, of pigeon flocks across the sky—all the usual clichés. I used to feel sheepish doing it, fishing around in my purse for the camera discreetly, as if for a lipstick or a compact. But then I would keep the Canon Elph on me openly, dangling from my hand by a wristlet. I preferred if people thought I was a tourist. It looked less weird that way.

I often ended up in Chinatown around lunch. Specifically, the Fujianese side, separated by the Bowery from the tourist-pandering Cantonese part. This part was cheaper, more run-down, less conscious of the Western gaze. You could get a plate of dumplings

for two dollars, spiked with black vinegar and juliened ginger on a flimsy, buckling Styrofoam plate. When it felt like my legs would give out, I'd eat pork-cabbage dumplings at a shallow storefront underneath the Manhattan Bridge, then sit outside in its shade and drink an iced milk tea. I could feel the bridge above me rumbling and bouncing with the weight of vehicles. The air was dense with afternoon exhaust and fried foods. Old ladies and hunch-backed men in white wife-beaters fanned themselves with palm leaves, eating chicken hearts impaled on skewers.

In the evenings, as people returned home, I looked into the windows above and imagined the lives of the occupants inside. Their desk lamps, their hanging spider ferns in wicker baskets, calico cats lounging on throw pillows. I could do that indefinitely: roam the streets, look up into windows and imagine myself into other people's lives. Maybe I could be a creepy Peeping Tom and that could just be my life.

When I returned home, I would go through the images on my camera and upload the good ones to NY Ghost. The ghost was me. Walking around aimlessly, without anywhere to go, anything to do, I was just a specter haunting the scene. A wind could blow and knock me to Jersey or Ohio or back to Salt Lake. It seemed appropriate that I kept the blog anonymous. Or maybe the anonymity was because I didn't know whether the photos were any good. What I enjoyed, or at least what I felt compelled to keep doing, was the routine.

I held this walking-and-photographing routine through almost all of that first summer in New York. I did it five days a week, Mondays through Fridays, from ten in the morning to six in the evening. June, July, August. A deep, grim satisfaction buoyed me. The thing was just to keep walking, just keep going, and by some point, the third or fourth hour, the fifth or sixth, my mind drained until empty. Hours blurred together. Traffic blared. Cars honked. A man asked me if I was okay, if I needed anything. What do you

Get dressed! my father snapped. We're going out for dinner. My mother came over and tousled my dried hair. What do you want to eat? she asked gently. We can eat wherever you want tonight.

Chinese food, I said, because I knew that would please them. All I wanted to eat as a kid was pizza or spaghetti.

We went to a midtown Chinese place called Vega House. It was almost closing time when we arrived, around nine. The place was mostly empty. They seated us in the big corner booth next to the window. Outside, it had just started to rain; droplets streamed down the pane, blurring the scene outside. My skin broke out into goose bumps in the stale air-conditioning.

In a bid to impress my mother, my father ordered Peking duck. It was such a glamorous, high-maintenance dish; it required table-side service. The weary waiter rolled the glazed bird on a cart and lethargically carved it up, knife almost slipping out of his hand. I found the fatty blobs of duck skin off-putting, but I ate it anyway. I was my father's co-conspirator. He was demonstrating that anything she wanted in China, she could get here. Halfway through the meal, my father put his arm around my mother, trying to indicate to her that the fight was over. For now.

The rain had stopped by the time we left the restaurant. The air was warm. Gasoline puddles formed in the streets. Office buildings glittered as if in half-sleep, a scattering of darkened windows. The city was really beautiful. In a few of the fluorescent windows, employees worked late hours, each alone in his or her office. Dressed in collared shirts, they sat at desks littered with thermoses and Chinese takeout cartons, papers piled high. What were they doing? Where were their homes?

Looking at the office workers suspended high above us, I sensed for the first time my father's desire to leave China and to live in a foreign country. It was the anonymity. He wanted to be

unknown, unpossessed by others' knowledge of him. That was freedom.

I looked up at my father, his gaze also directed to those office buildings. He glanced down briefly and smiled. Like worker bees, he observed in English.

I remember thinking in that moment that I was going to live in New York one day. That was the extent of my ambitions at age nine, but I felt it deeply. I didn't want to go back to China. When we moved to the U.S., I had wanted to go back home, there was nothing I wanted more, I got on my knees and begged like a dog, but I was six then and stupider and I didn't know anything. I didn't feel that way anymore.

The shark fin dinner party took place on a cold, rainy Saturday night in late August. It marked the end of that strange transitory summer, and the beginning of something else.

The guests consisted of a mix of college friends and Jane's people, coworkers and neighbors. They crowded into our railroad apartment, guys in skinny ties and suits, girls with big Aqua Net hair and acrylic nails. They piled their coats on our beds, rolled a keg up the stairs, brought little hostess gifts. Giorgio Moroder played in the background. Someone came dressed as Ronald Reagan, pelting girls with jelly beans from his suit pocket.

We'd created a makeshift Trump-themed dining table in our living room by arranging collapsible card tables end to end. Over this, Jane had laid a metallic gold tablecloth, weighted by a thrifted brass candelabra, and bouquets of fake plastic flowers she'd spray-painted gold. On the table were ironic predinner canapés: salmon mousse quenelles with dill cream, spinach dip in a bread bowl, Ritz crackers, and a ball of pimento cheese in the shape of Trump's hair.

I navigated through the rooms in another of my mother's loose, billowy Contempo Casuals dresses, this one black with a white burnout Africana print.

In the midst of this fray was Steven Reitman, dressed as if for a Hamptons boating party, standing amongst the secondhand furniture of my bedroom. I had invited him almost as a joke, considering that we hadn't seen each other all summer, so I hadn't actually expected him to come.

Is this a dinner party or a costume party? he asked, pressing his whiskered cheek to mine in an air kiss. The scent of his expensive yuzu aftershave made me suddenly wistful for the few times we'd spent together. I swallowed.

You don't need an eighties costume, I said. You can say you're here for research, observing millennials in their natural habitat. I sat down on the edge of my bed, pushing aside the mountain of jackets.

So you invited me to be the party ethnographer? Should've brought my notebook. He sat down beside me, crossing his legs, exposing ankle sock. The bed sagged.

I shrugged and sipped from my rum and Coke. The dim light from the nightstand lamp dramatized our expressions.

How have you been? Sitting very close, he spoke in a low, conspiratorial tone, intimating an intimacy that we never really shared. I noticed that his sports jacket featured a Liberty floral pocket square that someone else, another girl, I assumed, must've helped him choose. No way would he have chosen it on his own.

How's the postcollege job market looking? he pressed. I don't know. I've been focusing more on, I guess, personal projects.

Well, the reason I ask is—he reached into his back pocket—I didn't come empty-handed. He opened his wallet. For a moment I was afraid he was going to hand me cash, but it was something else, a business card. It read MICHAEL REITMAN, CEO.

It's my brother's company, Steven explained. There's a position open. Give him a call.

You told your brother about me? I studied the card uncertainly, trying to make out the letters in the low light. What's Spectrum?

Spectra, he corrected. They're a publishing consulting firm that handles book production. It's not art or design, but it's something. They're looking to fill an assistant position. My brother will have more details, if you get in touch.

I studied the card again, avoiding Steven's gaze. I didn't need a job right away, but I needed *something*, a point of entry into another life that wasn't just about milling around, walking. I could feel my parents' disapproval hanging over me. I was embarrassed that Steven had sensed what I needed.

Thank you, I finally said. But you didn't have to.

It's nothing. I just mentioned you. Now he looked embarrassed.

I know we're not—

Dinner is ready! Jane clamored through the rooms, gathering guests up.

You go ahead, I told Steven. I'll be right in.

He stood up. Okay, I'll see you in there?

I smiled reassuringly. When he left the room, I closed the door. Then I crawled to the head of my bed, over the mountain of jackets, where I opened the window and climbed out onto the fire escape. The tinny, collapsible structure winced. The air outside was cool and humid. Tiny pinpricks of rain dotted my arms.

The fire escape looked out on the backs of other apartment buildings and a communal garden that all the ground-level tenants shared, its disorganized, uncultivated plots overrun with ghetto palms and ruffraff vegetation; a dash of wildflowers here, a fledgling fruit tree there.

I sat down. A full minute lapsed before I started crying. Or more like a shallow, panicky mouth breathing, dry and sobless. I

tried to focus my breath, steady it, in and out, like breaststrokes in deep, choppy water.

Hey, you're blocking all the rain.

The voice came from below. I looked down. Through the grating, I saw a guy sitting on his window ledge, reading a book, smoking a cigarette. He was the summer subletter downstairs. I'd seen him at the mailboxes.

Sorry, I said, automatically.

He looked up, smiled impishly. No sorry. Just giving you a hard time.

I'm getting some air, I explained unnecessarily.

Okay. He blew out a lungful of smoke. Fire escape is all yours.

Do you mind if I finish this first?

I considered the top of his head. Can I have one?

Sure. Then, after a pause, Should I come up?

I looked into my empty room. I could hear Jane still rallying everyone to the table. I'll just come down.

The fire escape rattled beneath my feet. He helped me down the last steps, where, at the landing, I extended my hand. He had a surprisingly firm grip, given his thin, boyish frame. There was a sadness to his face, dark circles under his blue eyes.

He asked, Do you want to wait here or come inside while I get you one?

I peeked inside his window. Is this your room?

Yes. He hesitated. Would you like to come in?

I climbed in and looked around. He lived in the room directly below mine. It was the same room—our apartments shared the same floor plan—except cleaner, better. My room was messy, cluttered with too many things. His room was clean and ascetic, bare walls dimly lit by a floor lamp. There was something serene about it, a temple emptied of all ceremonial accoutrements and cleared of incense smoke.

I live right above you, I informed him.

I know. I can hear you walking late at night. You pace. He caught himself. Sorry, I don't mean to sound creepy. You just have this skittish way of walking.

A skittish way of walking?

Like, restless. I hear your roommate too. She gets up very early. I can hear her grinding coffee.

Does she not have a skittish way of walking?

He contemplated this. Um, no. Your roommate walks very purposefully, but you, you're more unsettled, unsure. Not an insult, just an observation. He had found his pack of American Spirits and handed one to me, not touching the filter. I liked that consideration.

I rolled it around between my fingers. My roommate gets up early, I allowed. It's a long commute. She has this fashion PR job in Jersey.

Here, sit down. I can't find my light. Let me get one from the kitchen.

I sat down on the edge of the bed. It was a mattress on the floor, carefully dressed with white sheets. There was no chair. Affixed on the walls were two plastic hooks, one for a towel and the other for a jacket, next to the doorframe. In lieu of a dresser, clothes were neatly stacked in three rows on the floor, against the wall: jeans, underwear, and white T-shirts. A small floor lamp was arranged next to a few library books. Rousseau. Foucault.

When he returned, he was holding the largest butane lighter I'd ever seen. May I? he asked.

I nodded, and he attempted to light my cigarette, ridiculously, the gas flame licking my cheek.

Should we go back outside? I don't want to smoke up your room.

No, stay. Smoke up my room. He sat down on the bed. We smoked. He seemed content to say nothing.

So, I said, searching. Tell me about what you do. I regretted it

as soon as I asked. It was the question everyone asked everyone else in New York, so careerist, so boring.

What I do for money or what I actually do?

Both, I guess. I exhaled a plume of smoke.

I temp for money, usually copywriting jobs. I freelance a bit too, a few articles and interviews. But what I actually do is write fiction. And you, what about you?

I live off my parents, I said, surprised by the casualness with which I dispensed this information. I didn't elaborate that they were both deceased, and that the family coffers or whatever would last me just long enough—maybe, say, for the next ten, fifteen years—for me to be comfortable with not working, long enough to be useless. The fruits of my immigrant father's lifelong efforts would be gobbled up and squandered by me, his lazy, disaffected daughter.

But I'm looking for a job, I added. I have an interview coming up at this place called Spectra.

What are you interviewing for?

Um, I have no idea.

He smiled, as if to himself. By this point, my cigarette had gone out. I hesitated. There's a party that I'm supposed to be hosting.

What, now? He started.

I nodded. They've probably begun without me. You're invited, if you'd like.

I'll walk you up at least. He came over to me. I thought he was going to pull me up, but instead, he licked his thumb and touched my cheeks. I realized that he was clearing off dried streaks of mascara. I'd forgotten that only moments earlier, I'd been crying.

I'm going to pretend you're not cleaning me with your spit. I closed my eyes. Is it coming off?

No. You might have to use my bathroom.

Can I use your bathroom?

Sure. It's down the—Actually, you know where it is.

I walked to where my bathroom would have been. Unlike our space, the bathroom was also tidy, full of generic Duane Reade products lined up in his medicine cabinet, which I opened to look for prescription pill bottles. There weren't any. I couldn't see his private grievances.

I closed the cabinet and looked at myself in the mirror. My private grievances were all over my face. I looked upset. My skin looked dry and tight; I'd probably forgotten to moisturize. I threw some water on my face.

When I opened the door, he was waiting in the hallway. Together, we entered my apartment the same way I had left it: up the fire escape, through my window, and into my room. We walked into the living room, to a dinner that had just begun. Everyone looked up.

Who's this? Jane asked.

This is um—I turned to him, realizing we'd never introduced ourselves.

Jonathan, he said.

Jonathan, I repeated. He's our downstairs neighbor.

Can I get you something to drink, Jonathan? Jane said. If she was annoyed by our lateness, she didn't show it. We have kamikazes, rum and Cokes, anything.

Just seltzer water if you have any.

I'll get it, I said, walking to the kitchen while Jane pulled up an extra chair for him, clear across the other end of the table, while I was seated next to Steven.

Once we were all seated, we beheld the magnum opus at the center of the table: the shark fin soup was arranged in a crystal punch bowl with a ladle, prom-style. Actually, two punch bowls, one for the original soup, and another for the mysterious vegan version that Jane had made.

Jane served all of us, ladling it out into bowls.

The shark fin had a strange, gelatinous texture. We chewed for a long time, then swished the soup down with red wine.

I should've bought white, Jane said. Better with seafood.

The tannins, someone agreed.

It's not bad, Jonathan said, and really seemed to mean it.

The rest of us forced the soup down our throats. Jane passed around a glass candy dish full of oyster crackers, which guests sprinkled in their bowls. It didn't make the soup any more palatable, any less sour or musty. I wondered if I'd made it wrong. The recipe had called for fresh shark fins. Instead, I had soaked the dried fins in filtered water for a few hours, to reconstitute them, before I'd made the soup. Aside from that, I had followed the recipe precisely.

I guzzled more wine than I could handle. Steven turned to me, his low voice forcing me to lean a little closer. He was saying something about his brother, how his brother was a better man than he because he was a fair man. Or something like that.

And you're not a fair man? I asked Steven.

A *family* man, Steven corrected, slurring. My brother has always been a family man. Whereas I have only performed at it. And badly.

I realized he was addressing his divorce, the emotional repercussions he must have been struggling with. He'd never spoken of his family, and whatever information I'd gleaned was vague and clichéd: the distant wife, the troubled children.

You're fine, I said. You're okay. Nothing bad is happening right now.

He smiled, eyes bloodshot, and spooned his soup.

Suddenly, I felt a bit nauseated. It was so hot and smoky and perfumed inside.

In keeping with the vaguely Orientalist theme, Jane had bought

a mah-jongg set that we were all supposed to play after dinner, but no one could figure out the game.

Candace, I thought you knew how to play this, someone yelled at me.

Why, because I'm Asian?

We gave up. We disassembled the card tables that made up our dining table and moved them out into the hallway. The living room was cleared.

Suddenly, the sound of the fire alarm cut through the room. Everyone winced, covered their ears against the shrill, electronic shriek.

What's burning? someone asked. I don't smell anything.

It's all the cigarette smoke, another person yelled.

Shit. Well, crack a window.

Should we stop smoking? a girl asked, her hand frozen, clutching her cigarette.

Jane waved her hand. Guys! Just dismantle the alarm! She climbed a kitchen chair to the smoke alarm on the ceiling, located the battery hatch, and removed it.

The alarm had broken a spell. Afterward, everyone began to relax. We hooked up an iPod to the speakers and took turns DJing. People jumped around in unison, a faux mosh pit, with happy, sunny pop music. In the kitchen, others played a drinking game called Bullshit Pyramid. Someone else had brought Twister, and the mat was laid out in the middle of my room. I wandered from room to room, circulating, playing at everything and losing, laughing hysterically as I scattered the cards, stumbled on the mat, jumped up and down, out of sync.

When other people are happy, I don't have to worry about them. There is room for my happiness. In this happiness, I lost track of Jane. I lost track of Steven. I lost track of Jonathan. I had seen him talking to a bunch of people as they sat around on the floor.

Later-still, through a curtain of smoke, I saw him in my room, looking through my bookcase. Those books aren't mine! I wanted to yell, even though that was not true. They were all mine. *My Antonia. Windowlight. Namedropper. Crime and Punishment*, the one thing I saved from freshman English. *The Metamorphosis*. The Sweet Valley High series, paperbacks of teen horror and sci-fi that I had pilfered from visits back home. Christopher Pike. R. L. Stine. Coming-of-agers. *I Capture the Castle. The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*. A collection of defunct magazines from the nineties, *Index* being my favorite. How long had he been in there? And even later, I glimpsed him in Jane's room, watching some Italian movie on a laptop with a group of people, the loud exclamatory Italian phrases like typewriter keys clacking. *Come stai?* What was there to do but smile. I smiled and waved. Come join us, he yelled after me, as I went down the hallway to do something else, I forget what. After that, I didn't see him and I figured he had probably gone back downstairs, through the fire escape of my room.

I don't know how many hours passed. I stopped and started. When I was tired, I sprawled out on the rug. When I was hungry, I nibbled on chips in the kitchen. I drank Sprite and wine coolers I found in the fridge. I was like a homeless person in my own house. I was enjoying myself, but it was an insulated enjoyment. I was alone inside of it.

Around four, the party began to wind down. The sky had begun to lighten outside the window. Guests were gradually leaving, one by one or in groups, peeling themselves off the rug of our living room, where we hovered, drinking and passing a spliff. Jane was sleeping on the floor. The mountain of coats and jackets on my bed diminished until only a few remained. I identified Steven's sports coat, which he had taken off sometime during the night. It was missing its pocket square.

I picked it up and walked through the apartment. Steven? I called.

I found him in the bathroom, gripping the sink. He had sweat through his shirt. He was utterly, swervingly drunk, and with that drunkenness came complete, terrorizing amorosness. But no, he was not just drunk. Something else. He had ingested something, it was so clear that he had ingested something. Maybe he had taken it willingly, or maybe someone had slipped it to him as a joke. My friends could be assholes.

Steven was touching my face, his eyes glassy. You look so sad, he said.

I'm not sad, I replied. Are you having a good time?

You're so beautiful, he said, not answering me. You're really beautiful, he repeated.

Thank you, I said, maturely. Would you like me to call you a cab?

He shook his head vigorously. No. I want to stay.

Okay, you can stay. But why don't you lie down. I led him to the living room, toward the sofa. I was removing his shoes, attempting to unknot his gray leather shoelaces, so fine like mouse whiskers.

No. I want to say something. I want to tell you something, he said urgently.

What's that?

He took my face in his hands and looked at me. I am alone, Steven said. I am without family, I am alone.

You're not alone, I said, though I did not know this to be a fact. And, because I was not close enough to him to tell him the truth, I added, You have people all around you. You're on TV.

I missed you, he persisted.

You have people, I repeated, not knowing what else to say.

No, you're not hearing me. You're not hearing me even though you understand. I missed you. All summer, I kept thinking about you.

Is that why you came? I asked, thinking of the times he had deflected my IMs, the times I had deflected his.

He looked at me. You invited me. Why did you invite me?

I didn't answer this. Instead, I said, A lot has changed for me this summer.

Like what? He was grabbing my wrists. How are you different? You look the same. Exactly the same.

He lurched toward me. I pulled back. Undeterred, he lunged again and attempted to kiss me, madly, desperately. When I pulled back again, he came crashing to the floor, dragging me down with him. Jane, lying on the rug a few feet away, didn't stir. With the both of us lying low, he started kissing me. It was like tumbling down a dizzying Escher staircase of beer-tasting embraces and caresses. I kissed him back. Through the yuzu aftershave, I could remember what it was like to kiss him, at the beginning of the summer, when he first took me over to his loft. I went around, looking at his things, his books, the framed art on the walls, his furniture that he'd paid someone to arrange. I opened up his bathroom cabinet and sniffed his collection of aftershaves. I opened up his closet and looked at his wood hangers and shoe trees. He got off on my curiosity. When I kissed him, it was like I was kissing all his things, all the signifiers and trappings of adulthood or success coming at me in a rush. Fucking was just seeing that to its end, a white yacht docking.

Now Steven was the one to disentangle himself. Hold on. Let's go to your room.

We walked to my room, to the very end of the railroad, where I saw Jonathan. He was sitting on the edge of the bed, fully dressed, reading. My heart dropped. As we came into the room, he looked up at Steven and me, putting two and two together. What was there for me to do but smile and try not to look too disgusting.

I was just leaving. Jonathan stood up and went to the window. I followed him, to close the window after him. When he pulled himself out on the fire escape, he turned around, his face half concealed by shadows.

Come downstairs and see me sometime, he said.

I will. Good night, I said, and as I turned away to go, his hand grabbed my arm.

Candace.

I smiled. Jonathan. What?

He leaned over and whispered in my ear. You're making a mistake. Then, before I could react, he licked my ear. With the tip of his tidy, scratchy tongue, he grazed the bottom of the lobe to the tip of the ear, in one stealthy swoop.

I stepped back, grabbing my ear with both hands as if someone had cut it off. It was warm, and wet.

With that, he closed my window and descended the fire escape. I heard the fragile, thin metal clanging as he climbed down. I heard his window opening. Then I heard it close.

4

The sunlit days were for driving toward the Facility, but certain days were different. Certain days, we went stalking. As in: Let's stalk this town. Let's stalk this street. Pick a house, any house. It wasn't just houses that could be stalked. Gas stations could be stalked. Strip malls could be stalked. Gyms. Clothing boutiques. Holistic health centers. Coffee shops. But houses, they were our bread and butter. We basked in their homey feeling, imagining the Saturday breakfasts, the TV evenings. And we were familiar with the range of layouts, the types of products, having grown up in similar homes.

Stalking, Bob liked to say, is an aesthetic experience. It has its rituals and customs. There is prestalking. There is poststalking. Every stalk is different. There are live stalks. There are dead stalks. It isn't just breaking and entering. It isn't just looting. It is envisioning the future. It is building the Facility and all of the things that we want to have with us. He couldn't guarantee what supplies were still available in the Facility, so we stalked everything. Foodstuffs. A library. DVD movies. Office supplies. Throw pillows. Tablecloths, one for every day, one for holidays. Ceramic planters. Soap dishes. Prescription drugs. Toys, though there were no children amongst us.

Anyway. We had arrived. We were going to stalk.

We stood outside on the dry brown lawn of a powder-blue colonial. This was somewhere in Ohio. It was in the afternoon. I had to remind myself of how, in the winter, dark always came early. It was December something.

All right, Bob said. Now let's join hands.

We formed a circle and performed our prestalk rites on the frost-encrusted grass of the front lawn. I stood between Todd and Adam. We took off our shoes and held hands. We began the chant, a long mantra that we recited every time. The fact that it corresponded to the rhythm of the Shins' "New Slang" made it easy to remember, easy to say. You could almost sing it, tumble around on its wistful rhythm. And if we didn't do any part of this prestalk correctly (to Bob's satisfaction), if we stumbled over the chant, if we accidentally broke our handhold, we'd have to do it again.

After the chant, we bowed our heads and closed our eyes, as Bob administered the recitation, part prayer and part affirmation—an ever-changing hokey thing that he improvised on the spot.

As we gather here today, Bob said, speaking slow and loud, we ask that you allow us the fortitude to stalk with circumspection and humility. We don't know what we will find behind these doors, but the Lord provideth. Please allow us to respectfully take what you provide. Please allow us to be fair and merciful toward the previous owners, should we encounter them.

We have come a long way, he continued. The farther we go, the less tenable and certain the path ahead may seem. And while there are those among us who may waver in their faith, I ask that you help us take things one day at a time. For now, for today, may this stalk we are about to embark on be fruitful. And let us receive your fruits not with further demands or expectations, but with humility and grace. His voice trembled. We thank you for the supplies that you are about to give, and which we are proud to receive. Thank you.

At the end, as a sealant to contain the goodwill and luck we had just created, we went around the circle and stated, with solemnity, our full birth certificate names. Bob started first, then we went clockwise.

Robert Eric Reamer.

Janelle Sasha Smith.

Adam Patrick Robinson.

Rachel Sara Aberdeen.

Genevieve Elyse Goodwin.

Evan Drew Marcher.

Ashley Martin Piker.

Todd Henry Gaines.

Candace Chen.

We bowed in unison toward the center of the circle, as if preparing to engage in karate. Then we put our shoes back on.

We considered the colonial in front of us. The doors were framed on either side by skeletal bushes that once bloomed roses. It was one of those prestige new-development homes in middle-class neighborhoods, a heritage property by external appearances but mediocre in quality, all shoddy thin walls and hollow doors inside. It looked easy.

First, the men made their approach, firearms in hand, and opened up the front door, hung with a molting eucalyptus wreath. It took them about half an hour to scope out the situation, check the gas lines, check the electricity, while Janelle, Rachel, Genevieve, Ashley, and I waited outside. If it was a live stalk, the occupants were still alive, but incapacitated by the fever. They were rounded up and herded into rooms. If it was a dead stalk, then Todd and Adam cleared the bodies and put them in the yard before we entered.

Through the large dining room windows, we saw Todd and Adam rounding up the fevered into the dining room.

I guess it's a live stalk, Ashley said.

There was a father, a mother, a son. Or that's what it looked like. It was hard to tell right away because of their skeletal frames. Well, the mother was easy to identify. Her face was a birthday cake, covered in night cream, dripping onto the cable-knit sweater she wore. Todd and Adam left and locked the doors.

The family seated themselves around the cherrywood dining table, decorated with a cream lace runner, anchored with a bowl holding what looked like moldy, decomposed citrus fruits.

The name on the mailbox indicated that they were the Gowers. As we watched, the mother began to set the table with dishes, white with navy trim, from the matching cherry sideboard, her movements rote and systematic. First she began setting up the dinner plates, then the salad plates on top, then soup bowls on top of that. After place settings were arranged, she distributed the cutlery. She set up four place settings.

When she sat down, they clasped their hands together on the table and bowed their heads. The father opened and closed his mouth.

What are they doing? Ashley asked.

Looks like they're saying grace, Janelle observed.

When the father spoke, he uttered sounds but no words, at least none that I could decipher from our proximity. He could have been speaking in tongues. After a few moments, they opened their eyes and began to have dinner, as a family.

They ran their tongues over the cutlery. They dinked knives and forks to the plates, dashing off chicken cutlet or veal Parmesan. They brought the plates to their lips and licked them, like child actors in Chef Boyardee commercials, as if the plates were redolent of savory spaghetti sauce. A pasta primavera with fresh garden vegetables. A Salisbury steak with canned corn.

Dinner was over when Mrs. Gower stood up again. She circled around the dining room table, gathered up the dishes and cutlery,

then stacked them back in the sideboard. As soon as she finished, she began again, unstacking plates and resetting the table. The Gowers were having dinner once more, the second of dozens of dinners they would have that night. They bowed their heads and said grace, although they likely did not speak words but animal mumblings following the same rhythm, the same cadence, like humming a favorite tune. Words are often the first to go when you are fevered.

Hey. Hello? Someone was saying something. It was Rachel. Her nails were digging into my arm. You're blanking out again.

I blinked, coming out of my trance. Sorry, I said.

You could lose yourself this way, watching the most banal activities cycle through on an infinite loop. It is a fever of repetition, of routine. But surprisingly, the routines don't necessarily repeat in the identical manner. If you paid a little attention, you would see variations. Like the order in which she set down the dishes. Or how sometimes she'd go around the table clockwise, other times counterclockwise.

The variations were what got to me.

When I was a kid, I used to watch my mother go through her daily facial routine. She subscribed to the Clinique 3-Step skin-care regimen: Liquid Facial Soap Mild, Clarifying Lotion 2 (because she had dry combination skin, like me), and Dramatically Different Moisturizing Lotion. Every morning and evening, she stood in front of the bathroom mirror, going through this process. It wasn't always the same. Sometimes she'd wash her face in circular clockwise motions, other times counterclockwise. Then there were times when she'd finish with an extra, unsanctioned step: Fujianese face oil, patted onto her face. The oil was a mystery, tinted emerald green, reeking of some chinoiserie, a fussy floral scent, imparting unknown medicinal qualities. It came in a small broad-shouldered

glass flask imprinted with the image of a poppy flower. I have looked for that product everywhere, in both Cantonese Chinatowns, in Fujianese Chinatown, in Sunset Park, in Flushing, and never found it.

During freshman year of college, she would call to stress the accumulative benefits of a proper facial regimen, her Mandarin always sounding like a reprimand.

Are you moisturizing? she asked, her thin voice crackling over the cell reception. You need to moisturize properly because your skin is naturally dry. Your father has the same problem.

Yeah, I'm doing it right now, I answered, as I checked my email, poured myself another coffee. I'm moisturizing as we speak.

Every day. I sent you a set of Clinique. Has it arrived?

Yes, thank you, I responded, though she had done no such thing.

They were having a sale with a free gift. It was a good deal. In your twenties, a skincare regimen is more for preventative measures. Even if you don't see its effects, the aging process will be worse if you don't do this, she said. So you have to do the regimen regularly every day.

Yeah, I said.

Pat the moisturizer in lightly, don't just smear it, she said. Then there was a pause, while she waited for me to do as she said.

How does it feel?

Great. It's very light.

What you do every day matters, she'd say, before hanging up.

By that point, she had grown dreamy, her brain flea-bitten by an early onset of Alzheimer's. She was given to strange, sensuous pursuits like rinsing our silver coffeepot under a cold tap faucet for abnormally long periods of time, or ordering fifty entrées of mapo tofu, her favorite thing to eat, for some imaginary dinner party. There was never not a dinner party. My voicemail filled with invites to lavish nonexistent gatherings. Those parties, if they

actually happened, would've been kind of amazing, like a cross between a classic Chinese banquet-hall dinner and eighties-era Studio 54. She'd describe the menu she was planning and the guests she'd invited: my dead father, some divorced aunts and uncles, then some other Chinese names of friends or relatives I didn't recognize, just a tangle of gibberish.

They'll be so happy to see you. Don't worry about airfare; I've already bought you a ticket, she'd say.

Thank you, I'd say, though, again, she had done no such thing. I'll be pleased to come.

Todd opened the Gowers' front door. Okay, ready! he yelled.

We put on our face masks and rubber gloves. We went inside, carrying empty boxes and garbage bags.

The door opened up to a large foyer. The walls of the staircase were hung with family photos. The Gower clan included a mother and a father, a son and an older daughter. The father balding and portly, the mother, a bleached blonde, tightly trim with a wan smile, her hands crossed in her lap, displaying a pert French manicure, the manicure of choice among porn actresses and midwestern housewives.

How tragic, Genevieve pronounced.

Let's go, ladies, Todd said. He loved to prod us and make us work.

The men hunted, and the women gathered. Each of us was assigned a division of sorts. Janelle and Ashley worked Craft Services, gathering cooking supplies and shelf-stable products that the moths and pantry rodents hadn't touched. Rachel worked Health, accumulating prescription meds, bandages, aspirins, and skin-care products. Genevieve worked Apparel, rifling through the closets for jackets and coats, but more often for quality linen tunics and silk blouses. I worked Entertainment, a broad cate-

gory that included DVDs, books, magazines, board games, video games, and consoles.

As usual, I started in the entertainment room. This was in the basement.

Room by room, we amassed boxes. The boxes were placed out in the hallways for Bob to inspect, taking out or adding items as he saw fit. As the rooms emptied and the boxes filled, Adam and Todd and the other guys would take the inspected boxes outside to the supply vans.

For some reason, this process took hours.

Every time we stalked, this feeling would come over me, imperceptible at first. It is hard to describe because it is close to nothing. Gradually, the din of other people's conversations or Todd's heavy footsteps, his ugly, flat gait on the floorboards would fall away. I would forget where I was or why I was there. I would get lost in the taking of inventory, with the categorizing and gathering, the packing of everything into space-efficient arrangements in the same boxes. *Planes, Trains and Automobiles*. *Vertigo*. *Halo 2*. *Seinfeld: The Complete Series*. *Grand Theft Auto: Chinatown Wars*. *Scrooged*. *Tales from the Hood*. *Blow-Up*. *Apocalypse Now*. *Waiting to Exhale*. *The Conversation*. *Sex and the City*. *The Complete Series*. *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*. *Back to the Future*. It was a trance. It was like burrowing underground, and the deeper I burrowed the warmer it became, and the more the nothing feeling summed me, snuffing out any worries and anxieties. It is the feeling I like best about working.

The only sound that would cut through this ebb and flow was Bob. In every house, he would take the muzzle of his firearm, a vintage M1 carbine semi-rifle, and run it along the walls as he walked. We would hear that scraping everywhere, in the floors above us, below us, and know where he had been. It left a mark, a black jagged line across fleur-de-lis wallpaper, sponge-painted designs, bare white walls. The scent of French vanilla drifted through the

rooms. Occasionally, the scraping stopped, and we braced ourselves for the shot that would ring out. We never knew what he was shooting at: a bat trapped in an attic, a squirrel chasing leaves through the rain gutters, or nothing, nothing at all.

Finishing up in the entertainment room, I found my way upstairs to the study to collect some books. In the Gowers' house, the study was on the first floor, adjacent to the kitchen. The unusually small doorframe, so low that I had to stoop my head, opened up to an unexpectedly grand room. The walls were lined with built-in bookcases. There was a fireplace, as high as my shoulder. Tall windows looked out on the backyard. The burgundy plaid curtains, so large and heavy that they sank to the floor, were tightly drawn.

I went to the books first.

The shelves were almost all filled with children's books. Only the top shelf held adult titles, vanity set pieces that gestured toward the cultured minds of the homeowners. In this case, it was a Shakespeare anthology, a Jane Austen anthology, the complete collected poems of Walt Whitman, and so on. They looked stiff, dusty, and barely opened. All except for the Bible, at the very end of the shelf.

I took the Bible down. It was the Daily Grace Bible. I had produced it, years ago when I first started at Spectra, and overseen several of its reprintings. It was a comfort to see it again, an artifact from a previous life.

I sat down on the green plaid armchair with the thing in my hands, recalling the production details. The Daily Grace Bible was an everyday Bible for casual use, but Three Crosses Publishing also wanted to imbue the product with the high-value feel of an heirloom. In order to hit the publisher's target cost, substitutions had been made. The cover was made of leatherlike polyurethane instead of leather. The book block edges boasted copper-hued spray edge, duller compared to the more expensive gilding. The

ribbon markers were made of sateen instead of silk. Most consumers couldn't really tell the difference between what was mass-produced and what was artisan or handmade. And in fact, real quality heirloom Bibles, with their pungent, heavy leather covers, weren't always preferred. The Daily Grace Bible had sold very well. I'd always felt fond of it, maybe because it was the least ostentatious Bible I'd produced.

For the cover, I'd ordered the polyurethane material from an Italian company that specialized in faux-leather. They also supplied the same material to Forever 21 and H&M, to be made into wallets, coin purses, shoes, other lifestyle accessories. For the specialty Bible paper, I'd calculated the number of rolls to be ordered from the Swiss paper mill, I couldn't remember how many now. But I'd always overorder a bit, accounting for a five percent wastage, because Bible paper was so thin that it often ripped on web presses, fast-spinning and dangerous, the kind of machinery that could slice an arm off. Even before production, I'd have recurring nightmares of Bible paper ripping on web presses, a dream that has never gone away. Swiss Bible paper, famed for its creaminess and opacity despite its thinness, had taken months to be made to order, its slurry stifling nearby rivers, and then shipped to the Hong Kong port, where someone from our Hong Kong office picked the rolls up and delivered them across the mainland China border to Phoenix Sun and Moon Ltd. in Shenzhen.

At Phoenix, it had taken six weeks for the Daily Grace Bible to be printed, assembled, and packed into custom-made boxes. The initial print run had been a hundred thousand copies, the largest of that year. Once completed, the product traveled back through to Hong Kong, where it cleared customs, was stuffed into a forty-foot shipping container, and departed in a freight vessel at the port. After fifteen days at sea, the Bibles arrived at the Long Beach port in California and were transferred to a freight train. The Bibles traveled east until, at some point, the shipping container was

transferred to a truck and driven south to the publisher's distribution center in Texas, where they were shipped out to retailers. The Gowers could have bought it at a Barnes & Noble, a Books-A-Million, a Christian bookstore, a gas station Christian shop, a Hallmark kiosk, or a megachurch gift shop.

Opening up the book, I saw, on the inside front cover, written in frilly teen cursive script, the name of its owner. *Property of Paige Marie Gower.*

I enacted an old ritual from product-coordinating days. With my eyes closed, I opened the Daily Grace Bible to a random page and placed my finger on the text. I'd read whatever verse I touched.

And David said unto God, I am in a great strait: let us fall now into the hand of the Lord: for his mercies are great: and let me not fall into the hand of man.

It was then that I heard it, a quiet sound, like paper rustling. I put the book down. I stood up, slowly, and approached the windows, where the sound was coming from. As I approached, I spotted something beneath the curtains. A pair of socked feet, red polka dots on orange.

I drew the curtains back.

It was a girl, twelve or thirteen years old. She was reading, or assuming the act of reading. She turned a page, looked at it for a few seconds, and then turned the page again. It was upside down. I craned my neck. *A Wrinkle in Time*, a vintage pink edition. As she read, she chewed her hair, a strand in her mouth. In fact, she was literally chewing all of her hair off. That was the sound that I was hearing, hair chewing and the turning of pages. The carpet around her was covered with strands of auburn hair.

She was fevered, obviously. She was thin from malnourishment, bruises running down her discolored, impossibly bony legs. Mosquitoes feasted on her open sores. Her bare calves were sticky with some kind of dried liquid. On the windowsill was a glass of

possibly orange juice with a whitish mold growing in it. Periodically, she reached up for it and drank the rotted juice.

The sight took me away. I stepped back slowly, still holding the Bible in my hands.

This was probably Paige Marie Gower. Her mother had set out four place settings in the dining room. The fourth seat was probably reserved for her.

I heard the sound of Bob's rifle down the hallway, heading toward the study.

I closed the curtain on Paige and arranged myself in an armchair, pretending to look through the Bible.

How is it coming along? he asked.

I found this Bible, I said, holding it up unnecessarily.

Good. Bob nodded. We'll take it.

There's not much else in here, just a lot of children's books.

We're about to wrap up. Meet us in the dining room for a poststark. Bob was about to turn away, then stopped. He stood still and looked around.

In my haste, I had not drawn the curtains fully as to obscure Paige Marie Gower entirely. Her socks peeped out from underneath the curtains. I held my breath. I looked elsewhere, at the children's books on the shelves. So many were ones that I had read myself as a kid, when my mother would take me to the library every week. *Anne of Green Gables. The Secret Garden. Matilda.*

The sound of a page turning, quick, like paper ripping.

Bob was now walking around the room, trying to track the sound down. He drew aside the curtains. A long, terrible moment passed.

He turned to me. How did you not see her? he asked, although he already knew. He could read it all over my face.

Come with us to the dining room, he said. He swung his carbine behind him and yelled for Adam. Together, they grabbed Paige Marie Gower and dragged her down the hall and toward

the dining room. I scurried behind, dreading what was to come. They were rounding Paige in with the rest of her family, to join in the cycle of endless dinners.

Todd had gathered everyone.

At the end of every live stalk, we had another stalking rite. Everyone had to observe it. We crowded around the doorway of the dining room. Through the window, the sun was setting. In front of us, there was Mrs. Gower, going through the plates with her French-manicured nails, now overgrown, dirtied, and broken. And Mr. Gower and his son, running their tongues over the plates. Paige Gower had sat down at the table.

Bob began. So, I realize now that Candace has gone on a few stalks with us, we should properly explain to her our poststalks. Can someone fill her in?

When it's a live stalk, we kill them at the end, Todd supplied. No, we don't kill them, we release them, Bob corrected. And why do we do that?

It's the humane thing to do, Genevieve replied. Rather than having them cycle through the same routines, during which they degenerate, we put them out of their misery right away.

Bob removed his bad arm from his sling, which he wore inconsistently. He needed both hands to work the M1 carbine.

This is how Bob shot Mrs. Gower, Mr. Gower, and Gower Jr., one after the other, all in a row. Each sustained a brusque, merciful shot to the head. Like slumbering bears in a fairy tale, one by one they slumped over their dinner plates.

Bob turned to me. Now you go. I've left you one more target. The girl behind the curtains, whom you apparently didn't see.

I flushed and tried to refrain. I'm not really good at shooting. Let this be a lesson to you to be more observant next time. Here. He put his carbine in my hands. It was heavy, still warm, sticky as if he'd been eating candy all afternoon.

I grasped it halfheartedly, its long, lean shape bundled awkwardly in my arms. I've never done this before, I protested.

It's okay. Here, let me do it, Janelle said. She reached for the carbine, but Bob stopped her.

No, he said. This is for Candace only. She should do it. He turned to the rest of the group. Okay, now let's see Candace shoot.

The first shot blasted through the window, its recoil force ricocheting through my shoulder, searing it with an afterburn that was so deep I almost cried out. The second shot pierced through the chandelier and shards of crystal rained over the dinner table. Paige Gower barely glanced up.

Jesus, someone—was it Todd?—muttered in the background. Steady, Bob said. Hold it firmly. He adjusted the gun.

The third shot hit a place setting, piercing through the porcelain of a salad plate. Paige Gower did not flinch. The fourth shot hit her in the arm, at which point she registered something. Her eyes widened and she started to get up. The fifth shot hit her in the stomach, and the ensuing cries were weak little bays, attempts at protesting more than actual pleading.

At this point, everyone was beginning to get impatient.

Okay, look, Bob said. He was speaking slowly. You have to put some intent into this. If you do this without intent, it's not going to work. Locate your target. Focus on it.

I let my gaze rest on Paige Gower's face. The target was the forehead. In the moments before we shot them, they looked at us with crocodile eyes, knowing our difference.

She raised her blue eyes and looked at me, as the sixth shot hit her in the cheek, and then the seventh reached the forehead. The eighth shot hit her in the arm, the ninth in the stomach, the tenth in the eye, which spurted. At some point, I lost track of what I was shooting. I just kept shooting, my hands welded to the humming carbine by someone else's sticky candy, every shot pulsing

through me like a spark of electricity. She was probably obediently dead by now, but still I was shooting, past the death barrier and into someplace else, I don't know where. Where else is there to go. I kept going.

A cool, light hand touched my back. That's enough, Janelle said.

I stopped. There was a strange rattling sound in the room, a shallow, irregular wheezing. It took me a moment to realize it was the sound of my phlegmy, panicked breath.

Bob broke the silence. Good job, he said.

5

So, tell me a bit about yourself.

I took a breath. Well, I was a Visual Studies major. I studied photography. And I am impressed by—here, I glanced around the office, filled with a swarm of books on the shelves—the book projects that Spectra has produced. I'm familiar with many of the art titles here.

Well, this position isn't about art appreciation, Michael Reitman said. His desktop pinged with another email, and he glanced at the screen briefly, momentarily distracted from my unimpressive answer. He picked up a printout in front of him, skimmed over it. Your résumé doesn't tell me much. Is your interest in being an artist or is your interest in working in book production?

I hesitated. I do dabble in photography. But obviously, that doesn't pay the bills.

Okay. I don't mean to be blunt, he said, leaning back in his chair. We get a lot of aspiring artists and designers applying here, thinking that they're going to be involved in book design or that they're going to be part of the art world. This position is not about that. It's about project management. We work with publishers in New York and printers in Southeast Asia. It's about logistics. It's about making sure the right people have the right information at the right time.

I nodded slowly, realizing how little Steven had told me about the position.

Did my brother tell you what this job entailed? Michael asked, as if reading my mind.

He said it's an assistant position. That's all he mentioned.

Typical, Michael muttered under his breath, which made me wonder how many girls Steven had sent here, that maybe this entire place was staffed with girls who'd once bedded Steven Reitman.

Well, let me backtrack by explaining what this company does, he said. He swiveled around in his chair, plucked a case off the shelves behind him, and set it down in front of me. It was a white coffee table book, with an irregularly pleated jacket cover. I rifled through the pages carefully, recognizing the designs of Rei Kawakubo, Yohji Yamamoto. It was a book on the history of Japanese fashion.

We help publishers produce specialty book projects at printers and suppliers overseas. They contract these projects out to us, we contract them out to the manufacturing plants, typically in Southeast Asia. Now, you'll notice that the books we focus on often require more labor-intensive work. You see this pleated cover?

Yes, it's a beautiful book.

This publisher specifically wanted a pleated feature to recall—I can't remember the designer's name. He's well-known for pleats?

Issey Miyake, I supplied.

Right. Issey Miyake. He smiled for the first time. So this pleated cover requires a certain hand detail work that printers here in the United States and even in Canada just aren't capable of. It's cheaper to produce more labor-intensive book projects like this in Southeast Asia, even factoring in the cost of shipping. To say nothing about the four-color printing.

Four-color printing?

CMYK, which is cyan, magenta, yellow, and black. Essentially, color printing. Almost all of that is done overseas nowadays. But you don't have to worry about color printing, because the position we're looking for is in our Bibles division. What do you know about Bibles?

Well, I grew up going to Sunday school. I had this Precious Moments-themed Bible. It was this powder blue. All the kids had that Bible, either in pink or blue.

Uh-huh.

I hesitated, intimidated by Michael's intricate knowledge. I can't say that I have any Bible production experience, though. Or, really, any book production experience.

No one does, he said gently. What we do here is very specialized. But that's not what's important to me. What's important to me is that you're organized, that you're detailed and meticulous. He lowered his voice confidingly, in a way that reminded me of his brother. Our last production assistant quit. I suspect he found the work too tedious, and he grew bored easily. But this job is only as boring as you make it.

I know I don't have that much work experience, I said, but I am organized and meticulous, as you mention. I worked an office job at a federal home loans bank, mostly filing papers and inputting data. Working with other people's accounts, I had to be very careful and thorough. I think I could do well in this position.

He glanced at my résumé printout again. So when you worked at this bank, it was during a year you took off from college. Why not just finish college first?

It was a family situation. My mother was ill. I liked working in an office. It took my mind off things.

He nodded, appearing to soften. I'm sorry to hear that. That's certainly a priority.

My eyes flickered over the pictures on his desk, showing his wife and two preteen kids. A family man.

He shifted in his chair, looked at me closely. Steven said that you pick things up quick, that you're very detail-oriented. You came on his highest recommendation.

That's nice of him, I replied, thinking of that Windsor knot I tied, the warm silk in my fingers.

He studied me. You say you like working in an office.

I do. I like the routine.

Michael nodded, stood up decisively. Let me get Blythe. She should meet you.

After he left the office, I looked around: a bleached wood desk, a Noguchi coffee table, and a sleek chaise longue. Upholstered in black leather, it would not have looked out of place in a psychiatrist's office. I had seen this model in design magazines. If the walls weren't made of glass, I would have lain down on it to see how it felt. Maybe that's what he did. Maybe that's what power would feel like, napping publicly while everyone in the office scurries on with their tasks around you. I thought of Lenin's tomb, his preserved body on display in Moscow, remembering a photograph from a book my father owned about the rise of communism.

Michael appeared with someone who had to be Blythe. She looked young, maybe only a few years older than me, but infinitely more pulled together.

This is Blythe, product coordinator in our Bibles division.

You'll be working closely with her, Michael said.

Wait, so I have the job? I asked, glancing at both of them.

Michael paused. Well, first we'll put you on a three-month trial period. But we're thinking you can start next Monday. HR will review the terms of the position with you.

Blythe smiled and extended her hand. We just need someone quickly, she said in a manner that suggested I should calm down. I'll be making a trip to Shenzhen in another few weeks, to check

on a print run. You'll come with me, and I can show you the exciting world of Bible manufacture.

Thank you, I said, trying to cover my surprise at the pace of things. I look forward to it.

Michael looked at me. Do you have a passport?

6

On every trip to Shenzhen, I always stayed at the Grand Shenzhen Moon Palace Hotel. It is not a hyperbolic name, because the hotel and its expansive grounds, featuring tennis courts, a rolling golf course, and an English-style rose garden, all enclosed by feudal iron gates, are indeed grand and palatial. If there is anything false in the name, it's the *Shenzhen* part, because you wouldn't know from staying there that it is located anywhere remotely in Shenzhen, let alone in China.

But the first time I went to Shenzhen, I shadowed Blythe on her visits to various printers and suppliers. We had flown into the Hong Kong airport. A white van with tinted windows, sent by one of the printers, picked us up and chauffeured us over the mainland border to Shenzhen. The two cities were less than an hour apart, but crossing into mainland China, we had to go through customs a second time. The weather felt more humid on this side.

It was a relief, then, after a twenty-hour journey, to step into the sweeping, aggressively air-conditioned marble lobby of the Grand Shenzhen Moon Palace Hotel. Blythe handed some documents to the Chinese attendant at the check-in counter. Someone came to show us to our rooms and helped us with our bags. The lobby opened up to a grand atrium of several floors. The rooms

were seemingly arranged in a maze. My room and Blythe's room were across the hallway from each other.

What do we do now? I asked Blythe.

Now we rest. Even if you're not tired, jet lag catches up to you. Charge whatever you need to your room. She fiddled with her key card at her door.

What about tomorrow? I asked. She had told me our itinerary, but now I felt disoriented and unsure.

Our first appointment is tomorrow morning. We'll meet in the lobby at nine and then head out to the printer. The door clicked open, and she stepped inside. Sensing my disappointment, she assured me: Don't worry, we'll have fun when we're in Hong Kong.

My room at the Grand Shenzhen Moon Palace Hotel was pleasant and nondescript, except for an intricate navy bedspread, embroidered with phoenixes in elaborate plumage rising to the moon. The place smelled like fake, sweet peach candy. The motorized curtains opened to a sweeping view of the estate. Off in the distance, a handful of white businessmen in polo shirts and khakis played golf, cigars hanging out of their mouths.

Feeling restless, I paced around the hotel. The carpeting was so plush and springy that I felt as if I were on another planet, one with weaker gravitational pull. I took the elevator to all the different floors. There were three restaurants of differing cuisines: an upscale European bistro, an Asian tapas lounge, and an Italian trattoria. There were two gift shops, a specialty one that sold silk ties and jade paperweights, and a cheaper one that sold Hong Kong souvenirs, even though we weren't technically in Hong Kong. There was a gym, and on the same floor a swimming pool. A water-aerobics class was in session, a tall Nordic man practicing leg lunges in the shallow end.

I circled back to the lobby and out the front entrance. I meandered down the long, winding driveway to the edge of the estate,

looking for something. It didn't feel like I was in China. It didn't feel like I was anywhere.

I had only returned to China once since my parents had immigrated. I'd visited Fuzhou during high school. My father had been sick, and the trip was understood as a peacemaking attempt with his relatives, who had felt abandoned after he'd moved to the States. I saw all of my relatives, many of whom I remembered and some I did not. My grandmother cried upon seeing me. My contact with them has been intermittent at best.

Approaching the end of the driveway, I reached a dirt road with a row of dusty storefronts, some closed with a rolling garage door. The difference between the hotel and its immediate surroundings was acute. At one of the storefronts, an old Chinese man in a wife-beater and plastic sandals sat on a plastic crate, in front of a dusty display of candies. He glared at me and spoke something. His Chinese, either a local dialect or heavily accented Mandarin, was impossible to understand.

I said hello in Mandarin, meekly.

But now he was standing up, speaking angrily. Though I couldn't understand what he was saying, it was clear he didn't think I should be sticking around.

I turned back.

In the morning, another white van pulled up outside the Grand Shenzhen Moon Palace Hotel. Blythe and I waited in the lobby, where she debriefed me on what we were doing. The printer was called Phoenix Sun and Moon Ltd. They were one of Spectra's biggest suppliers, the one we threw many of our largest Bible jobs. She would troubleshoot a cover situation for the Journey Bible, a portable-sized Bible with a printed cover, which was supposed to be made of all-weather, waterproof stock. The stock had trouble

absorbing ink; the colors looked too muddy. As an alternative, Phoenix would be running embossing tests. She was there to oversee the tests, and to make a decision on behalf of the client.

I nodded, trying to keep up.

So, here's what's going to happen when we get there, Blythe said. I'm going to observe the embossing tests, and you're going to be given a tour of the printer.

Sounds good, I said. My stomach grumbled. I hadn't eaten any breakfast. The breakfast buffet offered English breakfast, all beans and warm tomatoes and mushrooms and blood sausage. There had been a congee bar, with additives like duck skin and scallions. It'd all looked too rich for this early in the morning.

The lobby was scattered with hotel guests, mostly white businessmen. I recognized one of them, with his big build and bald head, from the golf game I'd glimpsed from my room yesterday. It suddenly occurred to me, though it had been obvious all along, that they too were all here on manufacturing-related business: apparel, cell phones and cell phone accessories, sneakers, toilet brushes, and whatever else. They were doing what we were doing.

A short Chinese man in a polo and aviators walked into the lobby. Blythe stood up, catching his attention.

Phoenix? he asked in accented English as he came forward. Blythe greeted him with familiarity. He had chauffeured her on previous trips.

It was another hot and humid day, but with the AC blasting aggressively, it was like the Arctic inside. The driver merged onto an expressway that cut through the city. Rows of factories and apartment buildings, laundry hanging off the clotheslines outside the windows, white undershirts waving in the wind. Palm trees thrashed, their fronds breaking off and hurtling onto the streets. He swerved crazily, thrashing across lanes, doing unpredictable U-turns. Asian pop music played from the radio. When someone cut him off, he

didn't curse or yell, just changed his driving strategy. Blythe seemed unfazed.

When we arrived at Phoenix Sun and Moon Ltd., a receptionist in teetering club heels escorted us into the receiving room. It was an important-looking room, anchored by a mahogany conference table. Blythe checked her phone. I looked at the walls, lined with plaques, commemorative tokens, and industry awards etched with Chinese characters. It was probably the room where all their American and European clients were received.

Two middle-aged Chinese men entered. Blythe greeted them familiarly, shook their hands, and introduced me. There was Edgar, VP of customer relations. Despite the weather, he was dressed in a gray pin-striped suit, like a London banker. Then there was Balthasar, one of the operations directors of the printer, who was dressed more casually, like the driver, in a polo shirt and slacks.

Nice to meet you, Edgar said in perfect English. Sit down, sit down.

The receptionist served us steaming jasmine tea in delicate porcelain teacups.

As we sipped our tea, Blythe made small talk. She was great at it, friendly but professional. She provided introductory anecdotal details about me that made me seem competent and smart. She asked after each of Edgar's and Balthasar's daughters, both of whom were enrolled in a competitive middle school where they only spoke English.

How is their English? she inquired.

Ai-yah. Only so-so. But they should learn English from you! Edgar joked. My English is . . . how do Americans say, rusty.

We laughed politely. Blythe smiled. Your English is excellent. They should learn English from you, she complimented Edgar, reestablishing the equilibrium.

The small talk gradually led to business. Edgar told us about

the company's year, which had exceeded expectations. For the upcoming year, they were planning to expand their facilities by twenty percent, focusing specifically on making stationery and gift sets that required manual assembly.

We expect to be fully operational with gifts and stationery very soon, Edgar said.

The market has shifted, Blythe agreed. Whenever I walk into chain bookstores like Barnes & Noble, the gifts and stationery section grows bigger and bigger; all these journals, board games, crafts kits. It makes you wonder if anyone reads anymore.

Nowadays, anyone can download a book on their e-reader, Edgar said.

Bibles are good business. They are always in good style. Balthasar spoke less fluently than Edgar, his words stiff and heavily accented.

We finished our tea. For the first time, Edgar addressed me. Balthasar will give you a tour of the factory now, he announced.

Balthasar stood up and smiled obligingly. I followed him. We walked through the lobby and into the printing facility. The place was enormous, housed in a multilevel brick-walled building with large windows. The equipment was impressive but confusing: a tangled abstraction of levers and pulleys and buttons. The printing facility was hot and humid, loud with the whirring and grinding of machinery. Workers in blue jumpsuits and earplugs looked up curiously from their work.

Balthasar explained that in addition to offset printers and sheet-fed printers, Phoenix owned seven web presses, which were typically used to print newspapers and magazines.

And, of course, your precious Bibles, he added, the snideness of his tone barely perceptible, but the subtext of which could only mean: We manufacture the emblematic text to propagate your country's Christian Euro-American ideologies, and for this, for this important task, you and your clients negotiate aggressively

over pennies per unit cost, demand that we deliver early with every printing, and undercut the value of our labor year after year.

Balthasar smiled. Pointing to a web press, a giant roll of paper furiously spinning onto other cylinders, he explained the mechanics of how it worked, the revolutions it spun per second. I tried to write everything down. He explained that only certain printers in China were granted a license to print Bibles, and even then there were rules.

What are the rules? I asked.

If there are—how you say—reference maps in the back of the Bible, Tibet and China must be printed in the same color. Otherwise the officials won't allow the Bibles to ship, Taiwan too. Hong Kong. They must all be printed in the same colors as China. You know, we are all one, he said, letting slip an ironic grin.

So it seems like Chinese authorities aren't as sensitive to religious content as they are to political content?

Balthasar smiled enigmatically.

We walked onward. He showed me the dark, humidity-controlled room where children's board books were kept after they were bound, so that the glue dried without warping the board pages. He opened the door and switched on the lights to reveal row after row of illustrated board books on wooden pallets.

Oh, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, I said, locating one stack of board books.

Yes, very popular, he affirmed. We do so many reprints. As we turned to leave, he asked: Why is it so popular in America?

I shrugged. I guess it teaches children counting skills. They practice counting all the apples that the caterpillar eats.

The worm is very greedy, Balthasar said darkly. He eats all the food and doesn't share. What lesson does that teach children? To eat with no—he paused, searching for the word—no conscience? American kids are very fat, I joked, though I knew that was not what he really meant.

Yes, he agreed, dropping the topic. He switched off the lights in the humidity-controlled room and closed the door.

What I knew about overseas labor came from a college Economics class. First, the U.S. manufacturing jobs went to Mexico, to the maquiladoras that staffed laborers willing to work for cheaper rates than Americans. Duty-free, tariff-free. This was the 1980s and 1990s. Later, a portion of those jobs went to suppliers in China, which offered cheaper labor rates, even cheap enough to offset the shipping costs that coincided with a rise in oil prices. And after this, in another few years, the jobs will go elsewhere, to India or some other country willing to offer even cheaper rates, to produce iPods, Happy Meal toys, skateboards, American flags, sneakers, air conditioners. The American businessmen will come to visit these countries and tour their factories, inspect their manufacturing processes, sample their cuisines, while staying at their nicest hotels built to cater to them.

I was a part of this.

The workers looked up at me with benign expressions as we walked past. My first impulse was to smile, but it seemed condescending. I didn't know them. I didn't know what their jobs were or what their lives were like. I was just passing through. I was just doing my job.

As we walked on, I could see other buildings out of the big-paned windows. There were several nearby buildings that looked like apartment complexes, with air conditioners sticking out of the windows, leaking rust stains, and nightgowns hanging out from clotheslines. I walked closer to the windows. Despite the loudness of the factory, I could hear strains of Chinese pop music and Peking opera, something that my grandmother used to play. The music was coming from the buildings.

What are those? I asked, pointing.

Balthasar followed my gaze. That is where the workers live, he said. Except when they return to their hometowns for Chinese

New Year. The printer shuts down for two weeks. Big holiday. He looked at me carefully, as if seeing me for the first time. Do you celebrate Chinese New Year?

I'll eat a moon cake, I said, purposely evasive. Does that count?

He smiled the same enigmatic smile. Ah, moon cake.

We walked through other rooms. There were areas devoted to bookbinding. He showed me the machines that folded together the page signatures, machines that stitched together page signatures, the machines that glued the book blocks. They were all operated by workers in jumpsuits, who wore earplugs and safety goggles. The air was thick with paper dust.

Can you speak Chinese? Balthasar asked.

Yes, I can speak Mandarin, I replied stiffly, sticking to English. I had been six when I left China, and my Mandarin vocabulary was regressive, simplistic. I used idioms that only small children would use; my language was frozen in time. I could carry on a casual conversation for ten minutes. Any longer, and I was like a shallow-water dog paddler flailing in deeper ocean waters. It had worsened every year. I had only spoken Mandarin to communicate with my parents, and was out of practice.

I added: But it's been a long time since I've spoken Mandarin and I'm a bit rusty.

He looked at me, as if trying to decide whether my response truly indicated the limits of my Chinese-speaking abilities or if I was simply conveying modesty, a very Chinese quality.

Without warning, he switched to Mandarin. He asked if I liked Chinese food.

I took the bait and responded in Mandarin. Yes, I quite rather like Chinese food, I said, proud to know so many qualifiers, the hallmark of a nuanced conversationalist. I like—here, I cracked my brain. I was too embarrassed to say General Tso's chicken, an American invention. But I didn't know the names of other dishes,

so I named something I never ate at all—Peking duck. I like Peking duck.

Ah, your Chinese is very good! he delightedly exclaimed. Which was an inverted form of what Chinese immigrants would say to me: Your English is very good!

He pressed on. Were you born in the United States?

No, I said. I was born in China but—I scanned my mind for *immigrate* and came up short—I went to America when I was six.

Oh, so young! Our exchange now took on an air of familiarity. Balthasar lowered his voice to confiding tones and told me about his daughter, how he was constantly pressing her to learn English. Because it's good for business, you know? More opportunities.

Yes, there is a lot of business exchange between China and the U.S. these days, I agreed, hoping that the conversation wouldn't veer into economics or international relations or globalization, more complicated issues I probably wouldn't be able to converse in as fluently.

Do you speak Mandarin at home with your parents? Balthasar asked.

Yes, I speak Mandarin with my parents, I answered, thankful that the language does not require tenses distinguishing past, present, and future.

What do your parents do?

My mother doesn't work. She stays at home.

And your father?

My father is a . . . doctor, I said, because I didn't know the words for housing loans risk analyst. Then I added, unnecessarily, The brain.

Ah, a brain surgeon, he said, then hesitated. Or do you mean psychiatrist?

I selected the more Chinese-impressive title. A brain surgeon, I said. I understood the terms as he spoke them, but I couldn't come up with the words on my own.

He looked at me with what seemed like respect. While I hoped that we would stop conversing in Chinese and switch back to English, I sensed that something important rode on my ability to speak fluently in both languages, I wasn't sure what. It was important that I gave the appearance of fluency.

He asked where my family was from, what part of China.

Fuzhou. That's where I was born.

Ah, Fujian province. He nodded knowingly.

I looked at Balthasar uneasily. There was a hierarchy of provinces, and each province carried a stereotype, like the cultural biases associated with different New York neighborhoods. He was probably unimpressed. My knowledge of Fujian consisted of basic encyclopedic details: it is located directly across the strait from traitorous Taiwan; it has been historically separated from the rest of the mainland by a mountain range. With its seafaring traditions, most of the world's Chinese immigrants consist of the Fujianese. They go to other countries and have children and claim citizenship, sending money back home to their families to build empty McMansions, occupied by grandparents. Fujianese was outlier Chinese.

I switched back to English, changed the subject. How did you and Edgar get your names? I asked.

They are not our real names, he said, following suit in English. They are just our business names, when we work with Western clients.

How did you pick Balthasar? It's unusual.

It's from Shakespeare. I choose from the best. He laughed. Then he asked, What is your Chinese name?

I told him.

Ah, very poetic, he said. It reminds me of the poem by Li Bai. It's very famous. All the students in China study it.

I didn't know it. I couldn't bear to ask him the name of the

poem. I had no idea what my Chinese name meant, or that I was even named after a poem.

In the packing room, Balthasar showed me a machine that made customized cardboard boxes in which books were packed. He spoke to one of the attending workers, a small, lanky man, in a fast-paced Mandarin I couldn't catch. The worker punched some measurements into a digital screen. His fingertips were yellow. With both hands, he pulled the lever. A weight descended and then lifted.

When he pulls the lever, the machine punches through cardboard, Balthasar explained.

Out came a flattened cardboard, with indents, ready to be folded into a box. Wordlessly, the worker handed it to Balthasar.

He has to pull the lever to make one cardboard box? I asked.

No, no, this machine punches through several cardboard boxes at once. It's only an example.

Turning to the man once again, Balthasar issued requests for different-sized boxes.

The worker, in his late twenties with a goatee, punched in some different measurements and pulled the lever again. Out came a larger stack of cardboard, then a mid-sized stack. The shipping boxes were the least important part of the book production, I wasn't sure why we were focusing on this so much. But I was mesmerized anyway. It was such a rote, mechanical movement, the punching in of measurements, the pulling of the lever. Cardboard boxes of different sizes and shapes were produced. He did this same thing over and over again, on a loop, until suddenly, he stopped in midaction and unleashed what sounded like a protest.

Balthasar responded calmly, something about how part of his job was to demonstrate the machinery for visiting businessmen, but as the irritated worker grew louder and more insistent, the two men engaged in an argument, speaking too quickly for me to

get every word. Something I did hear: Balthasar told the worker he was making a fool of himself in front of the foreigner.

I looked away. On the wall, someone had taped up a titillating photo of a woman, holding an ice cream cone and sucking her finger. It had been ripped from a magazine.

The photo was of Claire Danes, and it had been ripped from a 1996 issue of *Us* magazine. I knew it right away, because, as a kid, I had been obsessed with the Baz Luhrmann production of *Romeo and Juliet*, and had read all the interviews with its stars, collected them in a folder. It was unbelievable to see it here, of all places. The fact of finding a childhood artifact in such a strange place on the other side of the world, years and years later, I couldn't put this sensation into words.

Claire Danes! I love Claire Danes, I exclaimed, to no one in particular.

Balthasar and the worker looked up. They exchanged glances. Something about my behavior, in keeping with a dumb, enthusiastic American, put things into perspective.

Finally, Balthasar spoke. Gesturing to the other man, he said in Mandarin, This is Chengwen. At Balthasar's behest, the worker held out his hand, and so we shook hands. *Ni hao. Ni hao.*

Chengwen is from Fujian province too, Balthasar added.

My family is from Fuzhou, I told him.

Really? he asked, which in Mandarin sounds more like a request for veracity than a benign comment.

Are you from Fuzhou too? I asked, trying to make polite conversation.

Most of us are from villages, he answered. He named the Fujian village he was from, but I didn't quite catch it.

It's a village very close to Fuzhou, Balthasar interjected, adding jovially, Maybe your families even know each other!

Ridiculous as it sounded, I thought to ask Chengwen whether he knew my aunts or uncles. But I realized I didn't actually know

the full names of any of my relatives. I always called them by their designation in the family, the first uncle, the second aunt, my grandma. My mother had written their legal names on a list somewhere, though this was in a box in a storage facility in Salt Lake City.

Chengwen smiled at me, politely, then turned back to attend to his work.

Okay. That's the end of the tour, Balthasar announced. Now you've seen all of Phoenix.

That evening, we returned to the Grand Shenzhen Moon Palace Hotel. I swam a few laps in the pool. Then Blythe and I ate dinner in the hotel, at the trattoria that modeled itself after Little Italy, with red tablecloths. On the walls were photos of Italian mobsters, real and fictitious, from Al Capone to Tony Soprano.

Blythe raised her glass and made a little toast. To your first time in Shenzhen, she said. May there be many more returns.

We clinked glasses.

I ordered squid ink spaghetti, the most exotic thing on the menu. It was the first time I'd ever had it. My tongue blackened.

After dinner, we retreated to our rooms. It was pretty late. I had a hard time going to sleep. The events of the day churned in my mind, the blur of whirring web presses, the Claire Danes photo, Chengwen.

After tossing and turning, I gave up on sleeping and checked my work email. There was a new message sent by Balthasar from his Phoenix email earlier that day. The subject line was *Your Name*.

I clicked on it, and the software asked me to download a Chinese translation program that would allow the characters to encrypt properly. I declined, because it was late and I didn't have time to download a whole program.

The email that opened showed gibberish in place of Chinese characters. And yet, when I scrolled down, I found a PDF attachment he had sent. It was a scan of a page from an unidentified book that featured a short poem. It was the English translation of "Thoughts in Night Quiet" by Li Bai. He must've been trying to send me both versions of the poem, in Chinese and English. I read it aloud to myself.

Seeing moonlight here at my bed
and thinking it's frost on the ground,

I look up, gaze at the mountain moon,
then back, dreaming of my old home.



I have four uncles.

The first uncle I used to know better than all the others, though we're not related by blood. He lives in Fuzhou, a southern coastal city of Fujian province, aka the armpit of China, aka the Jersey of Asia, where I spent the first six years of my life. He has a slender frame and raffish profile; his upper lip sprouts a ratlike movie-villain mustache. That's the way I remember him, when I was a kid and he let me stay in the wedding suite with him and my aunt, his face lit by the glare of the TV screen.

Fuzhou is so hot and humid all year round; the kind of place, my grandma says, that breeds indolence. Things rot more quickly, everything melts, the local cuisine, rooted in sea and land meats, makes no comestible sense. Crime proliferates, mostly petty thievery; when there is violence, it is of the most astonishing, unimaginable kind. The streets are cleared for weeks, and the hose they use for cleaning is anvil-heavy. It's the kind of climate, my grandma says, in which it's difficult to maintain your character. Not only during the day, but at night too. So you see, she concluded, fanning herself with a dried palm leaf, this oppression is truly inescapable.

A long time passes between our move to the U.S. and when I go back. When I finally do return, in high school, it is to lacquered,

