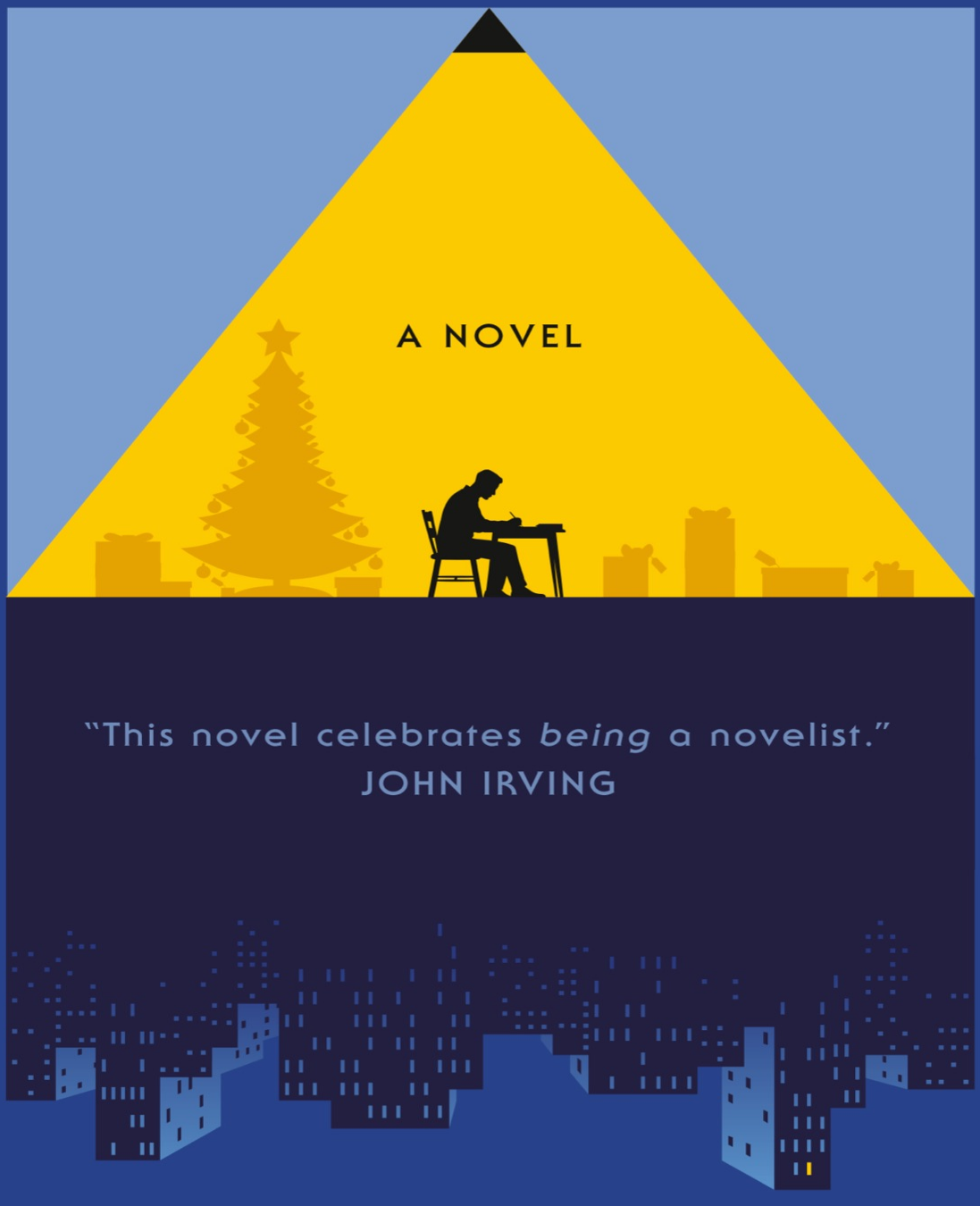
AN END IN ITSELF



TERRY FALLIS

Advance praise for An End in Itself

“Fiction writers are fair game for making fun of—we don’t live in the real world, we’re doomed to observe it. Terry Fallis creates a parallel universe for a literary but unread novelist. He wakes up in a dreamland for fiction writers; novelists are worshipped like movie stars. Something must be wrong. Art *is* for art’s sake; the aesthetic reason for writing a novel is the only reason. This novel celebrates *being* a novelist.”

—John Irving

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An End in Itself

A Novel

Terry Fallis



McClelland & Stewart
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For Douglas Gibson and Beverley Slopen, in gratitude and friendship.

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1

When the librarian introduced him, more seats were empty than filled. Many more. And there were fewer than two dozen chairs to begin with. But for Malcolm Forde—for most writers—this was often the way…until, once upon a time, it wasn't.

It was the middle of December, and signs of the approaching holiday season were all around him. Bordered by greying piles of slush and snow, the wet street reflected the storefronts' twinkling, coloured lights. Drifting above the sidewalks, music crackled from outdoor speakers with such abysmal fidelity you could barely discern one carol from another.

Malcolm walked to his local branch of the public library for his book event. Living only a few blocks away was a blessing given the less-than-even odds his aging, rusting Hyundai clunker would have started that night. As he approached the library, he glanced at the parking lot. He had hoped—but not expected—to see a snarl of excited drivers fighting over a precious few remaining spots. Alas, only a handful of parked cars was scattered around the nearly empty lot. And it was likely that at least some of them belonged to branch staff.

" 'Twas ever thus," Malcolm muttered to himself. He sighed and walked into the fifty-year-old library that, inside and out, looked every one of its years and perhaps a few more. He was greeted by Sheila Macbeth, owner of Macbeth's Books, his favourite bookstore, conveniently located just a little farther down the road. At the back of the room, she had set up a trestle table displaying copious copies not just of his current novel but of his backlist as well.

"The man of the moment," she said, smiling at him.

“Thanks for coming, as always. But, as always, you seem to have brought far more books than we’ll ever sell tonight.”

They both looked at the forlorn plastic stacking chairs arrayed in three rows of seven. Six people had spread themselves out among the seats, perhaps to minimize the need to interact with one another. They sat in silence, waiting.

“Come on, Malc, it’s only five to seven. You never know, a bus could pull up and disgorge a horde of admirers. And if that happens, I’ve got you covered,” Sheila said, with a sweep of her hand in front of the excessive bounty of his books.

“I think we should christen a new collective noun this evening,” he said. “When that mythical bus once again does not arrive, we’ll be left with an *overkill* of books.”

She laughed.

“A *murder* of crows, a *clowder* of cats, and an *overkill* of books,” she replied. “I like it.”

Malcolm scanned the room and noticed a rather sad-looking artificial Christmas tree—bearing far too few ornaments and lights to be convincing—propped up in one corner. There was nothing beneath the tree but an extension cord coiled on the threadbare carpet. Several of the windows along one wall featured artificial frosting apparently applied with a spray can, poor aim, and a heavy trigger finger. The whole scene did not exactly holler “Festive!” from the rooftops, Malcolm thought. It was barely a furtive whisper. Sheila’s yuletide contribution was a plastic cup of candy canes resting on the book table and a modest selection of Christmas kids’ books. With no family to speak of, Malcolm hadn’t really celebrated Christmas in the years since Isla died.

The librarian, Danielle, waved from across the room, and Malcolm started over to her. He eyed the two straight-backed wooden chairs set up at the front, facing the audience. Clearly, comfort hadn’t been among the design criteria when they were conceived, he thought. A young woman, who looked a little stressed, sat in one of the chairs, a clipboard in her lap.

He reached the librarian, whom he’d known for many years.

“Welcome back, Malcolm, and thanks for coming out,” she said.

“I’m grateful for the invitation. Thank you.”

“We’ll give it a few minutes more to let the stragglers find chairs.”

Malcolm looked back and noticed two more people arriving.

“Finding empty chairs will not be an onerous task,” he said. “But I’m always happy to wait for any and all stragglers, or even library employees who aren’t that busy right now.”

“Cheer up. This is actually quite a good crowd for us,” Danielle soothed. “So, to the task at hand. I’ll introduce you and ask you to do a short reading. Then, Susannah, our social media manager, will interview you for about forty minutes. The first half will focus on the novel, but then she’ll move on to more general questions about the life of a novelist. Nothing you haven’t heard before, I’m sure. But it’s her first time in the chair, so she’s a little nervous.”

“We’ll be fine,” he assured her.

“After that, Susannah will open the floor for questions. Finally, we have refreshments available afterwards, and Sheila can sell your books and you can sign them. Easy-peasy. Oh, and we have to be out of here by eight thirty.”

Malcolm saw a table at the back bearing a plate of digestive cookies—no, not the chocolate ones—a plastic bottle of lemonade, a stack of paper cups, and a wad of paper towels no doubt pilfered from the washroom dispenser.

“I nearly forgot. This is for you, with our thanks,” Danielle said, handing him a fifty-dollar Starbucks gift card.

Malcolm walked over to introduce himself to Susannah and then sat down in the chair across from her. A minute or two later, when the stragglers were seated, Danielle stepped up to the lectern.

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to tonight’s event and thank you for coming. I know the Christmas season is upon us and there are many other demands on your time. So, we’re thankful you’ve chosen to join us this evening.”

When he looked up, Malcolm noticed a third latecomer arriving—an older, well-dressed woman cradling his new novel, who found a seat in the back row, also known as the third row. He'd seen her several times before, at previous readings, though they'd never met. And just like the other times, he spied a number of yellow sticky notes poking out among the pages of her book. He'd always been curious about her and wondered if she would do tonight what she'd done every other time she'd come to see him. He'd know within the hour.

"Malcolm Forde is the award-winning author of seventeen novels, most of them bestsellers. I can tell that you're all fans, so I think we can dispense with the long introduction. You all know Malcolm, his numerous novels, awards, and accolades, and we're thrilled to have him back here tonight at his home library to speak with our own Susannah Wheatley. There'll be a Q&A afterwards, so do give some thought to what you'd like to ask our guest. Welcome, Malcolm, and would you start us off with a short reading from your latest work? Then Susannah will take it from there."

Malcolm rose, headed to the lectern, and centred himself for his reading. When he looked up to begin, he noticed Danielle returning to her office just down the corridor and closing the door behind her.

He planned to read, as was his habit, the opening two pages of the novel. After all, he'd worked hard on the opening. Most writers do. And if they don't, they ought to. As well, there's no need to set up the reading if you start at the very beginning—unless, that is, you've botched the first few paragraphs.

Malcolm opened his novel, paused briefly, let his eyes fall on the group scattered among the empty chairs, and began. He shifted into what he thought of as his "reading mode." That entailed animating his voice beyond a conversational timbre and taking care to read with the varying cadence, volume, and intonation he felt the passage demanded. He was not exactly *acting*, but he surely approached *performing*. In his experience, the stronger the performance, the better the book sales.

After so many readings, he almost knew the words by heart. And with so few in the audience, he could make eye contact with each person in turn,

holding their gaze just long enough to register but not unsettle. He slowed down towards the end and fell silent at the close of the scene. The audience rewarded him with polite applause as he returned to his seat next to Susannah.

She was nervous. She'd fully written out her questions and proceeded to recite them verbatim, one halting word at a time. But Malcolm was a pro and responded with insights, anecdotes, and good humour, calming Susannah as she eased into her unfamiliar role. As promised, the first half of their conversation focused on the themes in his latest novel. He'd already participated in several dozen book talks and onstage interviews since the book's release six months earlier, so he'd honed his answers and peppered them with thoughtful, funny, self-deprecating lines. He already knew how best to time and deliver them, so for the most part, they landed for laughs. He trotted them out in a way that appeared spontaneous. He was a big believer in the oxymoronic concept of planned spontaneity. He could feel both Susannah and the audience—sparse as it was—relax.

In the second half, Susannah, no longer tethered to Malcolm's novel, moved on to broader questions about the writing life.

"Could I ask why you write?"

"Well, the answer to that question is both simple and complex," he started. "I write because I seem to be able to. I write because nothing else has captured my interest and imagination more than the challenge of stringing together words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and pages to tell a story that somehow helps us find ourselves in this world. I write because I'm not sure I'm equipped to do anything else. I write because I don't seem to be able to stop. And, finally, I write because there always seems to be another story waiting for me. Oh, and of course I do it for the unspeakable riches and luxuries writing brings."

Only a few people laughed, led by the mysterious woman at the back, so he decided he'd better clarify.

"Just to be clear, I was kidding about that last point."

"Just on that topic, if you don't mind," Susannah began. "Most writers cannot earn a living from their writing alone. A joint report last year from

the Department of Culture and the Writers' Union revealed that the average writer takes home less than fifteen thousand dollars a year from their writing. Is that enough?"

"Well, it's certainly not enough to live on. But to a great extent, writers are not the ones who decide how much we earn from our art," he began, carefully thinking through his response. "Because I'm stubborn, and also because I somehow have seventeen books under my belt, all of which are miraculously still in print, I seem to be able to live very modestly from the proceeds of my prose alone. And I never take that gift for granted. I'm grateful I'm among the relative few who can commit all of my time and myself to writing, though it does dictate a certain monastic austerity in my day-to-day living."

"But that's not right and it's not fair," Susannah huffed. "You, and other writers, are…well, you're helping to create the art that defines and shapes our cultural landscape. Shouldn't such important work pay you more than, as you call it, monastic austerity?"

Susannah seemed to have found her feet, her outrage overwhelming her nerves.

He answered patiently and calmly. It was not the first time he'd fielded such a query.

" 'Twas ever thus. The public votes—as it always has—with its wallet. Clearly people are prepared to spend much more of their money—in fact, they seem *eager* to spend much more of their money—on non-literary forms of entertainment than they are on books. It's the dreaded, damnable invisible hand of the market, the collective reflection of societal priorities and preferences that has for years, for decades, now for generations, pushed books ever lower in the consumer spending rankings."

He paused, sighed, then continued.

"That is the reality with which writers have lived for much longer than I have been walking this earth."

"Yet you still write," Susannah interjected.

"Of course I still write," he said. "Writers write. Our curiosity must be sated. And in the end, there is nothing in my long life I've done better than

writing novels. And there is nothing that brings me such joy, stimulation, peace, pride, and satisfaction than the act of writing a story that just might enthrall hundreds of readers, or thousands perhaps, if I'm lucky. Those are the riches writing yields, and, not to be melodramatic, they mean more to me than all the treasures of our world."

"Do you really believe that? Is that how you actually feel?" Susannah persisted, leaning forward in her chair, her clipboard slipping to the floor.

"Well, it's how I feel when I take the time to think it all through."

Just as Malcolm was about to continue his answer, an older man in the audience piped up.

"Yeah, but what about when you see young baseball players or hockey stars signing contracts for millions of dollars to play a game?"

"Well, I do confess to momentary outrage when I read of a nineteen-year-old soccer phenom who has just signed some mega-contract because he's good with his feet, and when he may only use his head to butt balls into the net. It's not his fault, it's not my fault. It's society's call and society has spoken. Again, 'twas ever thus."

As Malcolm finished his response, hoping the next question would move them on to a different topic, he noticed the older woman in the back row, still holding his novel, rise and slip out of the room, as she had every other time she'd come to see him.

But then a younger woman sitting near the front took up the torch. Apparently, they weren't quite finished with this debate.

"But don't you wish society considered literature to be more important?" she said. "Don't you wish it paid better?"

Malcolm took a deep breath. *Once more unto the breach,* he thought.

"Well, I guess I occasionally lament what seems to be an unjust, or at least unfortunate, imbalance in how society values literature relative to, say, movies, television, professional sports, or popular music. But I find such indulgence seldom improves my writing and often spawns a bitterness that can turn malignant, and that can destroy creativity and art. As well, I just don't like the person I become when I have periodically allowed that bitterness to breathe. It's just not worth it."

—

When the talk ended, a young man approached Malcolm and explained that he was writing his first novel.

“Good for you. What’s it about?” Malcolm replied, soon to regret his question.

“Well, it’s the story of a young seafaring man who is shipwrecked on his first voyage, washing up on a beach, unconscious,” the young writer started. “So, when he comes to, he discovers he’s being restrained flat on his back by lengths of string tied to little wooden stakes hammered into the ground. And he’s surprised to see that tiny people, no more than six inches tall, are milling all around him. And, you know, the novel goes on to chronicle his adventures in this strange land.”

“Um, I see,” Malcolm said, releasing a silent sigh. “You know, it sounds a little like *Gulliver’s Travels*.”

“Oh, I’m not familiar with this Gulliver person, but he must not be of sound mind. There is no such race of little people that I’m aware of.”

“No, but he is the eponymous protagonist in *Gulliver’s Travels*, Jonathan Swift’s groundbreaking novel, published nearly three hundred years ago. Surely you’ve heard of it.”

“Well, first of all, I’m not really interested in reading about an economist protagonist, and I really only read contemporary fiction, and even then not very much. So, I guess that’s why I haven’t heard of this guy’s novel. I got my idea from a kids’ cartoon I watched while babysitting my nephew.”

“Right. So how far along are you in the manuscript?”

“Well, not very far. In fact, I haven’t actually started writing it yet, but I don’t think it’ll take me too long. I’m a really good writer, and I’m fast, too.”

“Oh, well then, you’re practically published.”

“I know,” the oblivious young man said, nodding his head. “Right?”

Malcolm endured a few more minutes of the conversation but eventually excused himself to make his way to the bookselling table.

He sat down next to Sheila and took out his pen. Four people were lined up with newly purchased copies of his novel—for which he was grateful. The others had already left. Four books to be signed. Four. Sheila leaned over and whispered to him.

“On the bright side, it means that nearly half of the audience bought books,” she said. “That’s huge! The big festivals never sell at anywhere near that rate.”

Malcolm dragged it out as long as he could, but still, it took him less than three minutes to inscribe the four books, despite attempting a meaningful exchange with each person.

He then went looking for a cookie but found there was none left.

“If you help me back to the store with the books, I’ll drive you home afterwards,” Sheila said.

“Deal.”

It took Malcolm four trips to lug the boxes of his unsold *overkill* of books out through the library’s back door and load them into Sheila’s car. She packed away her free-standing bookstore banner and gathered up her cash box and payment card reader.

“Sorry we sold so few books tonight,” Malcolm said, as they drove the short distance down the road to the bookstore. “It was hardly worth your while to come.”

“Malcolm, as I’ve said before, there’s no need to apologize for lacklustre sales. I’m a bookstore owner. I have no life. I’m always available in the evenings, and I particularly like your new novel. So, I was happy to come. Plus, don’t forget that I’m now rolling in the revenue of four more book sales that I wouldn’t have, had you not spoken tonight.”

They smiled at one another.

They carried the boxes into the darkened store.

“I’ll only be a few minutes,” she said. “I just want to enter the sales in the system before locking up.”

“That should only take you thirty seconds,” he replied.

As he always did when visiting his favourite bookstore, Malcolm perused the shelves, assessing his competition and noting new arrivals. The

room was illuminated only by the streetlights' stray rays spilling in through the front windows. He strolled the floor, his eyes scanning the pristine spines of so many books.

He passed through Biography and stopped in Literary Fiction. He saw displayed on the shelves one copy of each of his previous books, and six of his current novel—this was all in addition to the boxes of unsold books just returned to the store, fresh from his triumphant library reading, book signing, and sales bonanza. It was hard to put into words (even for a writer), but bookstores, this one in particular, felt like home, like *he* was home.

He was just happy to be there, immersing himself in the sensory feast of a great bookstore. The shelves, the tables, the different sections, the sound of the hardwood beneath his feet—he knew just where to step to elicit the best, most drawn-out creaks—that distinctive, intoxicating smell of books, the beautiful pressed-tin ceiling above him, and of course the window displays, all came together to welcome him, embrace him, comfort him. He could feel himself decompressing, recentring, settling. He'd grown accustomed to this bookstore's therapeutic effect.

Years earlier, Malcolm had actually worked at Macbeth's Books part-time to supplement his writing income—or really it was more like doubling his writing income. At the time, he and his wife, Isla, needed the gig to make ends meet. He had had some difficulty adjusting to selling books, particularly those he hadn't written. He was too locked into his own opinions, not just about books, but about entire genres. It took him a while to understand that many, many readers loved fantasy, sci-fi, and romance novels, and that the store depended on those sales to make it through the year. At first, he'd tried to talk customers out of buying a cozy mystery or a badly written thriller. Ever helpful, he'd then steer them towards the literary fiction section. Sheila had patiently helped him understand that he was actually steering himself out of a job.

Over the early weeks of his bookselling career, he came to see that those genre novels sold in much higher numbers than his books—than most books. He even read a few mysteries and thrillers, and one fantasy Sheila recommended. Much to his surprise, he found that he liked them. Not as

much as the classics or the books that stood on the shelves near his, but more than he expected to. He had thought he would loathe them. But he hadn’t.

—

Sheila drove him home twenty minutes later. He thanked her again, climbed out, and waved as she pulled away. His apartment was in an older building, and it was showing its age in many different ways. But it had been his home for more than thirty years. Built in the 1930s—long before developers realized that humans were prepared to live in five-hundred-square-foot glass-box apartments—the rooms of his coveted second-floor corner unit were spacious. The windows featured leaded panes, and the ceilings were ten feet high.

He particularly loved the writing room he’d created in the spare bedroom. Its windows faced east. Whenever the morning skies were clear, the sunlight on his red-and-gold Persian rug was dappled with the dancing shadows of leaves clinging to the trees lining the boulevard. In winter, the leaves long fallen, the shadows changed to swaying naked branches.

As a night owl, he would often write well into the wee hours of the morning. But with the passing years, his stamina had waned, and he often fell asleep at his desk. The silver lining was that when he opened his eyes in the morning, he was often greeted by the sun and shadows fluttering on the rug. For some reason, this particular floor show used to give him great comfort.

But that was then. The sunlight and shadows no longer swirled and twirled on his writing room floor, even on cloudless, sunlit mornings. The glass monolith that had risen up across the street—a forty-five-storey luxury condo tower—blocked the sun. It had been ten years, and he was still bitter about it.

When he arrived home, he poured himself a brandy to savour in his writing room. Built-in bookshelves rose from floor to ceiling on three walls, filled to near capacity with the impressive book collection he and Isla had

gathered over their life together. Comprising mainly fiction from around the globe, the carefully curated library also featured history, biography, memoir, and a special section devoted to the Lost Generation writers of 1920s Paris. On a middle shelf, between two bookends that looked like antique typewriters, were all seventeen of his novels, arrayed in chronological order—his entire oeuvre, so far. No other books graced that prominent shelf. As a kind of writerly ritual—and provided he was still awake—he often finished his late-night writing sessions by standing and resting both his hands on his books. He never even told Isla of his laying-on-of-hands habit. It just made him feel that he was doing something with his life, and eventually leaving that something behind, however modest a societal contribution it was.

Beyond his books, his most precious possession—a beautiful century-old wooden desk inherited from his mother—sat beneath the window. He'd written all of his books at that desk, except when he was touring and forced to write on the road. He never quite felt his writerly self when he was somewhere other than in his writing room, at his desk with its nearly glowing wood. A patinaed brass lamp cast a warm glow from the corner of the desk. Next to it, a constant presence, was a simply framed shot of Isla. Malcolm had taken the photo years before she'd been taken from him.

Seated at his desk, he warmed his brandy in his cupped hands and peered through the window to the outside world. He could see fat, fluffy snowflakes floating down, and sometimes up, giving Malcolm the impression he was living in a snow globe. Soon, he could see a gossamer dusting of snow on the windowsill. The bookshelves, the dimly lit yet gleaming desk, the leaded panes, and the falling snow in the near darkness came together in a scene lifted from an Edwardian Christmas card.

As he smiled at his wife's framed countenance—a nightly sacrament before writing—Malcolm couldn't quite admit he was happy, but he felt safe and comfortable and very nearly content. He placed his brandy snifter on the well-used cork coaster to his left and lifted the lid of his laptop. The screen brightened to reveal his manuscript in progress, the cursor blinking where he'd left off. He scrolled back to the beginning of the chapter and reviewed his most recent words. He liked what he read, yet, an inveterate

editor and perfectionist, he tinkered here and there, inserting new words and then often restoring the originals a few minutes later. It took him an hour to review six pages of prose, with only a handful of minuscule edits to show for it.

He pushed on into the night writing and rewriting, overturning sentences, flipping clauses, searching for perfect words, all in service of the story and characters he was creating. He often found that when he was deep into his writing, the physical constants of life—among them time, fatigue, hunger, and thirst—simply evaporated. He could sit at his desk for hours on end, completely swept up in his story, utterly oblivious to the demands of his own body and the real world around him. By design, there was no clock in his writing room, just as there were no clocks—or windows, for that matter—in Vegas casinos. He could stay in his story, in his writing, in his head, longer and more easily without a sense of time's passage, as long as sleep didn't catch up to him.

He emerged from his writing reverie only when a dull throb took root in his head. Lately, he'd been having slight headaches in the early morning hours. The discomfort wasn't serious but just annoying enough to intrude on his writing. He found this more irritating than painful. He broke his own rule and checked the clock on his phone. It was 3:45 a.m. He slipped into the bathroom and popped a couple of Advils before returning to his manuscript.

The minor pain persisted as the analgesics dawdled. While he awaited the relief they would soon yield, Malcolm pushed his laptop aside, rested his head on his folded arms, and closed his eyes.

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2

He didn’t know precisely how long he’d been asleep, but Malcolm opened his eyes to see bright sunlight and flickering shadows on his Persian rug. His head still rested on his arms atop his beautiful wooden desk. In the corner of one still half-closed eye, he could see his laptop, the screen dark, sleeping, as he had been. He could feel the familiar sensation of sitting in the writing chair he’d used for so many years and so many novels. But then, as he began to emerge from his morning grogginess, he sensed something was wrong, out of place. He returned his gaze to the floor. The shadows of dancing branches on his rug should not have been there. It had been a decade since the glass condo across the street had been built, ending any sunlit displays on his writing room carpet. As he gained consciousness, his head no longer hurting, he kept his eyes on the rug. The dappled sunlight puzzled him. Then he lifted his head off his folded arms and surveyed his surroundings.

If the sun and shadows flitting over his Persian rug surprised him, the realization that somehow in the night he had been transported somewhere else entirely, shocked him.

Standing now, he slowly turned 360 degrees on the spot. He was in the middle of the most beautiful, luxurious, and lavishly appointed penthouse suite he could possibly imagine. He heard not a sound. He was quite certain he was alone. He walked over to the wall of windows facing the sunrise and picked out a few familiar landmarks in the distance. That’s when it dawned on him. To confirm it, he made the long crossing to the opposite side of the suite and pressed his face up against another wall of windows. Yes. He was right. He looked down, way down, more than forty floors to see his own

aging low-rise apartment building across the street, the cedar garlands with their twinkling lights framing the front door.

“Why am I here?” Malcolm asked himself aloud, still staring out the window. “How am I here?”

That’s when he noticed the two dozen or so people camped out in front of the glass condo, bundled up against the December chill. He saw that some held placards. From so many storeys up, he couldn’t see them well enough to know what they were protesting. He spied a pair of binoculars farther along the windowsill and grabbed them for a closer look. As the figures below became clear, he focused on their signs and was stunned to see his own smiling face on several of them. On others, his name was plastered in large letters. He could see they were chanting something, pumping their handmade posters, and peering up, with smiles—and what Malcolm thought looked like longing—on their faces. He opened one of the small sliding windows and heard faint voices drifting up to him. As it turned out, it was more praise than protest. And it wasn’t so much a chant as a song—a megaphone-assisted song in the grand tradition of the urban street rally. He listened to it a few times through before finally picking up the less-than-scintillating lyrics, which he was currently hearing in at least three different keys at once. The Mormon Tabernacle Choir they were not.

We love you Malcolm, oh yes, we do
We love you Malcolm, and we’ll be true
When we’re not reading you, we’re blue
Oh Malcolm, we love you.

Under normal circumstances, Malcolm would likely have thought the song was derivative and lacked creativity, but his surprise that somehow he was the hero of the musical number knocked him off-line for a few moments.

Through his binoculars, he noticed four police officers, stamping their feet to stay warm and doing their best to maintain order. All of them were wearing earplugs—who could blame them? Malcolm closed and then locked the sliding window to restore the silence. He put down the

binoculars, afraid of what else he might see. This was quickly moving from strange to bizarre. But he persevered. What other option did he have?

He took a few more bearings from other windows to confirm what was no longer just supposition, but fact. He was standing in the forty-fifth-floor penthouse of the glass luxury condo across the street from his apartment. His nemesis. The building that had robbed him of one of his few simple pleasures.

He had no idea what had happened—how he had come to be standing in a luxury suite across the street. Had he been drugged? Abducted? Both? His confusion was not eased as he explored the spacious—really, it was massive—layout of the penthouse.

To his amazement, the suite was filled with many of *his* furnishings and possessions. While the space was large and open, his own rug, and writing desk and chair, and lamp, and cherished framed photo of Isla, were positioned in the corner near the span of floor-to-ceiling windows. Stunning dark built-in bookshelves lined the two walls that helped demarcate what he assumed was the library—his library?—and writing room. They were exactly the kind of bookshelves he'd have chosen if he'd had tens of thousands of dollars lying around. Moreover, they were his books lining the shelves, in the same order and arrangement that he had devised when he and Isla had first moved into the dingy apartment across the street so many years ago. And yes, on a middle shelf, between two antique-typewriter bookends, sat his novels, in chronological order, all seventeen of them. A large, plush sectional couch faced the bookshelves.

On another, smaller wall adjacent to the library space, his framed awards were nicely arrayed. He recognized them all except for the two in the centre of the display. He inhaled sharply. An objective observer may have called it a gasp. There was a Booker Prize certificate bearing his name. A Booker Prize. And next to it was an even larger and more ornately designed citation, this one for the Prix d'Or de la Fiction Littéraire. He'd never heard of that particular honour, but apparently he had one.

They were his awards—at least, the ones he remembered winning in his old world were his. They were just hanging on someone else's wall. Or

were they?

“Hello?” Malcolm said quietly, and then a little louder. “Hello!”

No response. As he’d assumed, he was alone. He had a thought and stepped back over to his desk and opened his laptop. His cursor blinked at the end of the last sentence he’d written, just before his headache had knocked his writing off the rails the previous night. He remembered what he’d last written, and there it was on his screen. It was 10:30 a.m., the time he often woke after writing well into the night. Everything seemed normal —except, that is, for where he and all his belongings were currently residing.

Feeling bolder now, he explored the rest of the penthouse. He found the primary bedroom, which felt bigger than his entire apartment, with an ensuite bathroom that was also huge. The high-end lighting switched on automatically when he shuffled into the enormous walk-in closet. In the middle, a beautiful couch pressed up against a dresser large enough to house the underwear, socks, T-shirts, and other sartorial necessities of an entire hockey team. The rest of the space was set up to store and display shoes (fifty-three pairs), dress shirts (seventy-one), pants (thirty-nine pairs), sports jackets (thirteen), and suits (eleven, plus two tuxedos). He was equally intrigued and troubled to find his own less-than-stylish clothes sprinkled among the beautiful fashion-forward collection filling what Malcolm thought ought to be called a dressing pavilion rather than just a closet.

But it was true. He located his trusty back-up pair of jeans (he only kept two in rotation). He stripped off the jeans he was wearing and pulled on the other pair. They fit perfectly and felt just the same as they always had. He found his dry-cleaning ticket in the pocket, just where he’d put it the previous week. Then he tried on some of the other clothes, which he could never have afforded. He slipped into a shiny Hugo Boss shirt and then pulled on what was branded as a Zegna suit in navy blue. They fit him as if he’d been born wearing them. Not only that, he picked up the scent of his own antiperspirant on the shirt. He found his own familiar, nearly worn-out

underwear and sweat socks in a dresser drawer, in amongst a larger and more stylish selection. These were undeniably, but inexplicably, his clothes.

In the vast bathroom he found a TV cleverly integrated into a wall-length mirror, in case he wanted to watch the news while he shaved. Malcolm opened the medicine cabinet. Everything inside belonged to him. His trusty Braun razor. His preferred toothpaste. His Oral-B electric toothbrush. His favoured but not flavoured floss. His less-than-clean hairbrush. The same antiperspirant he'd used for years. And his prescription, a statin, with his name and fancy new address right there on the prescription label.

Somehow, Malcolm could feel himself calming down. Just seeing his own possessions—albeit in a completely different building—somehow left him less frightened, though still bewildered.

He took the long walk to the kitchen next. It ran along the south wall of the suite, with an absolutely breathtaking view of the city. He'd never seen his hometown from this high up. He could still see his old apartment through the window if he craned his neck to look west and down. It appeared even more dilapidated from above. His kitchen in the sky was amazing. A gigantic cooking range that wouldn't have looked out of place in a top-notch restaurant occupied an interior wall, beside three stacked built-in ovens and a considerable expanse of marble counters. Two large stainless-steel farm sinks and two large dishwashers were housed in the sizeable island, along with ten leather stools, in case he needed to feed a book club. There was also a large breakfast table that could accommodate fourteen, for situations when the breakfast bar was deemed just a little too informal—or when that hungry hockey team arrived.

There was a completely separate dining room, with a truly magnificent table that could sit at least twenty. Expensive art hung on two walls, but on the third was the painting Isla had given Malcolm on his thirtieth birthday, more than three decades before. He looked at it closely. Then he pulled it off the wall and read Isla's handwritten birthday inscription on the back. It was his painting. There was no doubt.

He quickly checked out the three guest bedrooms, each decorated in its own unique style and equipped with an ensuite bathroom and walk-out terrace. By this stage, Malcolm was feeling more than a little overwhelmed. On his way back to the library, he noticed what he figured was the front door, in what was probably called the foyer. (Even though he'd never had one of his own before, he knew a foyer when he saw one.) Except the front door wasn't a typical front door. It was an elevator door. The suite had its own private elevator. Malcolm had never heard of such a thing. Off to the left, there was a second, more conventional front door. He looked through its small window and could see the carpeted corridor and the exit sign by the stairwell. That made sense. In a power outage—with the elevator out of commission—there had to be a way to get to the stairwell for the long walk down to the lobby.

On a narrow table against the foyer wall was a leather inbox of sorts, with mail piled in it. There he found the same stack of opened mail that he'd kept at his apartment, among them a letter from his agent with his latest royalty statements and a letter from the university that held his archives, such as they were. He'd already opened and read these missives the previous week. But the envelopes bore the address of the luxury condo, not the nearly century-old low-rise apartment building across the street.

He walked back to the library area and sat down in his writing chair, where he felt most comfortable. And he thought. Could he be in some kind of parallel universe? Had he died and gone to heaven? Had he mistakenly overdosed on some powerful hallucinogenic narcotic? Perhaps a pre-Christmas miracle? He had no explanation. But he knew where he was, and he knew this was somehow *his* penthouse, because everything he owned was here with him, along with lots of other items that he'd never seen but just happened to fit him perfectly. What was happening? His heart rate was elevated, and he tried to slow his breathing. A panic attack would not help him divine what was going on.

He stood up again and opened a sliding glass door to the largest outdoor terrace he'd ever seen. There were potted coniferous trees—the limbs of which explained the surprise shadows on his rug—festooned with coloured

Christmas lights. And despite the sub-zero temperatures, there was a reasonably sized swimming pool, with one of those infinity edges that always freaked him out. You could swim right up to the glass wall of the pool, forty-five storeys above the ground. Vapour swirled on the surface, where the very warm water met the very cold air. There were two separate barbecue and bar areas, in the event he didn't want to speak to his guests. It was amazing. The winter cold hit him as soon as he stepped through the sliding door. But he sat down anyway, in what felt like the most comfortable chair ever made for outdoor sedentary living.

He just shivered in the chair for a time, breathing deeply and taking in the view from the terrace—*his* terrace. It suddenly occurred to him that if he really was living there in luxury's lap, who was living in his apartment across the street? He leapt to his feet and tried to remember how to get back to the foyer. It took him a while to find it, but he eventually did. He was about to push the button for the elevator when he heard a phone ring. He trotted back to the library and saw his mobile lit up on his desk. Manjusha's name was displayed on the screen, along with her headshot. She'd been his agent for nearly twenty years, and he considered her a close friend. She was always honest with him.

"Manjusha? What the hell's happening around here? Where am I?" Malcolm opened.

"I know, I know. It's been a crazy few weeks, hasn't it? But we'll get through it. You're almost done. Just one more big show. And at least it's here so you can sleep in your own bed tonight, right?" she started. "Okay, listen, I don't have much time right now, but I just wanted to let you know that Bigman and Wonderwoman will be there in a few minutes for your security briefing for tonight's final big hoo-ha."

It was her voice. He knew her distinctive tone so well. And he was certainly familiar with her scrappy demeanour and take-charge attitude. He was definitely talking to Manjusha.

"Wait, I'm still back on the two superheroes you mentioned."

"Did you just wake up from an all-night mushroom tasting? Where is your head?"

“Um, pretend, just as a hypothetical, that I have recently suffered brain damage and you have to explain things to me as if for the first time. Or, as you say, that I have just regained consciousness after an all-night mushroom tasting. Let’s try it. Come on, it’ll be fun,” Malcolm implored. “Okay, so let’s start with Bigboy and Catwoman. Just go with me on this, please!”

“Okay, okay, but don’t expect this spoon-feeding all the time. And it’s Bigman, you know, Bruce Staunton, and Wonderwoman, a.k.a. Sue Craig, your regular private security detail. As you would surely know were it not for the mushrooms, for big events like this evening’s, they’re supported by a large security team to keep you safe. So, tonight’s a big deal, or have you forgotten?”

“Oh, *that* Bigman and Wonderwoman. Bruce and Sue! Got it. And of course I haven’t forgotten about tonight. Can you just run me through the highlights quickly to make sure I’ve prepared properly, please?”

“Running out of time here so this is going to have to be quick. Here goes, so open up those ears. But you already know all this…”

Manjusha proceeded to walk Malcolm through what was to unfold that evening. Anyone watching Malcolm’s face during her breathless telephone briefing would have seen several different shades of shocked. He barely kept his composure. He didn’t interrupt her, but it was clear that he was not ready to buy what she was selling, let alone believe it was something that existed in any realistic realm with which he was familiar. He almost lost it when she told him who was opening for him that night. So, he just ignored it. His brain was not yet able to consider something quite so far-fetched. Then again, ever since he’d woken up in this penthouse, nothing was as it had been. He took it all in, and issued sounds and formed words that suggested all was well. But his mind was a maelstrom.

“Oh, and don’t forget, Bigman will give you a remote to advance your slides, just like in the other cities. Do not lose it or the world will end. And because it’s another sellout, we’ve had to change the schedule. So Adam, Felicity, and Sonia will now do their thing at your condo just before you leave for the gig.”

“Their thing?” Malcolm replied.

“I know, I know, you always mix them up,” Manjusha said. “Okay, one more time. Adam is hair, Felicity is wardrobe, and Sonia is makeup.”

“Right, right, got it,” Malcolm said, though he was clearly still a long way from getting it.

“And remember, as always, Micheline is producing, so she’ll be in your ear the whole time. It’ll be just like all the other stops on the tour. You’re going to kill it here at home, like you have everywhere else.”

“Okay, just a final question before you go. You said a word a couple times in your little briefing that sounded like ‘EVTOL,’ if I’ve got that right. What’s an EVTOL again?”

“You’re hilarious, Malcolm, but I don’t have time right now, and neither do you. Bigman and Wonderwoman are about to arrive. Have a good show.”

The line went dead.

It sure sounded like Manjusha. She was the same goofy, mouthy, badass agent in this new world as she was in the old. *But how did I get here?* he wondered, for about the thirty-seventh time since waking up that morning. *How did Manjusha get here? And how do we get back?* There were no ruby slippers among his fifty-three pairs of shoes. His heart was pounding but he tried to keep his cool. The phone rang. It was Manjusha, again.

“Finally,” she said, as if she’d never hung up, “you have two other calls this afternoon after your security briefing, and one call tomorrow, that have been added to your schedule. I’ll forward the updated sched later this afternoon. So, first up is Emily.”

“My editor.”

“Good boy. Yes, I’m aware that she’s your editor. And the second is a call with Doug.”

“Doug, Doug, um…”

“Jesus, Malc. Doug Houseman—you know, Doug your money guy. At least, that’s how you have him listed in your contacts.”

“Right, right. Of course. Doug the money guy. What does he want to talk about?”

“How should I know, Malc? You asked for the call. I think you just wanted an update on the tour take.”

“Tour take, um. I see.”

“Seriously, Malc, you obviously don’t see. Again, where is your head? You know what? Don’t answer that!” she replied. “Tour take, Malcolm. You know, what we cleared…in money…on the tour.”

“Oh, right. That call. I remember now.”

“And call number three, tomorrow morning, is with Eliza McCain,” said Manjusha. “She’s on track with the bio and just wants to drill down a bit more on how you feel about writing and its place in your life. And just to remind you, at some point in the next month or so, she’s going to want to talk more deeply about Isla. So, start getting ready for that. She can’t finish the book without it.” She paused. “Malc, you got through it for the documentary, you’ll get through it for the bio.”

“Why does she need to know about Isla?”

“Malcolm,” she said, her voice softer. “You know why. Eliza is writing your biography. Isla has to be a part of it because…well, even though she’s been gone for a very long time now, still she’s such an important part of you—as a writer and a person.”

A wave of grief and angst broke over him. He paused and took a few slow, deep breaths as he gathered himself. Manjusha held her peace.

“I know. I know,” Malcolm replied. “But just not on tomorrow’s call. Please? I need to think through what I’ll share and what I won’t—and how I’ll keep it together.”

“Of course. I’ll remind her. Oh, and speaking of the doc,” she said, happy to change the subject. “I just heard from Bobby, and he confirmed that the film is nearly finished. He’s just fiddling with the credits in post-production, so the LA premiere later this week is finally, definitely, a go. It’s been tentative in your schedule for a while, but now we can ink it in.”

“Um, what’s Bobby’s last name again?” Malcolm asked, trying to figure out what she was talking about. He heard her sigh. “I’m just having a mental block on his name.”

“Geez, Malcolm. Bobby Locke. *The* Bobby Locke. You know, four-time Oscar-winning documentarian. That Bobby Locke?”

“Right. I remember. I just seem to glitch out on his name for some reason.”

“Okay, but I sure hope you’re sharper tonight on stage,” she said. “Ack! Gotta go. Bigman and Wonderwoman are in your elevator. Talk later.”

Malcolm put his phone down on his writing desk, his mother’s beautiful wooden writing desk that now belonged to him. It was more than a possession, or even a family heirloom. It felt like a part of him. He knew the flow of the wood. He knew each darker brown knot that graced the grain. He loved the lustrous glow of the writing surface, in which he could see his own reflection. As uncertain as he was about many things that morning, he was certain it was his desk.

He quickly flipped open his laptop and googled Bobby Locke. And there it was. The very first entry. It was a YouTube clip, a trailer for a new Bobby Locke film called *Writestar: The Life of Malcolm Forde*. That caught him just a little by surprise. “Shite,” he whispered. “What the hell is a writestar?”

Before he could click on the trailer, a doorbell sounded somewhere in the vicinity. He was still getting used to the vast floor plan, so it took him a moment or two to follow the chime back to the sprawling foyer. The elevator button was flashing green, so he took a chance and pushed it. The doors immediately opened on the largest and most musclebound man and woman he had ever seen. Dressed in matching black suits and sunglasses from the Hugo Boss Bodyguard Collection, Bruce and Sue—or Bigman and Wonderwoman, as they were known—stepped into the massive reception area. The large, open space suddenly felt less large and open for their considerable presence.

Based on Manjusha’s call, Malcolm greeted them as if he knew them, because he clearly did. The security briefing took about thirty minutes, and Malcolm felt much more anxious after the full scope of the evening’s festivities was revealed—but he covered well and performed an adequate impersonation of someone who wasn’t nearly as close to the edge of panic as he felt.

“To sum up, Mr. Forde,” Wonderwoman said, “I will get you to the roof at 7:54 p.m. sharp to catch your ride, and then Bigman, and our supplemental venue team, will be waiting for you on the field to escort you up the ramp so you can do your thing one last time. Just like we’ve always done it.”

Malcolm overcame his instinct to shake his head violently from side to side with his face buried in his hands, and somehow managed to pull off a casual nod in the affirmative.

“Are we good?” Bigman asked.

“We are great,” Malcolm assured him. “Thanks for the run-through.”

“All right then, I’ll be back here at seven thirty, and we’ll start the clock then,” Wonderwoman said, as she headed back to the foyer with Bigman.

When they entered the elevator, Wonderwoman raised her finger to her earphone. Just as the doors were closing, she nodded and said, “Your phone is about to ring.”

“Right, okay. Oh, and what does EVTOL stand for again?” Malcolm asked, but the doors had already closed.

He heard his phone ringing, just as Wonderwoman had promised. He rushed back to the library area where he’d left it, still managing to take a couple of wrong turns, and saw his editor’s name and photo on the call display screen.

“Emily?”

“Hey, big-shot writer. Just wanted to wish you good luck before your little gathering tonight with seventy thousand of your closest friends. Break a leg.”

It sounded just like her. It was definitely Emily.

“Thanks, Em. It’s all a little surreal.”

“Well, surely it’s not that different from the other stops on the tour. London was crazy, and so were Paris and Melbourne and the other cities, right?”

“Um…true, but, um, this is my home turf so it kind of feels a little different, you know?”

“Right. But you’re going to slay it. You always do,” she said. “Oh, and I’m nearly finished my first pass through the new manuscript. I should have my opening thoughts and observations back to you next week sometime. But so far, it’s got ‘winner’ written all over it. Congrats.”

“Oh, right. Um. Thanks,” Malcolm replied, relieved. “Em, you know, I’m having a few minor computer issues right now, and the cloud is not cooperating. Can you fire me back the manuscript as I sent it to you? It would save me some messing about.”

“You got it. I’ll do that right now.”

“And you know that while you’ve been reviewing the finished manuscript, I’ve still been banging away on the next one, right?” Malcolm asked.

“I’m counting on it,” she said. “And?”

“Well, nothing really to report except that it’s early days, but I’m on it.”

He could hear her working her keyboard while she kept talking.

“Good. Carry on. And have a blast tonight. It’s the last night of the tour, so just enjoy it and let it roll over you. You’ve earned it. You deserve it.”

“Thanks, Emily. I couldn’t have done it without you. You know that, right?”

“Damn straight you couldn’t have done it without me. Of course I know that! See you tomorrow.”

“Oh, right. Remind me about tomorrow again?” Malcolm asked.

“Manjusha, you, and I are meeting here at two o’clock to look at TV ads to support the long tail of the current novel, now that the big tour is done. Then the rest of the team is joining us for a little confab on the current state of the market and your audience demographics, to see whether you should be responding to any recent shifts. Other departments will report, too. Just an update, really.”

“Right, that’s what I thought.”

“And then we’re doing a modest celebration in the boardroom with the senior team here.”

“Great. Thanks, Emily. See you tomorrow afternoon.”

He ended the call.

So this is my life, he thought yet again.

As he looked at his phone, he realized for the first time that it wasn't the ten-year-old Samsung with the cracked screen he was used to. No, it was a brand-new, shiny iPhone. He touched the smooth black surface and it lit up, scanned his face, then opened. He thought the screen was bright enough to take an X-ray. He navigated to his calendar and read through the next few days. In addition to calls, meetings, and media interviews, he also had an upcoming trip to LA for the premiere of that documentary supposedly about him. He'd never been to Los Angeles, at least not in his old world.

He finally had a moment to watch the trailer for the doc. It was three and a half minutes long and featured scenes of him speaking on stadium stages, receiving various literary awards, and driving a bright-red Alfa Romeo sports car, along with some talking-head interviews. He didn't watch the whole thing. He couldn't. He suddenly felt nauseous, so he stopped the video and hyperventilated for a few minutes.

When he'd steeled himself, he typed *Malcolm Forde stadium tour* into the YouTube search bar. There were several pages of results. He lowered himself into his desk chair and spent half an hour or so watching a mix of professionally produced footage and mobile-phone videos of his shows that had been uploaded by fans in various cities. The scenes played out exactly as Manjusha had described. As he watched his entrance in several videos, he suddenly remembered what EVTOL stood for. He tried to remain calm, but that was a Herculean task that he wasn't quite able to manage. However, watching the clips from different cities at least gave him some understanding of what to expect that night at his final tour stop. But it did little to quell his incredulity that this was in fact who he was now, that this was his life.

He clapped his hands together. He felt the physical sensation of his palm-on-palm contact. He heard the sharp report. He pinched his arm and felt the pain. He slid open the terrace doors again and let the frosty air hit his face. He couldn't argue with the reality of his new world. He didn't know how he had gotten here or even where he was, but there was no evidence that it was anything but real.

—

Doug Houseman, Malcolm's "money guy," called right on time. Doug had not been a part of Malcolm's earlier life. Middling novelists tended not to require the kind of services Doug Houseman provided exclusively to high-net-worth individuals.

They exchanged pleasantries for a few minutes before getting down to business.

"So, the final net tally for the tour, assuming tonight unfolds the way every other show has, will be in the neighbourhood of twenty-seven million dollars."

There was a long pause.

"Pardon me?" Malcolm finally croaked, his throat almost completely closed.

"I know, I know," Doug said. "I promised we'd hit thirty million, but our security costs were higher than we anticipated given that each show sold out. And we exceeded our hotel and transportation budget because we had to boost the size of our travel and security teams due to the sellouts, and because you're such a big writestar. But twenty-seven million is still the second-highest net proceeds from a six-week lit tour, just a hair behind Margaret Atwood's incredible The Handmaid's Tour last year."

Malcolm was rendered speechless.

"Are you still there, Malcolm? Hello?"

"Sorry, I was just trying to wrap my puny brain around such a colossal number," Malcolm said. "Just to be clear on the terminology, by *net* you mean that after everyone else has been paid—the stadiums, the airlines, ticket agencies, security, catering, transportation, hotels, literary agents, you, et cetera—there's still twenty-seven million dollars piled in neat stacks on my dining room table?"

"Well, I wouldn't advise having that much cash lying around your condo, but in essence, yes."

"Wow. But it must have cost a fortune for our opening act to kick off each stadium show."

“Well, not really. The band was only fifty thousand a night. We made that much on merch sales alone in twenty minutes after we opened the gates. Then, after the first two stops, the retail team discovered we could make even more on merch by opening the doors half an hour earlier than we had been. A simple and profitable change.”

They talked for a few more minutes before Malcolm thanked Doug for the update and ended the call.

He needed a moment. He needed much more than a moment. He needed to get out of his own head for just a little bit. He walked back to the foyer and stopped in front of the large white pottery bowl sitting on the hall table. He was right. He had seen a set of car keys sitting there sporting the distinctive, if complicated, Alfa Romeo logo. He grabbed the keys, pulled on a long black wool coat and red plaid scarf, and hit the down arrow on his private elevator. Malcolm had always liked cars in general, just not the ones he’d been able to afford over the years. He thought, not at all wistfully, about his decrepit, rusting Hyundai. He wondered if it were sitting across the street in the crumbling concrete underground parking lot of his old building.

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3

The doors slid open on P1, and a uniformed parking valet greeted Malcolm as he stepped off the elevator. His name tag read *Ricky*.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Forde,” the valet started. “I saw on my screen you were headed this way. The Alfa, I assume?”

“Um, yes, that would be great,” Malcolm replied, offering him the keys. “Thank you, Ricky.”

“Oh, you keep the keys, Mr. Forde. You know we have our own set here,” Ricky said, pulling an identical key fob out of his pocket.

“Yes, of course,” said Malcolm. “My mistake.”

Ricky hustled out into the parking area and disappeared around a pillar at the far end of the lot. Shortly thereafter, a lovely, throaty engine roared to life and a brand-new, bright-red Alfa Romeo Giulia Quadrifoglio pulled up. Ricky turned off the car but left the key fob in its slot in the centre console.

“Man, I love these wheels, Mr. Forde.”

“So do I, Ricky. So do I.”

“I’ll open the big garage door when you get there,” Ricky said, pointing to the video monitor on his desk.

“Thank you. I won’t be long,” Malcolm said.

He climbed into the rich, beautiful, brown-leather interior and closed the door behind him. The seat automatically slid forward and reclined slightly so that it was in Malcolm’s customized, perfect driving position. He sat there feeling the seat hold him and inhaling leather’s scent. With his foot on the brake, he pushed the ignition button, and the twin-turbocharged V6 symphony began anew. Such an intoxicating sound.

He eased away and followed the arrows to the exit, with the dependable Ricky opening the door at the end, right on cue. Malcolm drove up the ramp

and turned onto the road—really it was more of an alley—behind his condo. He pulled up to the cross street. As he waited for some traffic, he looked to his left to see what had, in an earlier life, been his down-market apartment building. He lifted his eyes to the window of his old writing room. An older woman who somehow seemed familiar looked out, before returning to the book she was reading. Someone was living in his old apartment. In light of everything else, this ought not to have been surprising. Yet, to Malcolm, it was—a recurring sensation to which he was growing quite accustomed.

He drove down his own street, taking in his surroundings. He stopped at a red light just across from the library where he'd given his talk the night before. But, like so much else in his new world, the library wasn't the same. No, the tired branch from the previous night was now a larger, sparkling, glass architectural gem gleaming in the afternoon sun. Attached to one end was a separate, smaller building. Malcolm wondered what it was, but only for a second or two, until his eyes found the sign out front.

"The Malcolm Forde Debut Reading Theatre?" he said aloud. "What the…?"

Then a car behind him honked. The light had turned green. Flummoxed, Malcolm squealed away but then promptly signalled and pulled over to the curb. The car behind him honked again as it whizzed by. Malcolm turned off the ignition. If he craned his neck, he could still see the theatre with his name on it. Sitting there, he googled it on his phone. He shook his head as he read—though, again, given what he'd already seen, it all somehow tracked. It turned out the theatre was part of an ongoing federal program to build two-hundred-seat theatres at library branches to provide venues for writers, particularly debut authors, to deliver their early book talks and hone their public performance skills. Put another way, the federal program ensured a national infrastructure to introduce rookie writers to the country—in the same way that Triple-A minor-league baseball teams developed up-and-coming players for the major leagues. These debut reading theatres seemed to be part of the nation's literary farm system, a feeder circuit developing new writers and introducing them to readers looking for their

next favourite books and authors. Fascinating. He figured it was named after him because it was his home library branch.

He kept reading and learned that complementing this federal effort was a municipal program called Reading Rostrum that incorporated into public parks small gathering spaces where book lovers could listen to aspiring writers read from their works in an outdoor public setting. Malcolm likened it to the Speakers' Corners found in many cities of his old world, or open mic nights for fledgling stand-up comics, but available anytime in the park for readers and writers alike. A brilliant idea, he thought.

Malcolm briefly puzzled over the activist role various levels of government played in promoting writers and their books. This was something new and foreign to him. A federal government investing so heavily in the welfare of writers—clearly, he really was in a different world, Malcolm concluded.

He drove around the city, quickly falling in love with his red Alfa. It handled beautifully. At the wheel, he felt safe and secure—cocooned behind tinted glass. He kept driving aimlessly and making random turns as he considered his predicament. He'd never been a big believer in parallel universes. In fact, he couldn't recall ever really thinking about them at all. But he was beginning to change his tune, faced with the mounting evidence all around him.

"Am I dreaming?" he wondered aloud. He often talked to himself when alone. "No, I don't think so," he was forced to admit. He thought it all seemed too real, too visceral. The finely tuned engine was vibrating his rib cage in a most pleasant way. He felt too conscious and too acutely alert to be dreaming. And everything was in sharp and vivid focus, without the gauzy blurriness typical of his dreams.

He dug his fingernail into his arm again until it hurt. No, he concluded, he must somehow be in an alternate dimension of some kind. Or he could have completely taken leave of his senses, which was also a possibility. Perhaps this was a strange new form of dementia, though he hoped not. Clearly people he'd known for a long time, like Manjusha and Emily, were

doing their jobs and carrying themselves as they always had. Situation normal.

He thought long and hard as he drove through the city's streets. Everything looked the same, except for the massive digital billboards that featured his smiling face as he held his latest novel for all to see. What had happened? Since when did novelists get billboards? Or, for that matter, Alfa Romeos, luxury penthouse condos, and sold-out stadiums? There was another change he noticed. There were plenty of bookstores—big ones and small ones, specialty and general, new and used—all over the city. And twice on his little driving tour, he saw retail outlets with "Opening Soon" signs announcing new bookstores. This was unheard of in his old world, his old life. Where he came from, owning a bookstore had almost always been —at one and the same time—a labour of love and financial folly. The adventure was captured in an old joke that regrettably held more than its fair share of truth.

How do you make a small fortune?
Start with a large fortune and open a bookstore.

On his way back home, he looked longingly into Macbeth's Books as he passed by but couldn't see Sheila for all the customers milling about. He looked for a parking spot but there was none, so he just drove on by. He figured it would be more easily reached on foot.

As he drove the last few blocks home, he realized yet again that he'd awakened as a stranger in a strange land. Yet it was real. And almost all of the strange elements of his strange land seemed to make his life as a writer better, dramatically better. He kept returning to the evidence to reaffirm the existence of this world. He'd spoken to people he knew, liked, and trusted. His possessions were in his penthouse suite. His awards were hanging on the walls, along with the painting Isla had given him. His writing desk was there, with Isla's photo on it. For all intents and purposes, despite the inexplicability, the unfathomability, of it all, this was reality—at least it was his new reality, for as long as it lasted. He couldn't argue with the

immutable facts. The Alfa Romeo was a fact. His condo? Fact. The billboard he'd just passed featuring his gargantuan headshot? Fact.

He was living in the here and now, just a very different here and now. If he continued to question it and behaved like someone who refused to accept his own reality, he would eventually be admitted to one of those institutions inhabited by those who had lost their grip on that same reality. So, almost in self-defence, he resolved simply to accept his new circumstances—if not embrace them—and just play it out for however long he found himself a part of it. Step up and engage, participate, and learn all he could. That's what a writer would do.

Besides, what other choice did he have? He had no option but to adapt, and not let on that he was reeling in shock at this bizarre turn of events. The previous evening he'd been interviewed onstage in a local library before an audience of nine, only a handful of whom seemed interested in being there. Later tonight, if no one was messing with him, he'd give a talk to a sold-out crowd of seventy thousand crazed fans and book lovers in a dome stadium, bookended—pun intended—by performances by one of rock royalty's supergroups. Two different worlds, both apparently real.

That was a lot to take on board in twenty-four hours.

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After returning what he was beginning to believe was his own Alfa Romeo to the parking garage, Malcolm was still feeling a little overwhelmed. But making the decision to ride whatever roller coaster he was on until it stopped—or ran off the rails—had calmed him down. Still, he felt he needed the dose of serenity that came from visiting his favourite local bookstore. Sheila's bookstore. He needed to centre himself before whatever was supposed to happen that evening—and time in Macbeth's Books, even if the store was crowded, felt like the right call.

On his first attempt, he blithely walked out the front door of his condo and entered the orbit of the gaggle of paparazzi and fans camped outside his building. Everybody freaked out, including Malcolm. There was screaming

and shouting and even some shedding of tears—not by Malcolm, but rather by a few of his fans who had probably never seen him in the flesh. He quickly retreated inside. When safe and secure in his own lobby, he smiled and waved at the fans, occasionally shrugging and mouthing “sorry.” After all, he had a reputation to protect.

For his second attempt, he returned to his penthouse suite and donned a heavy parka, sunglasses, and a winter ballcap with earflaps, all of which he’d found in the foyer closet. He descended again in his elevator, pulled his hood up over his head, and slipped out the back door through the loading dock, his hands shoved deep into his parka pockets. It was snowing lightly, so Malcolm figured the hood would not look out of place. Keeping his eyes on the pavement, he shuffled behind the neighbouring buildings and eventually emerged onto a side street a block over, still unrecognized. He kept his head down and walked with purpose. Macbeth’s Books was still several blocks up, on the other side of the street.

In the air, he could hear Christmas music. He’d heard the same recordings of the same carols the night before—and a world away—as he’d walked to his library reading. Back then, they’d sounded like they were being played through a first-generation walkie-talkie, or perhaps a tin-can telephone. The fuzzy, buzzy, squawking, crackling yuletide melodies were almost painful to the ear. But this time, his new world offered clear, beautiful, lush, and balanced audio, more in keeping with a top-of-the-line Bang & Olufsen stereo system. It was lovely to hear.

Malcolm approached the corner and waited for the light. While it was quite chilly, his all-encompassing hood gave him no peripheral vision. One needs peripheral vision when safely crossing busy city intersections. Without thinking, he pulled the hood off his head so he could more easily look both ways and monitor the traffic signals. Plus, the fidelity of the Christmas music was even better with his ears exposed. When the walk sign finally lit up, he stepped off the curb and started across.

He was halfway to the other side when a car horn started honking. The driver then rolled down his window and stuck his head out.

“Malcolm! Malcolm Forde! I love your books! They changed my life! Hey Malcooooolm! Hey, over here!”

Malcolm made the mistake of looking back at the young man shouting. Without his hood, he’d immediately blown his own cover just by turning his head and waving tentatively. Several other horns then started honking. Pedestrians started pointing and hollering, and most of the superfans camped outside his building a block away noticed the commotion and heard the distant strains of “Malcolm, Malcolm,” so of course they rushed towards the scene en masse.

I’m no longer incognito, he decided, in the very definition of understatement. *No, I’m definitely outcognito now.*

He took an all-too-brief but still longing glance up the street towards Macbeth’s, before sprinting back the way he’d come. At sixty, Malcolm sprinting looked to others more like Malcolm trotting, or perhaps cantering. At least he was wearing hiking shoes. He’d have been in real trouble had he worn the heavy winter boots he’d seen on the floor of his foyer closet.

The herd of fans behind him, well-meaning yet a little terrifying, was gaining. He wasn’t going to make it to the condo’s back door in time, but as luck would have it, a beautiful black Jaguar SUV was just heading down the ramp to the underground parking garage. Malcolm took a hard left and followed the Jag. The door was already coming back down by the time Malcolm reached the ramp, which was a little greasy from the snow. Bold action was required. So, Malcolm made like he was sliding into second base and literally slipped under the door, just in time. A few seconds later, the pack of fans rushed down the ramp, but it was too late. Pulling himself to his feet, he was quite chuffed at his daredevil slide. A few of his fans banged gently on the door.

“Malcolm! Malcolm!”

Realizing their efforts were futile, the mob dispersed, presumably retreating to their traditional outpost behind the metal barricades across the street.

Ricky was returning from a foot patrol of the parking lot and had witnessed Malcolm’s narrow escape.

“Now, that was a close shave, Mr. Forde. Are you okay?”

“I’ll survive,” Malcolm replied, between gasping breaths. “My own fault, I guess.”

“Yes, sir. You can’t just go walking around outside, even with your security team, and even with that big-ass hood. It’s not safe.”

“I know, I know. My mistake. Thank you, Ricky.”

By the time Malcolm made it back up to the safety of his penthouse, he was still frazzled from his brief adventure beyond the security of his condominium. But one look outside at the setting sun calmed him down. It was that magical hour when the sky was not yet fully dark, but deep blue. Remnant rays of the sun—pink and orange striations—streamed across the western sky, while in the east, the moon and early stars were on their luminous rise. Day and night together.

He pried himself away from the view and opened his laptop again. He found the promised email from Emily with his new manuscript attached and was anxious as he opened the document. But all was well. The familiar title of the novel he had just finished in his earlier life appeared on the screen. He digitally flipped through the manuscript from start to finish, and it was all there. They were his ideas, his characters, his words. Clearly there was some link back to his earlier reality. That was where he’d written this manuscript. At least he could speak about the new draft with authority and conviction when discussing it with Emily, and anyone else for that matter.

He saved the manuscript in a separate file and closed it. Perhaps against his better judgment, Malcolm then opened his Internet browser and googled himself, not for a run-of-the-mill ego search, but to help him prepare for his imminent call with the biographer who was apparently writing the story of his life.

Malcolm spent half an hour or so reading magazine profiles and, of course, his Wikipedia entry. He was relieved to discover that, at least as far as his books were concerned, his past life was essentially the same in his new dimension. Same titles, same publishing dates, same covers. What had changed was how many people had read them, and how many literary awards he’d won. In fact, there were so many more prizes available to

writers, all bringing significant purses, profile, prestige—certainly more than he'd enjoyed in his old life. But knowing that the basics of his history were the same meant he could just tell the truth in his upcoming call, other than the whole "writers are king of the world" thing. He was still getting used to that.

Internet descriptions of him and his personality all lined up quite closely, at least in his mind, with who he really was. Except he was now world-famous and uber-rich.

"The world should have my problems," he muttered to himself.

Soon after, his updated schedule arrived from Manjusha. This included the next day's biographer call, followed by a network TV interview and that 2:00 p.m. meeting with his publishing team. He'd then have a short break before joining Valerie Comeau, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Culture, for a private dinner at a fancy restaurant downtown. That seemed to Malcolm like a packed and exhausting day to follow the last show of his stadium tour. But who was he to complain? This was his life. Given what seemed to be considerable government support for writers and readers, he was actually looking forward to his dinner with the culture minister. She ought to be able to explain how Malcolm's new world had come to value writers and books so highly.

He saw in his schedule that two days later was the trip to LA for the movie premiere. It didn't look like he'd even be able to see the film before the curtain lifted at Grauman's Chinese Theatre in Hollywood for the world premiere. He'd be seeing *Writestar: The Life of Malcolm Forde* for the first time along with everyone else in the theatre. He didn't think that was the way it ought to play out. So, he emailed Manjusha to ask if he could perhaps review the film on the long flight to LA, just so he was prepared.

Adam, Felicity, and Sonia were due to arrive at six thirty, which left Malcolm just half an hour to shower in his giant bathroom. He'd never had a shower where multiple heads fired water jets at him from head to toe and from every conceivable angle. He loved it and savoured every last drop of his twenty-five-minute session. In his apartment across the street, his

shower head was so clogged that he felt little more than damp standing beneath it.

At six thirty on the dot, his wardrobe, makeup, and hair SWAT team greeted him like a long-lost friend. Malcolm figured they must have bonded over the course of the tour, so he embraced the idea, and them, when they stepped off the elevator. It only took about an hour, but the "Malcolm makeover" was quite impressive. He still looked like Malcolm, just a newer, sleeker, more stylish, and better-looking model.

"You're all magicians, alchemists, and genies," Malcolm gushed. "I had no idea I could look like this, without the benefit of plastic surgery, poor eyesight, and long distances."

"Well, you've looked this good at every other stop on the tour," Sonia said.

"Yes, but this is my hometown show, and you've clearly upped your game tonight, and I appreciate it," Malcolm said. "Thank you."

"Well, you have to step up tonight, too," Adam said. "Last show!"

"Um, do I get to keep these clothes?" Malcolm asked.

"Well, you paid for them," replied Felicity.

He did look good in his high-cut brown leather shoes, stretchy jeans, colourful patterned shirt, and solid-blue trim-fit sports jacket. It pushed back the frontiers of his authorial sartorial splendour.

His three makeover artists had just left when Wonderwoman arrived. She also thought he looked great. But with about forty minutes until showtime, Malcolm was suddenly anxious. He thought it all through and tried to calm himself down. He was a pro. He'd done hundreds of book talks over his writerly career, although never in a domed stadium. But he knew the program. He knew where he was supposed to be and what he was supposed to do. And he'd have the calming voice of Micheline in his ear every step of the way. Micheline had apparently already successfully guided him through every other stadium show on the tour. Unfortunately, as far as Malcolm was concerned, he'd never met Micheline. But the more he thought about his preparation and support, the more confident he became. All that was left was the execution.

“It’s time, Mr. Forde,” Wonderwoman said, beckoning towards the elevator.

They both boarded, and she hit the button with *HP* stencilled on it.

“HP?” Malcolm said.

“Helipad,” she replied.

“Of course.”

One floor up, the doors opened onto a glass vestibule that overlooked a circle of tarmac edged with orange paint containing the aforementioned initials, *HP*. The light snow from the other night had been cleared from it and was piled around the pad’s periphery. As the doors closed behind them, Malcolm heard and then spied a small, strange, drone-like flying machine approaching from the north. EVTOL—Electric Vertical Take-Off and Landing. By the time it was hovering over the tarmac circle, it still seemed small, largely because it was. Up top, four sets of horizontal fans encircled the central cabin below. To Malcolm’s eye, it looked as if the craft had only one seat, and there was clearly no pilot on board. It slowly descended to land face-on to them, right on top of the big painted *HP*. Its small double-stacked fans slowed, then stopped, as the drone settled on its landing skids. Silence reigned.

Wonderwoman led Malcolm through the door and out onto the chilly helipad. While by that stage, Malcolm’s capacity for surprise had diminished, it was not completely exhausted. As they rounded the front of the EVTOL, Malcolm stopped. Wonderwoman clearly heard his intake of breath and turned to him. He was staring at an oversized image of himself plastered on the side of the vehicle. He was holding his latest book and offering a megawatt smile. His teeth looked fantastic. He wondered if he really had such gleaming white chompers, or if this dimension’s version of Photoshop had been employed. Just then the gull-wing door on the side opened automatically. Wonderwoman motioned with her hand for him to board the strange vehicle. As he’d suspected, there was only one seat, and it was empty. In a daze, Malcolm climbed in. What else could he do? Wonderwoman helped him secure the five-point safety harness.

“Bigman will meet you on the field, and he’ll have your earbuds and your remote. Have a great show.” She smiled at him, closed the door, and backed away.

He was all alone. A message flashed on the screen in front of him.

Please put on the headset provided, it read.

He lifted it from the hook on his armrest and pulled it on.

“Good evening, Mr. Forde. It’s Savannah, your pilot,” said a voice with what sounded like a Scottish accent. “Ready for one final spectacular entrance?”

“Well, ready as I’ll ever be, I guess.”

“Here we go.”

With that, the noise of the electric motors started up, then crescendoed as the craft lifted off the ground.

“Um, remind me, Savannah, exactly where you are?”

“Oh, I’m in my virtual cockpit in Glasgow with my wraparound monitors. I’ll have you on the ground at the MegaDome in just a minute or two.”

“I assume the stadium roof will be open,” Malcolm quipped, feeling more and more confident—and, in related news, looking his best.

“Well, have a gander yourself, dead ahead of us,” she said.

The white domed roof most certainly did not look open.

“Um…”

“Don’t worry,” Savannah said. “Do you see that big black circle in the middle of the white roof?”

“I see it,” Malcolm replied.

“Now, keep your eye on it.”

As he watched, the black circle miraculously opened, its multiple leaves turning and disappearing, leaving a gaping hole.

“Ahhh, got it,” Malcolm said, relieved.

“I tend to find it easier to land on the field with the entry port open,” Savannah said. “But because I’m not on board, I’m up for trying anything.”

He laughed and turned his head to look down as they approached their destination. The open entry port still seemed small, but Savannah had a way

of relieving his concern. Through the roof's opening, Malcolm could now see at least part of the sellout crowd and they almost looked like they were waving him in.

"That is one amazing view, Savannah," he said.

"It is, Mr. Forde. Every time."

"Malcolm, please," he urged.

"You've said that on each of our trips together, but I'm afraid I'm a formal Scottish lass from Dunlop, so you'll always be Mr. Forde to me," she replied. "Thirty seconds to touchdown."

The EVTOL easily descended through the open entry port with plenty of room on all sides and was soon hovering just a hundred or so feet above the field. Malcolm thought it was one of the most surreal sights he'd ever seen. More than seventy thousand fans were jammed into every nook and cranny of the stadium. At one end there was a stage, where he could see a rock band playing. Then towards the centre of the football field was a larger, raised, rectangular platform, with bleachers filled with screaming fans at either end. In the middle of the platform, a circular podium with a lectern rose up. Despite the band playing, Malcolm could see that many fans—perhaps all of them—had their eyes fixed on the EVTOL and were standing, pointing, cheering, and bouncing up and down.

By the time Malcolm had taken all this in, the EVTOL was only about fifty feet above the field. Bigman and his similarly attired security team stood waiting. Even through his headset, Malcolm could hear the band and the noise of the frenzied crowd as the craft settled on the ground at about the thirty-yard line, not far from the large midfield stage where he would soon be standing.

Malcolm looked at the band at the far end of the field. He'd never seen them live. He still couldn't believe they were opening for him, but there they were. U2 brought their song "Beautiful Day" to an epic end.

Even with the hatch still closed, Malcolm could hear Bono's words echoing throughout the stadium.

"We're going to take a break, because the guest of honour has just dropped in! We'll be back to close the show, but in the meantime, ladies and

gentlemen, I give you Malcolm Forde!”

He pointed towards Malcolm just as Bigman appeared at the EVTOL door and opened it. He said nothing, but leaned in, released the safety harness, handed Malcolm two earbuds, and made sure he shoved them where you’d expect them to go.

“Okay, Malcolm,” a voice said in his ear. “Welcome to the MegaDome. Of course, it’s Micheline here, your director for one final show. I will guide you through all of this from start to finish, just as I did for the other shows.”

“Thank you, Micheline. This is freaky, but I’m okay and I’m in your hands.”

“All right, Bono was a bit early so we’re exiting the EVTOL in three, two, one…step out now.”

He followed orders. When he was on the field, he happened to glance upwards and watched as the black leaves of the roof entry port turned in on one another to close up the opening completely. Impressive. Then Micheline’s voice brought him back.

“Okay, now smile and wave—a full three-sixty, please, to get everyone. Now move briskly to the stage ramp dead ahead. Energy, Malcolm. Let’s try a trot, remember?”

“Right.”

Malcolm kept up his smiling and waving while trotting. He concentrated to keep from tripping. Such a pratfall would live online forever. He also tried very hard not to pass out.

“As you know, you’re soloing to start the program, as always. It’s sold out, so there are a little more than seventy thousand rabid fans here. Of course, your destination is the raised stage in the middle of the field, dead ahead,” Micheline said. “Okay, stop for a second and do another three-sixty, waving to the crowd. Your slides will appear as usual on all the Jumbotrons, as well as on the surface of your lectern. You’ll advance them with the remote clicker Bigman gave you when you landed.”

“Wait,” Malcolm said. “He didn’t give me the remote.”

“Check your left inside jacket pocket.”

Malcolm kept smiling and waving with his left hand while he checked his pocket with his right.

“Oh, okay, it’s here.”

“Good, then back to a trot until you reach the ramp, then you can walk up onto the stage, but keep waving. Smile and enjoy it.”

“Got it.”

“And when you make it up the ramp, walk around a bit so you can connect with all sections of the crowd. Don’t forget about the fans sitting behind you. They want a bit of face time, too, not just the view of your back. You know the drill. That’s good. You’re doing fine.”

Malcolm followed instructions well.

“Okay, now please spend a second or two engaging the ninety or so superfan promotion winners who are sitting in the small sets of bleachers at either end of the stage. Don’t get too close to them, but we do have two undercover security dudes seated among them at both ends. They all want a piece of you, but they’ve been told their butts have to stay planted to the seats or they’ll be wrestled offstage. Clear?”

“Um…”

“Malcolm! Clear?”

“Yes, got it. Sorry.”

He walked towards the seats at one end, trying not to exhibit the trepidation he felt. He stopped several paces in front of the superfans and waved specifically to them. He was surprised to see the older woman from his home library reading—the one who regularly attended his talks but always left early—sitting there and beaming at him. He noticed that under her arm, she again held his latest novel, sticky notes peeking from its pages, freeing up both her hands so she could alternately wave and applaud. He nodded to her, a perplexed look on his face. She seemed pleased and surprised that he recognized her.

He briefly stood in front of the superfans, waving and mouthing “Thank you for coming.” Shouting would have been useless against the stadium’s clamour. Then he crossed the stage to repeat the protocol before the second set of promotion winners. Through it all, the other seventy thousand fans

seated in the stadium were still hollering and clapping. The scene hovered somewhere between madness and mayhem, though in that moment, Malcolm had difficulty drawing the distinction.

“Cuing public address. Stand by,” said Micheline.

Malcolm had no idea what she meant, but he wasn’t in the dark for long.

A lovely, rich baritone voice echoed throughout the stadium and in his earbuds with crystal clarity.

“Ladies and gentlemen, MegaDome and Continental LitTours are pleased to welcome international multiplatinum bestseller, winner of countless awards, subject of a soon-to-be-released blockbuster documentary, one of the biggest writestars on the planet and among the most popular novelists of his generation…the writer Malcolm Forde!”

Like a prizefight ring announcer, the big voice held on to the “Forde” for so long that Malcolm worried the poor guy might faint.

The din was deafening and unsettling. In unison, seventy thousand crazed fans leapt from their seats and screamed their unbridled adulation. Malcolm stood in the spotlight, a writestar, paralyzed by the rapturous ovation.

“Malcolm. Malcolm!” Micheline shouted in his ear.

“Yes, sorry, I’m here.”

“Okay, good. Now head for the lectern. Maybe that will bring us some peace so you can begin.”

Malcolm stepped up onto the raised circular platform. The lectern stood ready for him, a glass of water and his latest novel resting on the flat surface.

“Your regular reading passage is marked.”

He kept waving to the crowd and eventually used his hands to call for calm so he could start.

“Okay, Malcolm, when you’re ready, you can welcome everyone and thank U2 for their amazing opening set. And remember, as soon as you start to speak, that little circular platform you’re standing on is going to start to rotate.”

“Wait, you mean like some kind of centrifuge?”

“Of course not, Malcolm. This isn’t astronaut training. Just like on the other tour stops, you’ll barely notice it. You’ll be turning no faster than one of those revolving restaurants on hotel rooftops. Remember? It rotates very, very slowly, so that all your fans in the stadium get some of your face over the course of the program.”

“Yes, of course,” he replied.

Just then his opening slide miraculously appeared on a screen built into the lectern itself. *Cool*, Malcolm thought.

“Okay, the crowd is finally settling, so if you’re ready, you’ve got forty-five minutes, just your regular talk. But remember to make yourself and your words a little bigger and more energized, in every sense. There’s quite a distance to bridge between you and the crowd. Okay, get out your remote for the slides, and your mic will go live in three, two, one…you’re on.”

“Good evening, MegaDome,” he said, somewhat tentatively.

Then he took a deep breath and decided to treat this just like any other author event.

“It sure is nice to be back home,” he said, sweeping his arms in front of him.

The crowd went berserk but calmed down shortly thereafter.

“Thank you all for coming out tonight in such huge numbers. I’m grateful.”

The crowd cheered again.

“U2,” Micheline said in his ears.

“And how about U2? Weren’t they fantastic? Thank you, guys, you are true rock stars.”

It shocked Malcolm when the crowd only clapped politely for U2. Then it dawned on him all over again that the audience was there to see him, not Bono.

He then clicked to his second slide and started giving his well-practised book talk—the same presentation he’d given at libraries, festivals, and book clubs countless times in his old life. Having spent months giving this particular presentation, he had honed his delivery and timing nearly to perfection. The talk was funny, informative, moving in places, and

entertaining. And the very colourful and image-rich slides he'd created supported his words beautifully. The capacity crowd loved it.

In the writer's life, being able to talk about the book was almost as important as writing it. It was central to the writer's success. Malcolm Forde had recognized this reality with his first novel and had always said yes when invited to speak about it. In the MegaDome, he took Micheline's advice and turned it up a notch or two, given the stadium's gargantuan scale. The frenzied audience lapped it up, interrupting him several times with spontaneous outbursts of cheering, chanting, and applause.

As planned, he closed with a reading. He used a line he'd delivered at almost every one of his readings, large and small.

"Why don't I read you the first half of the novel?"

The stadium cracked up in hysterics, then applauded, as if they would like nothing more than to listen to him read 170 pages.

"I'm kidding. I wouldn't put you through that."

More laughter.

"Okay," Micheline said in his ear. "Pause now and take a drink of water so I can brief you on what's coming up."

Malcolm lifted his water glass to his mouth and took a long draw on it, then turned to wave to different sections of the stadium while Micheline spoke in his ear.

"When your last slide goes up and you finish your reading, behind you a carpeted platform will rise from beneath the stage with two easy chairs and a small table in between," Micheline explained. "Stage techs will remove the lectern. Oh yeah, and that talk show host whose name I always forget—Julie? Julie Mathews—will already be sitting in one of the chairs. In case it's not clear, you should sit in the empty chair. An audio tech will fit your lav mic on the fly."

"Got it."

Malcolm opened his book and started rifling through the pages to give the impression he was searching for his spot. This allowed Micheline to finish her briefing.

“You’ll also be able to hear what’s-her-name in your earphone. The set will also rotate at the same slow speed as the lectern, so don’t be put off by it. You’ll have a forty-five-minute conversation with her. As agreed, she’ll stick to your writing process, the themes of the novel, and what you’re working on next. To reiterate, there’ll be no personal questions, nothing about Isla, nothing about getting older, et cetera. Then when I signal the last question in your ear, it means you give your answer, thank—um…Julie? Yes, Julie—for the stimulating conversation, and then stand up and express your heartfelt thanks to your fans as the ones who have made all of this possible. Blah, blah, blah.”

“Right.”

The crowd was still cheering his talk and anticipating his reading.

Malcolm read for only about five minutes. He’d chosen the passage carefully and thoughtfully, not just to introduce the main characters, but also to set the narrative tone and voice of the story. When he finished, he paused for a few seconds before speaking again.

“I think I’ll stop there so we can move into the next part of the program. Stand by, we’ll be right back.”

The crowd cheered wildly as the two chairs, one occupied by Julie Mathews, rose up from the stage. By the time Malcolm had sat down beside her and shook her hand, the lectern had disappeared and his lav mic was clipped to his lapel, with the battery pack stowed in his inside jacket pocket. He’d barely felt any of that happening. The stage tech had the skills of a Paris pickpocket, Malcolm thought.

Given that she was the lead host of one the nation’s top talk shows, it came as no surprise that Julie was a real pro. She skillfully guided their conversation and, true to form, stuck to the agreed-upon parameters. There were no curveballs. Malcolm warmed to the conversation and became even more animated in his responses. Their discussion allowed him to speak personally and thoughtfully about the writing life, and the crowd was hanging on his every word. The time flew quickly and easily.

“Last question, please, Julie,” Micheline said in their ears.

When Malcolm finished his final response, Julie turned to the crowd.

“Wasn’t Malcolm Forde just riveting?”

The crowd went nuts again, so Micheline jumped back in.

“Okay. Nice job, Julie. Malcolm, your last task is to thank Julie and the audience. And then invite U2 to start their closing set. Then it’s time to fly, literally. Bigman and four of his security team will escort you back down the ramp, across the field—don’t forget to wave to the crowd, and I mean a full three-hundred-sixty-degree wave—and back onto the EVTOL. Don’t dawdle—the crowd is least predictable just as you’re leaving. You should be up in the air and out of there before Bono kicks off their final set.”

Malcolm stood and gave Julie a hug, which he thought was a nice touch. Then he turned to face the crowd, his hand elevated like a TV evangelist.

“This is the last stop on the tour, and I wanted to end this odyssey here in my hometown. Thank you all for coming and for being such ardent supporters of literature and the written word, and of my work in particular. I am grateful beyond measure.”

“Malcolm,” Micheline cut in. “Turn a bit so the fans behind can see you.”

He rotated and waved, getting into the moment, gathering himself for the final push to the end.

“So, all that’s left for me to do now is to thank U2 for their incredible body of work and their performances tonight, and to thank my friend Julie Mathews for such a great conversation. And finally, to all of you, here in this intimate setting, you have my undying gratitude for your astonishing support. I write for you. And we’ll do it all again for the next book.”

The crowd lost their minds a final time.

“Okay, now U2, and then down the ramp with you,” Micheline prompted. “Go!”

“But stay in your seats, everyone,” Malcolm urged the crowd, “because U2 is about to hit the stage for their closing set. Thank you all, and we’ll see you again. Keep on reading!”

“Your mic is now off,” Micheline said in his ear. “An amazing finale, Malcolm. Go to Bigman now.”

As he turned towards the ramp and the open field beyond, his eyes fell on the familiar older woman who'd been seated in the onstage bleachers. She was standing and looking at him with a beatific smile on her face, still clutching his novel. Malcolm nodded, returned her smile, and headed for the field.

At the bottom of the ramp, Bigman took his arm, while another four similarly built security studs surrounded them as they hustled across the grass to the EVTOL. The police line around the perimeter of the field was not quite up to the task of containing the chaotic crowd. There were several breaks, and fans were soon sprinting across the field. But Bigman and Malcolm had a considerable head start. As soon as Malcolm was inside the craft, Bigman helped him strap in and remove his earbuds, lav mic, and battery pack, before swinging the gull-wing door closed. He banged the roof twice as Malcolm pulled on the headset. An instant later the electric motors revved up.

"Heads up, Mr. Forde. Ready or not, we're lifting off now, and I mean right now," the Scottish voice said in his ears. "Congratulations, Mr. Forde, you are officially done, and we are safe in the air."

"Thank you, Savannah."

As the EVTOL rose through the open exit port and above the MegaDome, Malcolm stared out the window, desperate to capture and keep forever the image of the illuminated, sold-out stadium below and the memory of the most extraordinary book talk he'd ever given. Now that it was over, Malcolm was surprised to find he was overcome with emotion. He had arrived in a world turned upside down. He shook his head and couldn't help concluding that he loved his new life. And really, what was there not to love?

The sun had long set, and Savannah ferried him the short distance back to his penthouse with only the lights of the city to illuminate their course. There were stars in the clear night sky. A few moments later, another star—a writestar—touched down. Home.

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Wonderwoman was waiting for him on the helipad as Savannah guided the EVTOL down for a soft landing on the rooftop.

“I certainly hope I have the chance to fly you again, Mr. Forde,” said the voice in his ears.

“As do I, Savannah,” he replied. “You’re very good at what you do. Thank you so much for everything.”

“Now, go and decompress. You’ve had quite a couple of months.”

By this time, Wonderwoman had opened the door and was unlatching his seat-belt harness. He started to slide out of his seat, but Wonderwoman stopped him with a hand to his shoulder. She pointed to his headset.

“Right, thank you,” he said, pulling it off and returning it to its hook.

They stood in the warm glass vestibule while the EVTOL lifted off and disappeared into the night sky.

Malcolm thanked Wonderwoman and sent her home. She insisted on a final sweep of the condo but left shortly thereafter. It was only 10:00 p.m., and he had nothing on his schedule until the call the next morning with his biographer. The realization that he actually had an official biographer made him shake his head and chuckle to himself. Then he took his second shower of the day. It lasted even longer than his first, stretching to nearly forty-five minutes. He just couldn’t seem to pull himself out of the all-encompassing hot water cascade.

He felt great when he finally emerged, refreshed and relaxed. He threw on sweatpants and a T-shirt from his walk-in closet and stretched out on the enormous sectional couch just off the library. He came down slowly from the extraordinary event at the MegaDome. He lay there and tried to make sense of it all. He resisted the temptation to scroll through YouTube in

search of clips of the show. He didn’t need to see videos. He’d been there, at the centre of it all. Instead, he just lay still, closed his eyes, and let the memory settle over him.

He was surprised at how easily and quickly he was adjusting to a completely different life. He kept waiting to be unceremoniously returned to his proper universe.

After an hour, he’d calmed down and felt a little more grounded, a little more like himself. The discipline of his writing life rose to the surface. So, he sat down behind his familiar, lustrous desk, opened his laptop, and returned to the new manuscript he’d been writing. He usually wrote into the night, and his instinct was to write then, as he normally would. He liked the story he’d come up with and took an hour to review what he’d written so far. He thought it held together, so he placed the cursor where he’d left off, ready to continue the story…but he couldn’t. His fingers were poised on the keyboard, but he just couldn’t start. He even knew what he wanted to write. He always knew what came next. But for some reason, the words had scattered. They weren’t there. Perhaps it was understandable, even to be expected, after his tumultuous day and incredible evening. But still, he was disquieted. After an hour of staring at the blinking cursor and the blank page beyond it, Malcolm closed his laptop and jotted down a single word on a notepad.

He’d been searching for a name for his new world, this parallel universe, where everything was upside down. Where U2 was an underpaid opening act and novelists were selling out stadiums. He needed a shorthand term he could use. He stared at the word he’d written on the notepad.

Unireverse.

A single word—albeit unwieldy, ungainly—that nevertheless perfectly captured the essence of his new world. Everything turned on its head. Still, he was anxious that the sole result of his writing session was a single, made-up word, clever and clunky or not.

Then he took the long walk to the primary bedroom and crawled into the biggest bed he’d ever seen. His bed. Just before he closed his eyes, he wondered how long his sojourn in this upside-down world would last.

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The next morning, he kept his eyes closed even after he was awake. Exhausted, he'd slept long and deep after his first big day in the unireverse. He knew where he was, eyes open or closed. He knew the scent of his old apartment across the street. Not a bad odour, but a clearly identifiable mélange of plaster, dust, and age. But his nose detected no *essence de plaster* in the air. So, he snuck a peek and felt relief wash over him. Malcolm was still in his penthouse, lolling in his gigantic bed between nine-hundred-thread-count sheets. His happiness caught him by surprise. Clearly, he was warming to his new world.

He hauled himself out of bed and into his walk-in closet. He considered *walk-in* to be a misnomer. The room was so expansive, *hike-in closet* was closer to the truth, or even *drive-in closet*. He'd always felt that words should accurately reflect what they were describing. He pulled on a burgundy patterned-silk robe that he thought was a little over-the-top. Then he sat down at his writing desk and opened his laptop to prepare for his call with his biographer, Eliza McCain. He started by searching his hard drive and emails for any documents including Eliza's name.

He did find a folder on his hard drive that held transcripts of his earlier conversations with Eliza. They had file names like *Childhood*, *Primary & Secondary School*, *University*, *Jobs*, *Novels*, *Awards*, and *Film/TV*, among others. There was also a file named *Isla*, created months earlier, but it was empty. He'd obviously been pushing that conversation off into the future.

He scanned the transcripts and was pleased to see that everything they had apparently discussed perfectly matched his own recollection of his life. That was a relief.

In general, the basic outline of his life—family, education, employment, and writing—was the same in the old world as it was in the new. But the insane popularity of his books in the unireverse and the awards he'd amassed were obviously quite different from his old life. Nevertheless, he felt reasonably comfortable when Eliza called at the appointed hour. They exchanged pleasantries for a few minutes before she moved the

conversation on to business. Even though in Malcolm's mind he had never met or spoken to Eliza, he tried to sound casual and familiar with her, given that in this world, they had already spent several hours conversing about his life.

"First of all," Eliza began, "just a reminder that I am recording our conversation, as I have all the others. I do this so that right now, while we're talking, I can listen to and think about what you're saying rather than feverishly taking notes."

"Understood," he replied.

"Can I just start by asking when you believe you began that transition from a relatively unknown writer with few readers to what you are now, a bona fide international writestar, read by millions around the world?"

This was precisely the kind of question Malcolm had feared might come up. He had a general answer based on winning the Prix d'Or when he was thirty, followed later by the Booker, but had no idea if there were other factors in play. He paused for a few seconds to regroup.

"An interesting question," he said, stalling. "Um, I know how *I* view the transition—as you put it—but I'm always fascinated by how others see it. You must be drawing your own conclusions as you research and write this book. What do you think? Perhaps we're on the same page."

"Well, I think it started with your first big break thirty years ago, when, as a young writer, you won the Prix d'Or de la Fiction Littéraire in Paris. At the time, you were still only known in this country. It was considered then to be the top international fiction prize—and I'd say it still is today—so it almost instantly broadened your readership to no less than the entire world," she said. "And the novel flew off the shelves for the next several years."

Malcolm had the sense that she wasn't quite finished. So he stayed silent.

"But I think you really took off when you followed that up by winning the Booker—not to mention multiple other prizes—two years later for the follow-up novel. I'd say that's when the die was cast for who you have now become. And what kept you there was the fact that you never slowed down.

You never took a breather to enjoy the success. You just kept on churning out great novels."

"Well, that doesn't happen very often," he replied.

"What?"

"Lots of people bring up the Prix d'Or, but few ever link it to the Booker, at least until now," Malcolm said. "Like you, I've always thought it was that double whammy that gave me the international profile and literary momentum that changed my life as a writer. Great insight. Well done."

"Thank you, Malcolm," she replied, sounding chuffed. "All right, I'd like to spend a few minutes talking about how you feel about writing. I know it's a nebulous topic, but I think the reader deserves to know what the writing life means to you, and perhaps what you've learned along the way. And I haven't yet got a true sense of that."

Malcolm relaxed at her question. He'd thought long and hard, over many years, about his relationship with writing. This was familiar turf for him. He'd fielded a similar question at his home library just two nights before. Malcolm shook his head at what seemed a distant memory.

"I like to think I've learned a few things," Malcolm said. "I've learned that nothing brings me more happiness than stringing words together to tell a story no one else has ever told in quite the same way. I've learned that well-crafted stories can actually affect readers' lives, sometimes even change them. I've learned that I've never been better at anything else, nor will I likely ever be better at anything else, than I am at finding, shaping, writing, editing, and then promoting my novels. Being a writer encompasses all of these stages. I'm very lucky in that I think I'm built for almost all elements in the writing life—and not particularly well-suited for anything else. So, as you might expect, writing is important to me."

"So, it sounds like you think of it as a calling, rather than a job?"

"Yes, I think writing is a calling," Malcolm replied. "While one can earn a very good living writing novels in this world, even if you never hit the bestsellers list, I still don't think most of us in the scribe tribe write for the money. We write because we're writers, which is another way of saying I'm not sure what else I'd be qualified to do if I couldn't write."

“Do you love writing, or do you just love being a writer?”

“Some might understand the distinction, but I do not. But since you phrased it that way, I love both. I love being by myself and working hard on my story for hours, days, weeks, and months on end. I love creating believable characters and giving readers a stake in their journey. I love finding just the right words and sentences to capture and convey the story in a way that grabs you and then stubbornly refuses to let you go. I love working with my editors to make what I’ve conceived and written even better. And when the book is out, I actually love meeting readers and talking about the novel. I know I may not be in the majority of writers on that last point, but it’s certainly how I feel.”

“Are you relieved when a novel is finished?”

“Well, if I’m still pleased with the story and how I’ve told it, I freely admit that while I very much enjoy writing, there is a different kind of pleasure in *having written*. It means I can focus my questionable cerebral powers on my next story. And there’s always a next story.”

“Without public investment in the arts, and in writers in particular, by various levels of government, would you be the writer you are today?” Eliza asked.

Malcolm smiled to himself. Sure, he was still learning about how the government supported writers—including those debut reading theatres at libraries he’d learned about—but he certainly knew what the writer’s life was like without much government support.

“I have no doubt I’d still be a writer with or without governmental assistance. But it’s also clear that our public institutions have invested in a literate society and in literary infrastructure, and this has helped create a climate that encourages readers and writers alike. I will always be grateful for that. I suppose without government and public support, I wouldn’t be living where I’m living, or driving what I’m driving, or earning what I’m earning. But I’m certain I’d still be writing what I’m writing.”

“Anything else you want to share on the writing life—on *your* writing life?” Eliza probed.

“Just that I really feel in my bones that I’m doing what I’m supposed to be doing. And that even if writers were somehow no longer revered and respected and rewarded as we are today in this world, even if we were relegated to the bottom of the heap, struggling to makes ends meet, I’m quite sure I’d still be writing, and so would most of the other writers I know.”

Malcolm paused to gather his concluding thoughts.

“Okay, here’s another way to put it,” he said. “I’ve just completed what I think would be considered by any fair-minded observer to be a very successful global tour. I can still barely believe that it actually happened. But do you know what I treasure most from the experience? And I seriously mean this. Even though, given my plush circumstances, this might seem very easy for me to say, it’s neither hubris nor hyperbole. I truly believe this.”

“Okay, yes, and…” she prompted.

“What I treasure most is certainly not words like ‘international platinum bestseller,’ ‘award-winning novelist,’ and ‘writestar’—in fact, those terms often make me feel a little queasy and uncomfortable. Rather, it’s that moment at the beginning of each tour event when I’m being introduced. Eventually, they get around to saying that I’m a writer—that I’m somehow a member of this ancient guild of artists called writers. That’s what hits me the hardest—that I have the privilege, the honour, of being introduced each night as a writer—that one, single, simple, powerful word. It still fills me up with satisfaction, pride, happiness, and gratitude, and still sends a thrill through me like a jolt of electricity. And that feeling was the same when I was doing library talks on my first novel to a handful of readers as it was last night when I was introduced at the MegaDome. That’s how I know I’m doing what I’m meant to be doing.”

The silence on the phone stretched.

“Sorry, Eliza. I hope you’re still there and conscious,” he said. “I can prattle on, I know.”

“Not at all, Malcolm. You were on a roll there, and I just didn’t want to step in if you weren’t quite finished,” she replied. “But that was really

helpful, and just what I needed. I can work with that."

They talked for another half hour, about other aspects of his career and the progress she'd made on the biography. As the conversation was wrapping up, Eliza raised one last topic.

"Malcolm, I know this is sensitive, but in a few weeks I'd like to schedule a call, or a meeting if you'd prefer, to talk about Isla. She was such an important part of your life as a writer, a husband, and a person. No biography would be complete without giving her pride of place in your story. And I desperately want to get that part right."

"I fully understand," Malcolm replied. "I just would like some time to prepare for that meeting."

"Of course, that makes sense," she said. "But just before I let you go, can you give me a quick view of Isla from sixty thousand feet, and what she means to you? Big picture only. It would really help me map out my approach to our future conversation."

Malcolm paused and took a few deep breaths.

"Here's the very abbreviated version of our story. We met at university in our early twenties. We'd both already fallen in love with literature. Then we fell in love with each other. Inseparable through our undergraduate and master's degrees. I like to think we were full and equal partners in our relationship," Malcolm said. "She finished her Ph.D. at Metropolitan University here in the city and landed a full professorship there. We married then, and I started writing novels while she began her teaching. She supported my writing unequivocally, unreservedly, and unceasingly. All right, warning, cliché ahead. She was absolutely the love of my life, in every sense of the term."

He paused to corral the lump that had formed in his throat, before stepping back in.

"To this day, I—perhaps I alone—sense her presence in the few novels I wrote before she passed, the earliest of which were not read by many. My only wish that was never granted in our all-too-brief relationship was that I predecease her, just to avoid the grief that has hollowed me out in the thirty years since she died," he continued. "That year was wonderful but then

tragic. I won the prize that charted my course for the literary life I have today, but I lost the person I loved the most. It was a period of devastating emotional whiplash. In a way, I had to learn how to write all over again, without her. But writing novels in the empty space she left behind has been important therapy for me. Every one of my books since, I have written for her, including the novel that won the Booker two years after her death. But my full recovery seems elusive, if not impossible. Even though she's now been gone much longer than we were together, I'm still not sure I'll ever be able to lift myself out of her loss. That it was so sudden, and so improbable, nearly crushed me. Now, all these years later, I'm just trying to accommodate it somehow, to coexist with it in a kind of uneasy truce. But we'll see."

He could hear Eliza breathing on the phone. When she spoke, it was almost in a whisper.

"Thank you, Malcolm. It feels like we both owe it to Isla to capture the truth of her role in your writing and your life. You've given me what I need to get started. Thank you. And not to be presumptuous, but perhaps it's what you needed, too, before we talk again."

"You may well be right," he conceded. "I guess we're going to find out."

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At 10:25 a.m. Wonderwoman arrived back at the penthouse, right on time to welcome the camera crew from *The Word*, the most popular of the many book shows on television and the streaming platforms. Manjusha had briefed Malcolm and felt confident that he could do it without having her there or rehearsing beforehand. *The Word* was an hour-long prime-time show all about books, literature, publishers, and writers. Because Malcolm's popularity essentially left him incarcerated in his luxury suite high above the city, the producer had agreed to shoot his segment at the condo. It was easier and safer for Malcolm—not to mention more convenient—than running the gauntlet of the paparazzi and ardent fans camped outside.

Manjusha had told Malcolm that the theme of that week's show was the myth of the tortured artist and how it manifested in the lives of writers.

"I know you have a well-developed view on this topic, so I'm quite sure you're going to be just fine fielding Maggie's softball questions," Manjusha had said. "She loves you, and every time you've been on her show, you've hit it out of the park. Anyway, we have final say over the clips they use, so we're all good. Oh, and your clothes for the shoot are hanging in your walk-in closet, just inside the door. One of your standard writerly ensembles."

When the camera crew arrived, Wonderwoman escorted the three young men and their equipment to the library area. They scanned the room, taking in the position of the windows and the sun above, which was shrouded in clouds. They briefly conferred before one of them descended in the elevator. Fifteen minutes later he was back, pulling a dolly with two plush white easy chairs stacked on it.

While this was going on, Malcolm changed into the nice jeans, the light-blue button-down Oxford shirt, and the tweedy, but not too tweedy, blue sports jacket that he found all hung together as Manjusha had promised. A brown leather belt, funky blue patterned socks—they'd be visible in the shot—and the casual high-cut shoes he'd worn for the MegaDome gig completed the ensemble. Malcolm had no idea how the clothes had come to be chosen and hung together in his closet. Had Manjusha been in to pull it together? Wonderwoman? Bigman? Malcolm wisely decided it didn't matter and that perhaps he didn't need or want to know.

Decked out in full authorial regalia, he then loitered in his kitchen and reviewed in his mind what he might say on the tortured-artist topic. While it was true that he'd always been skeptical of the myth and had often challenged it when pushed, he sometimes found that when the klieg lights were powered up, he wasn't as articulate as he hoped to be. But he was feeling good that morning, even as he continued to wrestle with the question of where he actually was and how he'd arrived there. Wonderwoman paced between the library space, where the technical set-up was nearly finished, and the kitchen, where she kept one eye on Malcolm.

Maggie Hart arrived at eleven with a makeup artist in tow. She greeted Malcolm like a long-lost friend, going in for a long and close hug.

“Malcolm Forde, the writestar, relaxing at home!” she burbled. “So good to see you again.”

“Welcome, Maggie, it’s great to have you here,” Malcolm replied. “Sorry about dragging you out of the studio, but apparently the logistics of getting me there in one piece made my security team blanch.”

“No problem at all. We certainly don’t want Bigman blanching. We’re happy to bring the mountain to Mohammed.”

Malcolm quickly discovered that the makeup artist was for him. Maggie was always cosmetically prepared for prime time. After a few minutes in the chair, Malcolm was also declared ready for his close-up. In his bathroom mirror, he thought he looked like a wax figure at Madame Tussauds. But ten minutes later, under the lights, he looked like internationally bestselling lit celeb Malcolm Forde.

“I’ll shoot the intro and outro back in the studio, so we can just move right into our topic.”

“Ready when you are.”

“Malcolm Forde, welcome back to the show, and thanks for making time for us so soon after the tour,” she opened.

“Always pleased to see you, Maggie.”

“We’re talking this week about an aspect of the writing life that has persisted for generations and is still with us today. I’m talking about the myth of the tortured artist. The idea that artists in general, and writers in particular, are often miserable and discouraged seems as old as writing itself.”

Even though there was no question, Maggie stopped talking.

“Well, yes, it’s a stubborn notion that has dogged us for a long time. ’Twas ever thus. But it’s called a myth for a reason. I think the reality is far different, or at least it could be if writers wanted it to be. I’m certainly not miserable. It would be downright hypocritical for me to complain about my lot in life given what writing has granted me.”

“You think writers are propping up the idea that a life in letters is a miserable existence and deleterious to their health?”

“Perhaps, but not necessarily knowingly,” Malcolm replied. “The image of the tortured writer is now so well-established in our culture that I fear some writers don’t feel legitimate, or part of the writerly community, unless or until they are sad and unhappy when writing.”

Maggie just nodded, apparently in thought. So Malcolm barrelled ahead.

“And writers are as guilty of promulgating the idea as anyone. There are hundreds of colourful quotations from famous writers talking about how difficult writing is, and how miserable it makes them, and how bad it is for their mental and physical health. If Hemingway and Flannery O’Connor, Joyce and Orwell and Thomas Mann, E.B. White, and even Dorothy Parker all talk about how painful writing is in rather graphic and vivid terms, surely it’s not surprising that aspiring writers believe it and take it to heart. And it doesn’t help when you can walk into almost any liquor store and find a brand of Irish whiskey with the name Writers’ Tears. I have a bottle around here somewhere myself.”

“So, you don’t buy the myth? You don’t find writing hard?” she asked.

“Oh, writing is difficult, all right. There’s no question it’s hard. But that doesn’t mean it’s misery and torture. It just means that it’s not easy. Well, to invoke the cliché, few things worth doing are easy. But, then again, whatever makes it so hard also makes it so satisfying when you succeed.”

“So, you think writers are just pretending they’re miserable just so they’re more likely to be welcomed into the writerly fold. So they can join the club?”

“No, not really,” he said. “I think many writers do struggle with their art, but because they believe it simply comes with being a writer, they don’t question it or try to alleviate it. They even embrace it as part of the job. But I believe that in many cases, we writers are wrong to accept the pain. Not all of us need to be miserable.”

“Expand on that a little if you would? What’s the answer?”

“I may be wrong, but I think many of the writers who are suffering for their art may not have figured out yet how they, as individuals, are supposed to write. They have perhaps stumbled into a process that makes writing difficult, even painful, for them. But they’ve bought into the tortured-artist myth and believe that pain is the natural, inevitable price of writing. So, they just endure it as a cross writers must bear. And I don’t think it has to be that way.”

“So, what’s the solution? What’s your prescription for happier writing?”

“Well, to start, writers should not accept that pain and misery are guaranteed and unavoidable. Misery when writing is not a certainty. It’s not death and taxes. I’ve come to believe that our first responsibility as writers is to figure out how each of us writes best. If we all take the time to experiment and work at it, writers can discover what writing process works best for them. Do they develop a detailed outline? Do they just lean on some character sketches and a timeline? Do they simply start with a vague idea and write their way through the story until it emerges from the mists? There is an infinite number of ways one can write. If each writer puts in the work to figure out how they write best, I think the pain in the process will at least dissipate, perhaps even disappear.”

“So, the key to a happier and more harmonious writing life is making sure you’re writing the way you’re supposed to be writing? The way you write best?”

“That’s what I’ve always believed,” Malcolm replied. “And the easiest way to do that is to experiment and try different writing techniques and processes until the pain and misery recede.”

“But how can a writer really know what works best for them? Surely there’s more to it than waiting until writing stops hurting.”

“I think writers will know in their heart and in their head when they’ve found their writing groove—what process works best for them. If they make the effort to find out, they’ll know when they reach the promised land.”

“Will it work for every writer?”

“I guess no one really knows. I’m no expert. I’m just drawing on my own experience and thinking,” he said. “I suspect that we’ll always have some writers who cling to the belief that they aren’t fully fledged artists unless they’re wallowing in misery. But for many, there’s already enough misery in confronting daily life, without adding the burden of what is aptly called the *myth* of the tortured artist.”

“Fascinating. Thank you,” Maggie said. “That seems like a good juncture for us to shift gears and talk about the tour you’ve just finished. Industry insiders estimate that you cleared twenty-five million dollars.”

“Well, the tour just ended last night, so we don’t know the final numbers, and I’m not sure when we will. But I think it’s fair to say the tour was a success. We sold out stadiums in every city we visited, so I’m grateful to the hundreds of thousands of people who collectively came out to the shows. It was really fun for me to get to see and meet so many readers.”

“Do you have any new films or streaming series in the works?”

“Oh, well, I’m a little out of the loop on that front because of the tour, but yes, my agent tells me we’re currently in discussions with a few large studios about my last novel, and we’re cautiously optimistic that it will someday make its way to a screen near you. But it’s always a roll of the dice.”

“Something for us all to look forward to,” Maggie gushed. “I read somewhere that you have a menswear line soon to be launched at Fashion Week in Paris.”

Malcolm had no idea what she was talking about. On the other hand, it sounded utterly plausible, given everything else that was going on in his writerly life. He hoped he hadn’t been reduced to a deer in the headlights.

“Well, that sounds like a very cool idea, Maggie, although I don’t consider myself to be much of a fashion mogul. But I’m afraid I’m just not in a position to share any news about that rumour just yet. But if it has any merit, you’ll be the first to know.”

“Just before you give us a tour of your lovely home here, how does it feel to be heading to Los Angeles soon to walk the red carpet for the

premiere of *Writestar: The Life of Malcolm Forde*? That must be very exciting."

"Well, for me, it's just as surreal as it is exciting," Malcolm said. "I'm honoured, and a little perplexed, that a very talented documentarian thought my life might be worthy of cinematic scrutiny. I'm not convinced myself. But apparently, it's happening. I imagine I might feel a little uncomfortable at times sitting in the theatre and watching my own story unfold on the screen, particularly when I hope I still have many years to play out before the credits roll on my real life. But I don't think they'll let me leave the theatre early."

"Malcolm Forde, what a life you lead!"

"It's certainly not the life I expected when I decided to be a writer. And yes, I guess I am enjoying my so-called literary life, but for me, it all begins and ends with the writing. And speaking of that, Maggie, you haven't asked me if I have another book on the go, and of course, I do. Because if you're a writer, that's what it's all about—the solitary endeavour of bringing a story to life by assembling the right words in the right order to hold a reader's attention and perhaps, if we're lucky or good, even delight them, or surprise them, or move them in some way."

He paused, his call with Eliza still fresh in his mind.

"You know, I remember…um, I mean, I imagine, that even if writers were not as popular and successful as they are in this world, real writers would still write. Decades ago, before writers enjoyed the status we now seem to, at least we had more room in our lives to write. Sometimes I think that today's frenetic touring, the intense media interest, the heavy demands on our time, and even the luxury lifestyle many writers now enjoy may actually cost us dearly in other ways. They rob us of the time, the space, and the peace we need to create and to write. In fact, I'm beginning to worry that they might weaken the art of writing in the long run."

He hadn't intended on going there, but he was annoyed. This was the number one book show on the airwaves, and she hadn't once asked him about his writing, his next book, his own writing process, his approach to character development or plot. No, she probed on film adaptations, the tour

earnings, a rumoured fashion line, and the upcoming Hollywood documentary. Beyond discussing the tortured-artist cliché at the beginning, she hadn't asked him about anything that veered anywhere close to *writerly*.

"Sorry about that," Malcolm said, as the technician relieved him of his mic and battery pack. "I clearly had a churlish moment there at the end."

"Not to worry, it was my fault. I should have asked about your work-in-progress, but we were pushing up against the time limit for that segment," Maggie said. "You sounded perfectly fine, and you made a good point. I'm sure they'll keep it in the final edit."

"Well, only if Manjusha doesn't cut it," he said.

"Fair point."

They shot another fifteen minutes of Malcolm bantering with Maggie as he guided her through his sprawling suite. To compensate for his less-than-gracious response at the end of the interview, Malcolm tried to be particularly charming and witty on the condo tour.

Maggie left a few minutes after the shoot ended, following a lingering hug. But it was another twenty-five minutes before the crew finally vacated the premises with all their equipment and furniture. Wonderwoman then swept the suite one more time before leaving Malcolm on his own. She promised to return in an hour or so to drive him to his 2:00 p.m. meeting.

Alone again, Malcolm sat back down at his writing desk with the best of intentions. He was going to knuckle down and pick up where he'd left off in the manuscript. And he tried. He really did. Over the course of the next hour —the only spare time he had left that day—he did crack his knuckles several times, but there was no knuckling down. There was no writing. There was wringing of hands and gnashing of teeth. But no writing.

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5

“Let me begin by welcoming our guest of honour, Malcolm Forde,” opened Emily Ellis. “Thanks for joining us, Malcolm, and congrats on putting a brilliant bow on your latest global tour with a final stellar performance last night. Serving as your editor feels like my life’s work, and I hope it lasts that long.”

“Ahhh, thanks, Emily. Always nice to get together with you and the rest of what you always call my ‘publishing team,’ ” he replied.

They were meeting downtown, in the executive offices of his North American publisher. They were in a beautiful old stone bank building erected in 1900. Only the publishers and senior editors of the company’s various imprints earned spacious offices in the old bank, while most of the other employees worked out of the ten-storey glass box that sat right next door.

Malcolm had arrived at 2:00 p.m. sharp, to meet first with Manjusha and Emily. They screened sample TV spots to sustain reader interest in his latest novel, now that media stories about the tour had slowed to a trickle and would eventually stop. He couldn’t believe how compelling and cinematic the ads were. He loved them, even though they seemed better suited for promoting a film than a book. But there was his novel, centre-screen, in all its glory, as each commercial faded to black.

After approving the TV spots, the three of them moved to the large boardroom down the corridor for the meeting with the broader team. There was quite a crowd seated around the vast wooden table. Malcolm sat down at one end, with Manjusha to his right. Emily Ellis stood to his left, running the show, while Wonderwoman stood just outside the closed door, ever vigilant. He recognized only a few of the other people strung along the

table’s perimeter. In his previous life, his publishing team had consisted primarily of Emily, along with the periodic support of a publicist and a marketing specialist around launch time.

“Malcolm, we have your entire publicity department along this side of the table, and your sales and marketing team along the other. And right here next to me are Monica and Dan, two of my editorial staff, whose fingerprints can often be found on the edits I send to you. Finally, those three talented young’uns seated next to Manjusha manage your website and all your social channels.”

Malcolm nodded to them all in turn, smiling up a storm. There were a half dozen other young people seated in chairs away from the table, pressed up against the boardroom wall. Emily had not introduced them, and Malcolm had no idea who they were. But they looked nervous. With so many people packed into the room, Malcolm was feeling a little warm. He wasn’t uncomfortable but could sense he might soon be if the meeting dragged on for too long and the temperature kept rising.

“All right, let’s get started,” Emily said. “Malcolm, we do have quite a bit of ground to cover this afternoon. We’re going to kick things off with the results of a major quantitative study of your readers and the broader public to help us—rather, to help you—generate the right ideas for your next few novels. We can brainstorm a bit after the numbers are presented. Then we’ll get updates from publicity, then social media, and after that we’ll close out the business side of our meeting with a full sales and marketing report. Finally, we have a bit of a celebratory reception in the boardroom next door to wind down our Malcolm Forde afternoon.”

Emily looked at Malcolm.

“Um, that all sounds great to me,” he said, even as alarm bells rang in his head. “Thanks for all the work you’ve put into this. Yes, ahh, I can hardly wait.”

With that, Emily stuck her head out the door and beckoned in a young, well-dressed woman already holding a remote control in her hand.

She shook Malcolm’s hand before assuming her position at the other end of the room, a laptop on the table facing her. Someone, somewhere,

pushed a button that lowered a screen just behind her.

“Nice to see you again, Mr. Forde,” she said. “Just to refresh your memory, I’m Ariana Chassé, co-founder of Chassé Bertram, your market research house.”

Malcolm was unaware that he had a market research house but nodded as if he’d always known.

“We’ve just come out of the field with a major global study with two principal cohort samples. First, gen pop—sorry, general population—across the continents where your books are available, and second, avid Malcolm Forde readers. Comparing the results through these two lenses illuminates some insights that will help ensure your future novels will continue to be runaway bestsellers.”

Malcolm nodded, but the involuntary furrow that ran across his forehead betrayed his discomfort with what he was hearing. He was not a packaged goods company planning its next four quarters of sales and the following year’s new product lines. He was a writer. Just a writer. But he didn’t react, other than the aforementioned forehead furrow. After all, this unireverse was a whole new world. So, when in Rome…hold your tongue…at least for a while.

Ariana angled her remote upwards to turn on the projector suspended from the ceiling. Immediately, Malcolm could feel the warm air currents from the projector’s fan and worried again about the temperature in the boardroom.

Ariana spent the next forty minutes guiding Malcolm and his publishing team through an exhaustive presentation of the survey results. For Malcolm it was more exhausting than exhaustive. Some slides offered high-level views, while others took the room down into the weeds for microscopic examinations of thinly sliced demographic subsets. Malcolm’s last three books were the central focus of the research, so most of the survey questions were about them.

By the time the presentation was winding down, the projector’s fan was spewing hot air directly at Malcolm. He really wanted to take off his jacket, but his shirt was already wet with sweat. So he suffered in silence,

reviewing in his mind what he knew about heat prostration and its warning signs.

Finally, when Malcolm was close to losing consciousness, Ariana had the good sense to summarize her findings in a few pithy sentences. If she'd opened with those, Malcolm thought, the slide deck—not to mention the overheated projector—may not have been necessary.

"So, there are a few takeaways from the study," she began. "One, your core audience continues to be older women, but your last book made considerable inroads in the middle-aged-men demo. Two, both the gen pop audience and your dedicated readers seem to prefer your books when they are set in North America or the U.K., when they feature only one or two principal characters as opposed to an ensemble cast, and when they are no longer than ninety-one thousand words. And three, your fans would rather you keep sex offstage, as you usually do. But the gen pop audience—in essence, the broader public—would like a little more sex on the page. Oh, and red covers seem to pull the strongest across the board.

"So, the bottom line is," Ariana said, summing up a second time, "the research tells us that to maintain your existing fan base while maximizing the capture of new readers, your next novel ought to be set somewhere in North America or the U.K., with only one or two major players, run no longer than ninety-one thousand words with most of the sex offstage, as usual, but with at least some adult content in the prose to break through to new readers."

All eyes were on Malcolm as Ariana finally stopped talking.

"Presumably with a red cover," he said, unable to resist.

"Right!" Ariana replied. "Yes, red cover."

By this stage, Malcolm was hot and seething but doing his best to project at least an appearance of equanimity. He could feel perspiration trickling down the back of his neck.

"Um, thank you, Ariana," he started. "That was quite a presentation, packed full of interesting information. I'm just wondering how much this wide-ranging research project cost—I mean, in case we want to turn it into a tracking study and repeat it next year?"

He had no idea where that had come from, but he was genuinely curious about the price tag.

“It cost just north of two hundred fifty thousand dollars, but going forward, now that the database is already set up, there would be a modest cost savings. Excellent idea to track it over time.”

“Thank you. Um, rather than launching into a formal brainstorming session where, I gather, we’d use this data to generate plot lines for my future novels, I think I’d like a bit of time to digest what Ariana has presented,” said Malcolm. “I have a few ideas for new novels orbiting in the old cranium that I’m not quite ready to share yet. But I will certainly bear these important insights in mind.”

At that moment, it was helpful that Malcolm was not hooked up to a lie detector. Ever alert, Emily picked up his cue.

“Excellent, Ariana, very interesting. Thank you so much. I’ll hand out your leave-behinds at the end. We’ll let you get back to your day.”

Malcolm thought Ariana looked a little disappointed. But she bowed slightly and took her leave.

“Perhaps we might leave the boardroom door open for a while,” Malcolm suggested. “It’s a tad warm in here.”

Nearly everyone around the table nodded with a vigour that threatened whiplash.

“All right, let’s carry on and hear from publicity,” proposed Emily. “Ian?”

Ian, another young person Malcolm had presumably met but didn’t recognize, rose to his feet.

He spent twenty minutes updating Malcolm and the group on the earned media coverage the tour had generated, including major pieces in all the top newspapers, magazines, broadcast outlets, and online, in each of the tour cities.

“We also undertook some measurement research and were able to draw a very clear and direct line from those great print, broadcast, and online stories to increased tour ticket sales immediately thereafter. So, we can say with certainty that the media coverage was not just raising the profile of Mr.

Forde and his current novel but driving increased attendance at the tour events as well. A win-win."

While Ian was talking, he was projecting examples of the earned media coverage onto the screen. Several of the print stories were front-pagers. Outstanding results, any way you sliced it.

"That's fantastic, Ian," Malcolm said, genuinely impressed. "I know those stories don't just happen on their own. They take a lot of work to develop the angles and approaches and then to work the phones to pitch them. I just hope I didn't mess up too many of the interviews you scored for me."

Everyone laughed.

"Thank you again for all your efforts," he reiterated. "It's clearly been a great success."

"Mr. Forde, just before we leave publicity," said Ian. "Can you tell us how your interview with Maggie Hart and *The Word* went this morning?"

"Right! That was another great hit. Congrats to you and your team for landing it," Malcolm said. "I thought it went very well, although I was a little surprised at how few questions she posed about books and writing. Most of the time she was asking me about things that were book-adjacent at best. Like movie adaptations, the tour, the upcoming documentary, and the nice view from my condo terrace."

"Yes, we've seen that trend over the last couple of years," said Ian. "Maggie explained to me that their own research is telling them their audience stays with the show longer if they hit those broader—as you say, book-adjacent—themes."

"Well, I guess we should be grateful that the word 'book' is still found in 'book-adjacent.' "

The social media team's presentation followed a similar trajectory. In the process, Malcolm learned that his publisher employed three full-time communications coordinators to manage Malcolm's arsenal of social media channels. He recognized the big ones like Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, and Goodreads, but drew a blank on several others, including Bookish, the most popular book-specific social platform. Malcolm was running out of mental

bandwidth as numbers and charts and graphs flitted across the screen at a dizzying pace. But he did his best to keep up.

After social media, there was one agenda item left. The last hour of the meeting was devoted to a comprehensive overview of Forde book sales in each country and the forecasts for the coming year. Malcolm's readership in almost every nation was on the rise, with a commensurate uptick in book sales. The figures Malcolm heard—albeit in his unireverse—were staggering relative to his sales in his old world. It was no wonder he could afford fancy cars and a penthouse suite. Needless to say, with the success of the tour, the sales presentation was a very happy occasion.

"Thank you, sales team, for a top-notch report, chock full of big numbers," Emily said. "Just before we move next door to celebrate, without the aid of a PowerPoint, I hasten to add, I realize I've been remiss in not yet introducing the six new team members seated along the wall."

None of them had said a word all afternoon, but Malcolm thought they still looked uncomfortable.

"Malcolm, let me introduce you to your house writers," Emily said. "They are young wordsmiths, trained in your writing voice and style, and also steeped in the latest AI algorithms that have been fed a constant diet of your own novels."

At first, Malcolm lost some of the colour in his face, but then immediately got it back when his cheeks flushed red. Unfortunately, Emily had noticed neither.

"They are your support writers and, aided by AI, can help write your novels, under your supervision of course, to free up your time for more important initiatives."

"More important than writing? Like what?" he asked, again, unable to stop himself.

"Well, say, more global tours like the one you've just so successfully concluded, and key prime-time network interviews," Emily replied, looking down at her feet. "Or film adaptations…maybe…"

"And are you actually proposing the next Malcolm Forde novel—*my* next novel—be written partly by this undoubtedly talented team of young

writers, with a little or a lot of AI assistance?”

“Malcolm?” Manjusha said under her breath.

“Will I get to choose what the novel is about, or will that decision be made in a big meeting after a research-driven brainstorming session?”

“Malcolm?” Manjusha said, a little louder this time.

“Will it be my name on the novel, or will it say ‘Malcolm Forde, Supported by His House Writers and Artificial Intelligence’?”

“MALCOLM!” Manjusha snapped.

He turned towards her.

“Yes?”

“Please. We’ve talked about this. All the major houses are moving in this direction. We have to explore it, or we’ll be left behind,” Manjusha explained patiently.

“I have no memory of discussing this, but I admit to feeling like I’ve been living in a different world lately,” he said. He took a deep breath. “Okay, I’m calmer now. But I must say, I’m troubled at the turn my writing life seems to be taking. A novel is art. It’s not a car on an assembly line, where any old shift worker can tighten that nut and install that side mirror. We’re talking about art.”

He stopped and looked at his six young house writers.

“Sorry. Look, I’m sure you’re all fine writers. And perhaps you really have captured my writing voice. But I’m just not comfortable with any of this. And I’m not sure I ever will be. Maybe you can collectively ghostwrite the next celebrity memoir that comes to this venerable publisher, because I’m afraid I’ll be the one writing my own novels.”

Emily, who looked a little stricken, finally found her voice.

“I’m sorry, Malcolm, you were on board the last time we talked about this. But let’s table the idea to a future meeting for more discussion.”

“Let’s not,” Malcolm heard himself say. “I’m really sorry if I left you with a different impression when we last discussed this. I didn’t mean to. Maybe I wasn’t actually myself at that meeting. But as long as there are Malcolm Forde novels sitting on bookstore shelves, I alone will be writing

them, and I alone will be the one deciding what they're about, and how many characters they will have, and where they are bloody well set."

He paused to take a breath.

"And then you, dear Emily, as my editor, publisher, and close friend, can decide, in your literary wisdom, if you wish to publish them, and if you would like the cover to be red."

In the sudden chill of that very warm room, the meeting was abruptly adjourned. Malcolm felt terrible as he watched the six young house writers, *his* house writers, sprint out of the room. He hadn't meant to sound that harsh.

—

There were enough canapés to feed a hungry weightlifting team. But Emily, Manjusha, and Malcolm were the only ones to attend the reception in the boardroom next door.

"I'm so sorry, Emily, I know I lost myself in there for a few minutes," Malcolm said. "I just felt blindsided. We've known each other a long time. How did you think I would react to the idea of starting a Malcolm Forde novel factory so we can churn out more books, faster?"

"Well, your reaction today was what I expected to hear from you when we first very delicately broached this subject two months ago. But you were surprisingly open-minded at the time. Remember, Manjusha?"

"We were both shocked that you even entertained a discussion about it, let alone actually considered the idea," Manjusha said. "I mean, you didn't exactly run to embrace it as a done deal, but it sure sounded like you wanted to pursue it a little further. That's why Emily got the green light to assemble the team of house writers. That was the first step."

"I'm sorry. Maybe I wasn't listening or wasn't conscious that day. I certainly wasn't myself if two intelligent friends and colleagues were both left with the same mistaken impression. I accept responsibility for the confusion. But I simply cannot and will not countenance novels conceived

through market research and written by a team of AI-guided house writers. That is just not on. We're talking about literature."

Malcolm could barely remember the euphoric high he'd experienced just the previous night when he hovered above the MegaDome on his way home. The whole thing had profoundly moved him. But what had just unfolded in the boardroom brought him back down to earth in a spectacular crash landing.

"Don't worry, Malcolm. We weren't offended," Manjusha said, patting his shoulder. "You're a writer. People expect you to be mercurial."

"Speaking of mercurial, how goes my fashion line? Are we on track for Paris?" Malcolm asked.

"Our regular update meeting on that is next week, but as far as I know, all is well," Manjusha replied. "But you're going to have to start wearing some of the clothes in the run-up to Fashion Week. I've had a full lineup tailored for you and they should arrive in about ten days."

"I hope they're not too off-the-wall," he said.

"I think you'll be able to pull off most of them, but the target demo is men in their thirties," she explained. "So as long as you rock a couple of the pieces—you know, some of the shirts and vests—we'll be fine."

"Vests?" he asked. "Never mind. Anyway, Maggie Hart knew about the line."

"Damn. I told her that was off the record."

Emily and Manjusha then refilled their wine glasses for the third time as Malcolm mopped his brow with a napkin.

—

It was one of the city's finest restaurants. Wonderwoman and Malcolm arrived early, at his polite insistence. He didn't want to keep one of the nation's rising political stars waiting. Under cover of darkness, they were escorted through the delivery entrance off the back alley and then past the kitchen to a small private dining room. But the Honourable Valerie Comeau, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Culture, was already there

waiting, a few of Malcolm's clearly well-read books stacked beside her. She lifted her eyes when the door opened and then fairly leapt from her chair, beaming.

"Such an honour to meet you, Mr. Forde. And I have loved every one of your books," she said. "Oh, where is my head, I'm sorry, I'm Valerie Comeau, but please call me Valerie."

Malcolm was surprised but hoped she hadn't noticed.

"Madame Deputy Prime Minister, I'm very pleased to meet you," he started. "I know you have a demanding role, and a schedule to go with it, so I came early so I wouldn't keep you waiting. Yet here you are, um, waiting."

She laughed.

"I had the same idea. A happy coincidence that gives us more time. But please call me Valerie, or Val as my friends do."

"Only if you call me Malcolm," he said, holding her chair for her. "Please."

She resumed her seat and he sat down opposite her.

It was a simple but beautiful space, designed with the light touch of a minimalist's hand. The decor belied the reputed extravagance of the French cuisine. The room was staffed by a wine steward and a server, both young women with confident bearings.

To save time, the Deputy Prime Minister and Malcolm had preselected their meals—or rather, their underlings had.

To get it out of the way, Valerie—almost shyly—asked if he would mind inscribing her favourite novels of his. She passed them over as Malcolm reached into his jacket pocket for the pen he always kept there. In those first few, sometimes awkward, moments, this familiar ritual between reader and writer created common ground that they happily occupied for the rest of the evening.

With the book signing behind them, their conversation picked up.

"In my role as Minister of Culture, I was lucky enough to enjoy your recent triumphant appearance at the MegaDome from a private box, as a

guest of the International Association of Publishers," she said. "It was, well, enthralling."

"I'm sorry our paths didn't cross, but the military precision with which my time and movements were managed last night apparently left no room for anything else."

They both judged their classic French meals to be sublime. Malcolm loved his chateaubriand. The rare slices of tenderloin were almost heart-shaped on his plate. Living up to its name, Malcolm's beef was so tender that his knife lay untouched in his place setting. And Valerie was almost overcome with her Coquilles Saint-Jacques, declaring her dinner to be *parfait*.

"Madame Deputy Prime Minister…" he started as they neared the end of their main course.

"Please, Valerie," she implored. "This is not Parliament."

"Right, sorry. Valerie, I'm curious, and I have a favour to ask of you. Bear with me and pretend for a moment that I am a visitor from another planet—and believe me, in recent days I've often felt like one. Would you mind telling me the story of how the Minister of Culture—at one time, regrettably, a lower-tier Cabinet post—came to be the most powerful minister in the government, just a heartbeat away from the Prime Minister's Office? And in a related vein, how, in your view, did writers miraculously climb to the top of the social order, where we now somehow live as superstars—or, using the evolving parlance, writestars?"

Valerie smiled and nodded.

"In short, both can be explained by the same history," she said. "I'll try to give you the condensed version without shortchanging you on the details, because they do matter. But I love this story, and I suspect you're already quite familiar with it."

"Well, of course I am, but I'm drawn into this conversation often, and would love to hear what I'm sure is your more coherent and complete version."

Content to listen, Malcolm then settled back in his chair and, with a sweep of his hand, yielded the floor.

“The story begins nearly fifty years ago, when a particularly smart, committed, and ambitious policy analyst in the bowels of the Department of Culture—Aline Gagnon is her name—cooked up a simple but far-reaching idea that, without overstating it, ultimately turned not just the department’s fortunes around, but the nation’s.”

She looked at Malcolm while she spoke.

“Over about a decade, she managed to build sufficient support within the department, and eventually in Cabinet, for an unprecedented national commitment to literacy and reading.”

“And what exactly did that entail?” he asked, leaning forward in his chair.

“Well, the intrepid Aline Gagnon and her team developed the National Literacy and Reading Policy. Years later, when it was eventually adopted in Parliament, it included dramatic increases in year-over-year federal funding to libraries to augment the support from provincial and municipal governments, including capital spending for new building programs. But the most innovative element in the plan was the creation of what really amounted to a government-sponsored book-of-the-month club. Annually, all Canadians, regardless of age, would receive twelve coupons, redeemable once a month at independent bookstores, for a free book, chosen from a curated list in different categories within fiction, non-fiction, and poetry, in all its diversity.”

“Okay, understood,” Malcolm said. “Sounds like a great idea—I say as a visitor from another planet. But what made the government buy into the program?”

“Well, it took Aline and her team many, many years before the national legislation was adopted,” Valerie replied. “But it all began with five small pilot projects undertaken in five communities across the country that spanned the geographic, demographic, and socio-economic spectrum. And, critically, there was an unprecedented commitment to measurement and program evaluation in those first five test markets. In fact, the investment in analysis and evaluation at least equalled the cost of delivering the programs themselves,” she explained. “But early on, these sleepy little book-of-the-

month-club pilot programs began to show significant community impact and unexpectedly far-reaching positive results."

"Sorry, can I stop you there?" Malcolm asked, leaning in even closer. "What exactly do you mean by 'far-reaching positive results'?"

"Well, more and more people fell into reading, with many claiming they now considered themselves lifelong readers. Then, over time, the trend lines showed that more citizens from those five communities attended university. Local crime rates declined. The workforce in those five centres became more thoughtful and educated and well-rounded. And there were related measurable productivity gains in nearby industrial and service sectors. Average household income grew and overall optimism about the future increased in the five markets. And the research was solid, making clear and unassailable links between the pilot programs and the broader economic and social benefits in the community.

"I'm oversimplifying here—there were many, many other elements to the policy, including infrastructure to support authors, particularly rookie writers, and various tax expenditures—but the common denominator in all these broader gains was the steady growth in reading levels. It all started with people reading more. In fact, the results were so startling that Parliament unanimously passed the legislation to roll out the program nationwide, and invested heavily in it. I should say that, luckily, this coincided with a booming economy, or it might never have happened. There was revenue available and a comprehensive, high-impact national public policy initiative to invest in."

"How extraordinary," Malcolm said, fascinated by what he was hearing.

"There's more," Valerie said. "Within fifteen years of initiating the program nationally, the same trend lines showed up clear across the country. Within twenty-five years, the economy and most other areas of society were in very good shape. Again, measurement analysis traced the boom back to the slow-build national reading program that had such unexpectedly far-reaching social, educational, and economic impact. It became the miracle policy that sent the nation to the top of the charts. But it didn't stop at our borders. Other countries, notably the United States, the U.K., and most of

the European Union, had been watching, and they followed suit, with similar results. It's now a truly international policy phenomenon."

"Hence the Minister of Culture now sits at the Prime Minister's right hand," Malcolm said.

"Correct," she replied. "That's what caused this significant realignment in the government, reflecting the key contributor to one of the most pervasive and impressive public policy coups of the century. The Minister of Culture became the senior-most Cabinet post, usually also designated Deputy Prime Minister."

"So, let me see if my alien brain is interpreting this correctly," Malcolm said. "You're, in essence, telling me that reading has become the single most important driver of national wealth and well-being."

"Yes, put in its simplest terms. While there were many more related public initiatives supporting this policy, you are largely correct. Reading was at the centre."

"Incredible."

"It also explains why you are now able to sell out massive stadiums on a global tour and leave your fans wanting more," she replied. "And you have Aline Gagnon to thank. It all started with her idea, nearly five decades ago. It was her drive, her vision, and her intellect over so many years that finally pushed the national legislation over the finish line."

"Um, is Aline…still with us?" Malcolm asked.

"She retired several years ago, but policy-makers like her don't really retire. They're just not in the office quite as often."

"Wonderful," he replied. "Well, it certainly changed my life as a writer. But I do miss having the time, not to mention the intellectual, physical, and emotional bandwidth, to spend days on end sitting at my desk thinking and writing, and then thinking and writing some more. I haven't been able to do that in any sustained way for quite a while."

"The price of writestardom," Valerie said.

"That is one of the most interesting and important stories I've heard in a long time," Malcolm said, as they enjoyed their dessert—they had both chosen crème caramel.

“Well, you were around for all of it, so I assumed you were conversant with the history,” she replied, her facial expression leaning towards puzzled.

“Well, yes, of course, but hearing the whole story in one go from an authority on the subject, and making all the connections, really does help me understand how we both have arrived at our current stations,” Malcolm continued. “Setting modesty aside for just a moment, while we both live in very different worlds, our mutual success seems to be rooted in the very same innovative national policy.”

“Absolutely and inescapably.”

“Perhaps I’ll meet Aline Gagnon someday.”

“I can happily arrange that when your schedule permits,” she said.

They talked for another hour, enjoying the glorious dinner—a brief period of relative peace in their frenetic lives.

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“All clear, Malcolm,” Wonderwoman said, when she returned to the elevator foyer after a final sweep of the penthouse. “We are wheels up tomorrow at noon from the private hangar. Bigman and I will be here to pick you up at eleven a.m. sharp.”

After Wonderwoman left, Malcolm’s mind was still racing from his earlier conversation with Valerie. It had illuminated so much about his new world. What he’d learned settled his mind, calmed his nerves, and gave him some measure of hope. Enlightenment often had this effect on him. Carrying around such persistent, nagging uncertainty about how his unireverse had evolved to its current state had taken a toll. Now that he understood the logic and reason underpinning what had been a remarkable transformation over half a century, he suddenly felt lighter and his mind, freer. He was wide awake.

Malcolm immediately headed for the library space and sat down at his writing desk. He ignored his emails and several missed calls on his silenced phone. Instead, he opened his laptop and returned to his manuscript in progress. He read a few pages leading up to where his prose ended, not just

in mid-scene but mid-sentence. He stared at the cursor. After a while, he wrote a few sentences just to get himself over the hump. Then he stared at them. It didn't take him long to realize that—to paraphrase Truman Capote—he hadn't been writing, he'd only been typing. He backspaced through the placeholder text, and again stared at the screen.

Ninety minutes later, his memorable dinner all but forgotten, Malcolm—frustrated, angry, even a little frightened—surrendered and went to bed with the cursor still anchored in the same spot, mid-scene, mid-sentence. Then he tossed and turned for another few hours before finally slipping under.

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The following morning, when Malcolm yet again opened his eyes to find he was still in his unireverse, he began to contemplate the possibility that his new world might well be permanent—that he wasn't going back. This caused him to question whether his old life was ever real at all. He also wondered if perhaps he ought to spend some time lying on a therapist's couch, but he woke up too late to commit much of his intellectual resources to the idea. He had an hour before Bigman and Wonderwoman were due to arrive. He also had an idea and, he hoped, just enough time to execute it.

It was a dreary December day outside, with heavy cloud cover. The temperature hovered around zero, give or take a few degrees. Accordingly, the precipitation alternated between sleet and freezing drizzle. The weather had temporarily thinned the ranks of the Forde fans camped out across the street. But the stalwart core remained.

Malcolm dressed as blandly as he could. He pulled on jeans, a ratty old sweatshirt, worn hiking shoes, a ballcap, sunglasses, gloves, and his hooded parka. He completed his ensemble with a dark-blue umbrella. With his hat pulled low and his hood up, he headed down in the elevator to the parking level. He slipped into the car park, walked to the exit ramp, and stomped on the rubber hose lying on the concrete in front of the garage exit. The huge panelled door immediately rose. Malcolm then opened the umbrella, pulled it down low upon his head, and disappeared underneath the door, well before it reached the top of its run. Unless you were standing right next to him, sheltered by the same umbrella, you would have no idea who was walking up the parking ramp that morning, into the sleet.

He heard the big garage door close behind him as he walked along the back alley. He turned right at the first corner and could see, just below the

rim of his umbrella, his old building across the way. He waited at the traffic light but didn't dare lift his eyes—or his umbrella—to the fans gathered in his honour no more than a hundred feet away. When the light turned green, he moved leisurely, calmly, not wanting to draw any attention to himself. He could see a young woman in the lobby of his old building adjusting her winter coat, so he casually picked up his pace a little. As luck would have it, she then opened the front door of the aging apartment building and headed out into the inclement weather. In a spasm of near-perfect timing, Malcolm caught the door just before it swung shut, closed his umbrella, and walked inside. He moved with purpose to the stairwell and headed up one flight. Upon reaching the second level—what had been his floor—he walked into the corridor and right up to what was, in his old world, the door of his own apartment. It looked just the same. He wondered briefly if he were back. He raised his hand to knock but then hesitated. What was he going to say if someone answered? How could he explain it without giving the distinct impression that he'd completely lost his mind? He lowered his hand, then lowered his head in thought. Finally, he lowered his expectations. When he failed to arrive at a rational way to explain his presence there, he spun on his heel and made for the stairwell. As he passed the elevator, the door promptly opened and out strode an older woman—an older woman Malcolm recognized. And despite his parka hood, she recognized him, too.

"What on earth!" she exclaimed, her right hand clutched to her chest. "It's you! The cap and the hood threw me, but still, I can see it's you!"

Fortunately, the hallway was empty.

Malcolm put his finger to his lips in an attempt to keep their conversation just between them.

"I know you, too," Malcolm said in a voice one notch above a whisper. "You were seated on the stage at the MegaDome the other night, were you not?"

He also knew her as the woman who frequently attended his talks in his old world but always left before the Q&A.

"I'm flattered you remembered me among so many adoring fans, but whatever are you doing in my building, on my floor, alone, without even

the most modest of entourages?”

“Well, um, I was just visiting an old friend on another floor, and when I left, I avoided the elevator and took the stairs. Even in the empty stairwell, I kept my head down, a habit I’ve acquired. Apparently, I miscounted and mistakenly exited on your floor instead of the ground floor.”

“No matter, you’re here now and I’m delighted to meet you, Mr. Forde. I’m Colette Hamill.”

She proffered her hand, and he shook it, while scanning the corridor. They were still alone in front of the elevator.

“And you live on this floor?” he asked.

“Just there, in the much sought-after corner unit, for a great many years now.” She pointed down the hall to the door of the apartment Malcolm had lived in for nearly three decades.

“I’m sure it’s lovely,” he replied. “I like a good corner unit.”

“It’s quite spacious. It was perfect when my husband and I moved in,” she said. “I was a high school science teacher, retired now, while he was a sportswriter. But he died…well, suddenly, years ago now, so the apartment sometimes feels a little too roomy.”

“I’m very sorry about your husband,” he said. “Unfortunately, I do have some experience with losing one’s spouse without warning.”

“Yes, I know. I read about it in the paper when it happened, all those years ago,” she said, nodding her head and briefly touching his arm. “Right, well, that’s enough sadness for a corridor conversation. I won’t keep you, but for some strange reason I do want you to know that you are my favourite writer—and believe me, there have been many, many contenders, with new ones entering the fray every time I visit a bookstore. Of course, I’ve read all your novels, and found that each one offered me something new, and fresh, and different, yet still wholly familiar. It’s a rather remarkable literary feat.”

“Well, thank you. Very kind of you to read them,” he replied, chuffed.

“But by the very act of chatting with you, I’m breaking my own code,” she said, chuckling.

“Oh, I see. Um, or rather, I guess I don’t see,” he stumbled, puzzled.

“You know, I have often imagined how I might explain to you my particular approach to reading. And now, here you are, standing right in front of me,” she said. “So, here goes. It’s just that I have always thought of books as individual pieces of art that should…well, that should only be judged by the words on the pages alone. As a reader, I want to enjoy the book free from any outside influence—like, say, a book review in the paper, or a Facebook thumbs-up, or blurbs on the front cover, or a comment on Bookish, or even that little author bio on the back flap. I try not to read any of them, for fear that they will somehow affect or infect my view of the art. I want the prose alone to guide my opinion. Does that make any sense?”

“It makes sense to me,” he said, nodding. “That is a very noble view of art. I quite admire it.”

“But here I am actually talking with the author—my favourite author—right after sitting on a stage with you in a sold-out stadium. That’s two violations of my reading policy in just two days.”

“They don’t sound like egregious offences to me,” he said.

“Maybe not, but I simply couldn’t help myself. My curiosity finally overpowered my high-minded artistic ideals! And I can’t say I regret it.” She laughed.

“Well, I sincerely hope our encounter today won’t compromise your enjoyment of my next novel.”

“Oh, I think I’m past that now. I have no doubt I’ll love your future novels as much as I’ve loved all your others,” she said. “But don’t you travel with security or some kind of crack SWAT team to protect you from ardent admirers like me?”

“Well, I’m supposed to, but I managed to elude them this time,” Malcolm replied. “However, I’m afraid I must now try to make it back to my own residence before I’m missed. I’m so glad to have met you and I hope you keep reading my books, even if we now actually know each other.”

He smiled at her, shook her hand a second time, and hustled for the stairwell. She stood there watching his retreat until he darted through the door and was gone.

—

Once in the stairwell, Malcolm happily observed through the window that the freezing rain was falling more heavily than when he'd arrived. In short order, he was back on the street, his umbrella making it impossible for anyone to see his face. Malcolm thought the temperature had dropped. He made it safely back to the parking garage door but had to wait for a few minutes before it finally opened. A Mercedes-AMG GT R in British racing green—a sports car he'd admired for years—drove past him and out onto the back street. Malcolm waited until the Merc turned the corner before he slipped under the already-descending door and into the garage.

As he turned the corner, with his umbrella collapsed but his cap and hood still in place, he saw the concerned face of Ricky, who was striding his way.

"Hey, this is a secure parking garage," the young man said, with considerable hostility. "You're not supposed to be in here."

Malcolm quickly pushed down his hood and pulled off his cap.

"It's okay, Ricky, it's Malcolm, Malcolm Forde," he said. "You know me."

Ricky stopped, bent over with his hands on his knees, and laughed.

"You had me going there, Mr. Forde. I thought you were a carjacker. I'm sure glad it's you. I hadn't planned much further ahead. Who knows what I might have done!"

"It's okay, Ricky. All is well. I just snuck out for a walk," Malcolm said. "Now that the tour is over, I'm going a bit stir-crazy up there."

"Well, you be careful out there. That's where the crazy is."

—

Three minutes later, Malcolm was back in his penthouse, seated in his living room. He could not explain how Colette Hamill had come to be occupying his apartment in his unireverse, or why she kept popping up in his life in both worlds. Then again, everything that had happened since his

arrival here defied explanation. But he had no time to contemplate it further. Bigman had just texted. He was on his way up. It was 11:00 a.m. sharp. Punctual as always.

When he stepped off the elevator, Bigman handed him a copy of *Book World International*, supposedly the leading English-language literary consumer magazine.

“This will hit newsstands tomorrow,” Bigman said.

“Holy shite,” Malcolm said, almost, but not quite, under his breath.

“This is my favourite cover so far,” Bigman declared. “You’re starting to look like the celebrity you actually are.”

Malcolm was surprised, even shocked—though, given everything else, he shouldn’t have been. There he was on the front cover of the mag, standing on the MegaDome stage, staring up at seventy thousand adoring fans. It was a great shot by any measure. The headline splashed across the top read *A Writestar in His Prime*.

“Oh my,” Malcolm said, still looking at the magazine. “Um, do I need to pack anything?”

“No, Manjusha sent you an email last night. Your clothes and everything you might need for the LA premiere are already packed and on board the jet,” Bigman explained. “At your request, we’re not staying over. So, we’ll bug out right after the big show and you’ll sleep on the plane on the flight home. If all goes well, we should be back here tomorrow morning by nine thirty or ten, traffic permitting. And your sched has been cleared for the day in case of jet lag.”

Malcolm’s spirits lifted—even cartwheeled—at the thought of an entire day to himself.

“Great! So, just comfortable clothes for flying are all I need.”

“Right,” replied Bigman. “Oh, and there’s one more piece of news. Manjusha was supposed to keep you company on the trip, but apparently, she woke up this morning with a sinus infection. Despite arguing with her doctor, she won’t let her fly until it clears. So, you’ll only have Wonderwoman and me with you this time around.”

“Well, I’ll be in good hands,” Malcolm said. “I’ll be ready in two minutes.”

—

When they arrived at the airport, Wonderwoman drove the black Lincoln Navigator right inside the hangar, towards the only jet parked there. Malcolm said nothing, but his eyes widened at the sight. By the look of it, this was no unmarked rental jet. The discreet logo on the tail identified it as a Gulfstream G700. Malcolm’s signature was emblazoned on the plane’s fuselage in blue, just above the windows, stretching from the front hatch almost to the twin jet engines mounted on the tail. And the plane was quite large. Not Air Force One large, but neither was it one of those small, cramped starter jets.

“Remind me, do I own this bird?” Malcolm asked.

“The Gulfstream? You sure do,” Wonderwoman replied.

“I still don’t understand why you made them remove your giant smiling face from the tail,” Bigman said. “That really looked cool.”

“Right, well, um, I guess I just thought it was a bit over-the-top.”

“Oh, it was definitely over-the-top. But man, it looked cool.”

When the Lincoln came to a stop next to the jet, Bigman leapt out and opened the back door. Malcolm climbed out, carrying his laptop in a small backpack, and took three short steps across the floor before climbing the stairs and entering the private jet—yes, *his* private jet, as he’d been reliably informed.

The interior took his breath away. It was beautiful. A muted but very classy palette of cream, white, and beige complemented the luxurious brown leather swivel chairs. A centre aisle divided two rows of four seats, and just behind, two matching loveseats faced one another for when conversation and socializing were on the agenda.

“Wow,” Malcolm said. “Um, I’d forgotten how nice this thing is.”

“Let me put your backpack on your desk in the bedroom,” Bigman offered, tipping his head towards the rear of the Gulfstream.

“No, no, it’s fine. I’ve got it. Thanks,” Malcolm said, walking towards the promised bedroom cabin at the back.

Malcolm opened the door and walked in as if he’d done it dozens of times. And he probably had. Yes, it was in fact a bedroom, with what looked like a queen-size bed, all made up. A small desk and chair were pressed up against one side of the cabin, in case he felt the need or desire to write while in the air. A tight three-piece marble bathroom occupied the same space on the other side. He opened the closet door off the bathroom and saw a couple of suit bags, a carry-on bag, and two different pairs of black shoes.

When Malcolm returned to the main cabin, Bigman was handing over passports and other documents to a uniformed official. By the shoulder patch on her jacket, Malcolm deduced she was from U.S. Customs and Border Protection. On instinct, he walked towards them, kicking himself for not bringing his passport. Bigman looked up and waved him into one of the large leather seats.

“I’ve got all your travel docs, Malcolm,” he said. “I have it all in hand.”

Of course he did.

Twenty minutes later, the jet lifted off the runway and headed southwest.

Bigman and Wonderwoman, along with a lone flight attendant, sat at the back of the seating compartment, leaving Malcolm alone up front. Manjusha had emailed earlier to confirm he could watch the doc on the plane and had provided instructions for making that happen. Following the steps in her email, Malcolm pushed a button on the console next to his armrest and watched in wonder as a large, thin monitor emerged from between his seat and the cabin wall. When fully deployed on its robotic arm, it was perfectly positioned in front of him. When the monitor had locked into place, the screen flickered to life. The menu featured a selection of bestselling fiction and non-fiction e-books, followed by a listing of first-run movies. Finally, right where Manjusha’s email promised it would be, there was a heading that read *Private Downloads*. Malcolm pressed the touch screen and the menu unfurled below, offering a solitary choice:

WRITESTAR
The Life of
Malcolm Forde

He donned the fancy-looking Sennheiser noise-cancelling headphones hanging from a peg next to his seat, took a deep breath, and pressed the touch screen again.

In self-defence, he initially tried to detach himself from the star of the film and simply watch it as someone without a real stake in it might. That worked quite well for the first forty-five seconds, until the movie title flashed onto the screen.

The film offered quite a comprehensive look at his time thus far on Earth. There were interviews with former schoolmates, and with a high school English teacher who less-than-subtly claimed he had recognized Malcolm's potential early on and nurtured his emerging style. Malcolm barely remembered the teacher and had no recollection of any special support or guidance he had provided.

As the film unspooled, Malcolm realized that most of it perfectly matched his own memory of his life in the old world, aside from the self-aggrandizing English teacher. But in the second half, things changed. The skyrocketing popularity of his books as they became instant platinum bestsellers, the parade of prestigious literary awards, the multiple film adaptations, and the bright glare of international fame were aspects of his career with which he was, of course, wholly unfamiliar, at least until recently. He was unnerved by it all, but sitting in the enveloping comfort of a leather seat on a private jet, he was—again—forced to confront and accept his new reality.

The film ran for ninety-eight minutes and closed with a ten-minute cinematic collage of his recent global tour against a dramatic and, at times, pulse-pounding soundtrack. Again, he felt like he was watching someone else on the screen, but that was just a defensive tactic to help him get through it. Intellectually, he knew he was watching a film about him. He was listening to literary authorities wax eloquent about him. He was

witnessing tens of thousands of fans gaga and giddy over him. He knew it had all happened. But he still had a difficult time accepting it as the truth. Who wouldn't?

At about the half way point, one brief part of the film laid him low. It was a minute or so of haunting footage of Isla standing next to him at a star-studded writers' festival gala in New York. She was near the end of her pregnancy. From the date helpfully provided in white text on the screen, he knew it was just a few days before the tragic accident that claimed Isla and their unborn daughter.

Of course, he'd never seen the New York festival footage, because they'd never attended that famous gala in his previous reality. In fact, they'd never attended any kind of literary gala in his previous reality. He assumed they'd been invited to this one because earlier that year, he'd won the Prix d'Or de la Fiction Littéraire, the prize that had put him on the literary map, at least in his unireverse.

It was utterly surreal to see Isla on the screen. Surreal and wrenching. She looked just as she always had, though he recognized neither her dress nor his tux. But her accident, as the documentary briefly and sensitively described it, had unfolded in this new world just as it had in the old. Same date, same time, same location.

There was no one to blame. The landslide just happened. Out of nowhere. A landslide. Out of the blue. No warning. A landslide on a road that had never had a landslide. Never. Apparently, unprecedented and unrelenting rain for the preceding six days had loosened the soil beneath the hills along the two-lane highway. A giant swath of the hillside gave way and cascaded down the slope and onto the highway, taking with it anything in its path. That was the expert analysis from a leading geologist at the inquest. What were the odds? If she'd driven a little faster on the expressway as she left the city, or caught even one more green light—or red light for that matter—she would likely have missed it altogether. But no.

So, there was no one to rail against. It was nobody's fault. Just Isla's fate, their unborn daughter's fate, his fate. Malcolm watched the segment about Isla several times, and then a few more times after that. Mercifully,

Bobby Locke had not included any roadside footage of the accident's aftermath—no shots of the crumpled car down the embankment, no images of the washed-out highway, no clips of paramedics moving far too slowly for there to have been any hope.

When he finally pushed the button to return the screen to its secreted location between seat and cabin wall, he realized he was emotionally drained, physically tired, yet ravenously hungry. When he looked up, the flight attendant—Chelsea, by her name tag—was standing before him with a lunch menu.

"You must be prescient," he said.

"No, I just didn't want to interrupt the film."

He looked up at her.

"Thank you," he whispered.

She served him an amazing lunch. It was some kind of pasta, and Malcolm thought it was astonishingly good. It was like no other food he'd ever eaten on a plane. Then again, he'd never set foot on a private jet before.

With the three-hour time change, they landed at LAX mid-afternoon, with a good three hours to spare before they'd have to leave for the premiere. In fact, after the pilot taxied the jet into the quiet hangar ringed by security guards, Malcolm actually took a nap in the privacy of his bedroom cabin. He thought he might as well enjoy the trappings of his unireverse while they lasted. Plus, he didn't want to fall asleep later on, watching his own documentary. That would make great fodder for the tabloids.

At the appointed hour, Bigman woke Malcolm up to get ready for his big night. After he'd shaved, showered, dressed, and passed Bigman and Wonderwoman's inspection, he slid into the back seat of a shiny black Cadillac Escalade that was parked next to the plane. On the drive into LA, he couldn't see much, courtesy of the darkly tinted windows. Then again, neither could he be seen.

For Malcolm, the premiere at Grauman's Chinese Theatre was a three-and-a-half-hour out-of-body experience. Because he was the guest of honour, he'd essentially been held hostage in his Escalade a few blocks

away, until all the other celebrities had entered the theatre. Then his driver pulled up to the designated area, marked by the spotlight shining hot on the sidewalk. Malcolm took a very deep breath, waited for his door to be opened as instructed, and stepped out, making his triumphant entrance as the star of the film. Hundreds of fans jostling behind cordons cheered, once again catching Malcolm off guard. He recovered quickly and waved. Then, the red carpet. With Manjusha unable to travel, he walked it alone. There must have been a few hundred photographers, separated from him by a waist-high metal barrier. Halfway down the long red rug was a media backdrop featuring logos of the various film companies and production houses involved in the documentary. As directed, Malcolm stopped there and allowed the hordes of shooters to snap hundreds of photos. And they weren't shy.

"Turn this way, Malcolm, please."

"Angle one foot in front of the other."

"Take your hand out of your pocket, please."

"How about hands on hips?"

"Look up into the sky and don't smile."

And of course, several reporters asked him that old red-carpet chestnut: "Who are you wearing?"

He'd been specifically told who he was wearing but had specifically forgotten. His tuxedo fit beautifully and was the most comfortable outfit he'd ever worn—excluding sweatpants and a hoodie, his customary writing ensemble.

He just kept smiling and waving and praising the producer and director. As promised, his handler met him at the red carpet's terminus. She handed him a bottle of water and also offered him something stronger, which he declined.

He was escorted up a staircase to be seated alongside the director, Bobby Locke, in a special balcony box for just the two of them, away from the madding crowd. Stern security guards were stationed just outside. Having viewed the film on the plane, he found it a little easier watching it all again on the big screen. Despite his best efforts, the footage of Isla

choked him up again, but he covered it well. And it was dark in the theatre, so no one was the wiser. He quite liked the film, having now seen it twice, start to finish, with no interruptions and only a few emotional flares. When the final credits rolled up the screen, the house lights were raised, then the capacity crowd rose to its feet, faced Malcolm and Bobby's balcony box, and gave them a standing ovation that washed over them for quite some time. They smiled and waved. Malcolm turned to face Bobby and joined the audience in applause.

He actually enjoyed the onstage Q&A afterwards with Bobby. It took a while, but Malcolm began to slip into his role as a celebrated writer. Not in an arrogant way. He just forced himself to be himself, even with the spotlights burning and the microphones bobbing. It took some concentration, but he just tried to be who he had always been, even if the setting and the circumstances were otherworldly. He responded to the questions honestly and tried to shift the attention onto Bobby's more experienced shoulders. Nevertheless, versions of the same question always came back to him.

"What was it like to watch your life flash across the big screen tonight?" a reporter asked.

"To be honest, it felt like I was watching someone else's journey, until it slowly sank in that this fine film was actually telling my story. It was a strange sensation. I'm honoured and grateful for Bobby's brilliant piece of art. And one day, probably far into the future, I hope to feel worthy of it."

Malcolm survived the rest of the spectacle, and by 11:04, after his exit through the theatre's back door, Bigman and Wonderwoman had him safely buckled into the Gulfstream. By 11:36, they were wheels up from LAX, heading back home.

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Having flown to and from LA without staying overnight, Malcolm wasn't jet-lagged the next morning. He'd just stayed on Eastern Time and slept onboard his plane all the way home, in a bed that compared quite favourably to the one in his penthouse suite. According to his wishes, after they'd landed and taxied to his hangar, the flight crew let him sleep. He finally woke up around 9:30 a.m., back in his own time zone. Malcolm actually felt refreshed, anticipating his free and unfettered day ahead. Bigman and Wonderwoman drove him directly to the condo.

Before falling asleep on the return flight from Los Angeles, he'd had an idea. Around eleven thirty that morning, lounging around his penthouse suite, he looked up his "money guy," Doug Houseman, on his phone and called him.

Small talk consumed the first few minutes of their conversation, including a chat about the glitzy documentary premiere—Doug had seen a story about it on *Entertainment Tonight*. Then Malcolm took the reins.

"So, Doug, do you have any idea what it would cost to endow a chair in creative writing at a major university?"

"Well, I'd have to dig into it a bit to be sure so don't quote me on this, but probably no more than five million."

"Great," Malcolm replied. "Let's do two—one at my alma mater and one at Metropolitan U, where my late wife taught. Can you make that happen?"

"Well, if you're going to chip in that kind of change, you'll obviously want the chairs named in your honour. That's how these things usually work. I mean, it's only fair that you get the credit, the publicity—you know, the profile—for investing in their programs."

“Actually, now that you mention it, put them both in Isla’s name.”

“You mean alongside your name, right?” Doug asked.

“Nope. I don’t think I need to elevate my profile any higher than it already seems to be. I’m not sure it’s even possible. So, both in Isla’s name, please,” Malcolm replied, leaving little room for debate.

Yet Doug somehow managed to find a little more room for debate.

“I mean, Isla kept her own name, so virtually no one will know that you’ve donated ten million big ones to endow these chairs,” Doug said.

“Perfect. That’s just how I’d like it to be.”

“Well, have you bounced this idea off Manjusha?”

“Not yet, but I will,” Malcolm said. “But in the meantime, you’re clear to proceed. I think both schools will say yes.”

“Oh, I’m pretty sure they’ll say yes before I’ve even finished making the offer,” Doug concluded.

Malcolm thanked him and confirmed the names of the two universities so Doug could start making the arrangements.

Malcolm felt good about the gesture. And, given his net worth, a gesture was about all it really was. But still, both schools, and generations of aspiring writers at each, would benefit. Yes, he felt good about it.

Earlier that morning, Malcolm had emailed Emily and Manjusha to arrange a Zoom call for noon. They’d both confirmed and Manjusha had sent along the meeting link.

At twelve o’clock, Malcolm joined the online meeting and found his long-time literary agent and editor already there on his laptop screen.

“How are you feeling, Manjusha?” Malcolm opened.

“A little better today, but I’m gutted that I missed the red carpet,” she replied. “You should have seen the dress I was going to wear. It was scandalous.”

“Well, I’m really sorry to have missed you and your dress, but I’m relieved you’re at least sounding more like your old self.”

“I saw the coverage on *ET*,” Emily chimed in. “I thought you looked great, Malcolm, and you did really well in the six-second sound bite they aired.”

“Anyway, we’re both here, Malcolm,” Manjusha said. “What’s up?”

“Right, well, as you may have noticed at Emily’s meeting yesterday, I feel a little like I’m running out of rope,” Malcolm said. “I’ve never felt pulled in so many different directions at once. With the tour, and the documentary, the film adaptations, the packed schedule of media interviews, and…wait, I’m missing something, there’s more…”

“The biography?” Emily added.

“Yes, of course, that’s it, the biography. Not to mention the demands around all our international publishing deals and the film and streaming opportunities,” Malcolm continued. “I desperately need to carve out time and space to write. I want to write. I have to write. But lately I am feeling overstressed and out of control. My head is spinning.”

“But that’s natural and logical given what’s been happening lately,” Manjusha said.

“I know, I know, but what’s not natural is that for the first time in my writing life, I’m blocked. I’m stuck. In the few snippets of time I have for writing, I’ve just been staring at my screen with that cursed cursor blinking at me, taunting me.”

“But that happens to every writer,” Emily said, tagging in to support Manjusha.

“Well, it’s never happened to this writer, and it’s freaking me out,” Malcolm said. “I’m stretched too thinly, spending all of my time on tasks, events, travel, and other activities that all share one thing in common. *Not one of them is writing*.”

“Malcolm, when you hit literary pay dirt the way you have in the last twenty-five years, this is what happens. You can’t live the dream life you now have if you don’t feed the beast. And it’s the tour, and the films, and the personal appearances, and even some of the big-time TV interviews that feed the beast and pay for your fancy Alfa, your awesome jet, your luxury penthouse in the clouds, and your ever-growing investment portfolio. That’s how all this works.”

“I understand what you’re saying, I do, but forgive me, I was under the impression that all those lovely things you just mentioned—and I’m happy

to have them, believe me—came about because I write books that readers like…that readers love."

"Of course. The books are where it all starts, but you know very well that your royalties on book sales alone, albeit higher than almost everyone else's, still wouldn't cover the lifestyle to which you've now happily become accustomed. When you have your own jet, you have to pay the piper—not to mention the pilot—and book sales alone won't come close."

"Okay, I get that. 'Twas ever thus," Malcolm said. "But surely at some point I need to write another novel, another good one, or there won't be another tour, and there won't be another movie premiere to fly to in my Gulfstream, and there won't be any more investments in my portfolio, just withdrawals. And it all starts with my writing."

"Well, of course, at some point eventually you're going to need to churn out another blockbuster, just as you always have," Manjusha said. "Like the one you're working on with Emily right now. Em says it's a winner."

"Yeah, well, that's just it," Malcolm said. "It may be a winner, and I sure hope it is, because right now, I've reached an impasse on the novel after that one. I've got nothing. I'm just sitting there, waiting for the paralysis to pass, praying for it to pass."

"I'm sure you'll pull out of it soon," Manjusha said.

"How can you be sure? I'm the afflicted writer, and I'm not at all confident I'll be pulling out of it. I'm pulling out my hair, but I'm not pulling any brilliant prose out of my head, or out of any other part of my body. And I say again, it's making me crazy. I've blown right past nervous and anxious. Now I'm actually scared."

His voice grew more frantic towards the end, and Manjusha and Emily finally seemed to recognize his anxiety.

Manjusha jumped in. "Okay, Malcolm. Breathe. What can we do to help? We work as a team, and we're here for you on this."

"Yes, we are," Emily echoed.

Malcolm tried to calm himself down and think about his response. He paused and gathered himself before entering the conversation again.

“All right, thanks,” he replied. “Look, what I feel I really need is an empty schedule for a while—or at least a quieter one. I cannot create in snatches of thirty minutes here and forty minutes there. I need large chunks of time spread out before me so I can immerse myself in the new story, rather than flitting in and out of it and never really reaching beyond the superficial. I need time to think and to write—long stretches of time. I need solitude to write. I probably need an Uber Eats account to write. And I need your help to create those conditions. Otherwise, I’m worried the next Malcolm Forde novel might just wither on the vine. I’m not exaggerating. It’s really how I feel. And given that our mutual livelihoods flow from my novels, I really need to write another, and I really want to write another.”

“Understood. We can help, Malcolm,” Emily said. “Don’t worry about the finished manuscript that I’m currently reading. Let me go ahead and start the line edit on it without you for now. You’ll see and approve or reject my proposed edits when you’re ready. And I won’t bother you with it again until we’re at the copy-editing stage, so you can stay focused on the next novel.”

“And I’ll review your sched and cancel everything that is not absolutely mission-critical,” Manjusha said. “You just cleanse your mind of anything that is not specifically related to the new novel you’re trying to write. Submerge yourself in the story and push past the block. I know you can do it.”

He thanked them for their understanding, and they eventually ended the call. As he clicked out of the meeting, Malcolm could picture Manjusha and Emily racing to call each other for a post-mortem on his faltering state of mind.

Malcolm grabbed a paperback from the bookcase and stretched out on his unspeakably comfortable sectional couch. He needed some time to decompress and to allow his racing mind to stop sprinting and start walking. He read pretty well an entire P.G. Wodehouse novel—one of the Jeeves stories—as a fleeting but welcome distraction. Of course, as always, the story was absurd but the sentences sublime. And it was hilarious. He spent all afternoon and into the evening in Edwardian England in the company of

Bertie Wooster, Jeeves, Gussie Fink-Nottle, Aunt Agatha, and the rest of the quirky ensemble cast of misfits and misanthropes who always seem to populate Wodehouse novels. Malcolm felt it was time well spent, and just the escape he needed.

Then—using a pseudonym—he ordered, and then inhaled, an entire medium meat-lover's pizza, kindly delivered to him by the concierge. Delivery drivers were not allowed anywhere near the elevators. After that, he was feeling sated and almost happy. He was actually feeling good. So, it seemed like the right time to step up and challenge the dreaded flashing cursor once again.

The stars were out when he sat back down at his writing desk, opened the partially written manuscript, and scrolled down to the very end, mid-paragraph, mid-sentence.

An hour later, he crawled back onto the sectional couch in the living room and buried his head in a huge throw cushion to make his withdrawal from the world just a little more emphatic. His word count remained unchanged, and his post-Wodehouse upbeat, even buoyant, mood had taken a direct hit.

At 9:00 p.m. he pulled his phone from his pocket and acted on a thought that just seemed to arrive in his brain.

Worth a try, he figured.

He hoped Sheila would still be there, even if it was past closing time.

"Macbeth's," said a familiar voice.

"Sheila! I'm so glad I caught you. It's Malcolm calling, Malcolm Forde."

"Yeah, right, and I have F. Scott Fitzgerald on the other line. Nice try."

"No, no, it is. I'm Malcolm Forde. I am. Don't you recognize my voice?"

"Yes, but AI has become very good at generating your vocal stylings, so who really knows who I'm talking to? I was fooled once last week and I'm not falling for it again."

"No, really, Sheila, it's Malcolm."

“But if this really is you, Malcolm, you’d know to reach out to me in exactly the way we agreed upon so I can confirm I’m speaking to the real you,” Sheila said. “And don’t bother asking what that protocol is. You proposed it, so you know it. I’ll be here for a while, but if you don’t get back to me using our prescribed contact method, I’ll know you’re not who you purport to be. But I must say, the voice is quite close. Goodbye.”

She hung up.

Malcolm needed to think. What did she mean, and what could he have proposed? She’d have to see him to be absolutely certain. Right. She’d have to see him. It took him thirty seconds to put it together. Then, on a hunch, he opened up the FaceTime app on his phone and scanned the past calls. He scrolled and scrolled and eventually, there it was. Sheila Macbeth and her personal iPhone number. He clicked her name to place a FaceTime call. A moment later her familiar image materialized on his screen.

“Now, that wasn’t so hard, was it?” she opened. “So, what were you thinking calling on the store line?”

“Hi, Sheila. Sorry about that. I lost my head.”

“You need a bookstore fix, don’t you?”

“Yes, yes, that’s exactly what I need. And right now,” he replied, sighing. “How did you know?”

“Well, you’ve been on tour—congrats, by the way—and you’re probably exhausted and have had no time to yourself, let alone to write. And, well, that tends to be when you call me,” she said. “And you’re in luck. I’m torturing myself tonight with November’s month-end bookkeeping, so I’ll be here late.”

“This is the first bit of good fortune I’ve had today,” he said.

“You may want to consider whether complaining about your rotten luck, out loud, is a good idea.”

“Sorry. Yes, of course, you’re right,” he backpedalled.

“That’s okay, Malcolm, you know this is always a safe space,” she said. “So, we’ll see you in a little while, and…well, you know the drill.”

“Well, yes, but just to be sure, as it’s been a while since my last visit, remind me of the drill so I don’t mess up again?”

“Malcolm, the drill was your idea,” she scolded. “You park next to my car in the alley behind, come to the back door. I need to hear three knocks, a pause, and then one more knock, and I’ll let you in.”

“Right. You’re a wonder, Sheila. Thank you.”

He pulled on his parka and a ballcap and rode his elevator down to the parking level. Ricky had already gone home and the night-shift parking guy, Dennis, had taken over. He was an older man but just as congenial and effective as Ricky. Dennis seemed delighted to see him. Four minutes later, in the warm brown-leather embrace of his red Alfa, his hat pressed down so low on his head the brim cast a shadow over much of his face, Malcolm once again drove up the ramp and onto the road that ran behind the building. He stuck to the side streets running parallel to the main drag where his old apartment, his new condo, the public library branch, and Macbeth’s bookstore, a little farther north, could all be found.

Despite his fiery-red Alfa Romeo, he made it to the alley behind Macbeth’s without anyone noticing. As directed, he parked next to Sheila’s car. It occurred to him that it would be much safer to drive around in his beat-up Hyundai, but not nearly as much fun. He checked his rear-view and side mirrors. The coast was clear. He was alone in the alley. To his left, lines of light escaped around the perimeter of the store’s back door. Malcolm slipped out of the car as quietly as he could and then rapped on the door three times, paused for a beat, and rapped once more.

He heard Sheila’s muffled voice seeping through the door. Her footfalls stopped and the door opened.

“Great to see you, Malcolm,” she greeted him. “It’s been too long.”

She gave him a friendly hug after he’d entered, and quickly closed the door behind him.

“It’s so nice to see you and to be standing in my favourite bookstore,” he replied. “You’re right, it has been too long.”

“Well, it’s nice to know that even as you rise to stratospheric heights, you still think of us lowly creatures and our mundane toil down here on Earth.”

“Believe me, I’d come here two or three times a week if I were ever home long enough, and if I could run the gauntlet of my little fan club camped outside my building.”

“I know you’ve been hot stuff for a very long time now, but the last, what, ten or fifteen years, it’s been crazy. We’re all thrilled that so many wonderful things have deservedly come your way,” she said. “It’s what we wish for all worthy writers.”

He was relieved that their rapport seemed as easygoing and comfortable as it always had. They were good friends. She was not impressed or intimidated in the least by his rise as an international writestar. She’d known Malcolm Forde since he was a debut novelist with fair-to-middling reviews and lagging book sales—long before he became who he’d become.

She waved him towards the front, the business end of any bookstore.

“I’ll have my shoulder to the wheel in my back office, but the store is set up for your clandestine visit,” she said. “Roam as long as you like. I’ll be here for a while if you need anything or want to purchase dozens of great new books.”

Malcolm laughed.

“Thank you, Sheila. You don’t know how much I need this.”

“I have a pretty good idea. With your big tour over, I was expecting to hear from you.”

It was just as he’d remembered it. The overhead lights were off, leaving only the dim glow from the streetlights outside to illuminate the shelves. It was a calming, fulfilling, almost spiritual hour for Malcolm as he eyed the books, ran his fingers over their spines, and read random passages from those that interested him—and many interested him. He could feel the tension easing out of him as the time slipped by. As usual, he lingered longest in Fiction, History, and Biography. He skipped over the special display dedicated to his own writing and, for a time, surrendered to literature’s lure. It was a welcome, though perhaps ephemeral, antidote to the crazed and upside-down world he now inhabited.

He recognized it as the first time he’d truly felt safe and relaxed—and not so alone—since he’d entered this strange new world. At least for a brief

time, he felt renewed and restored, nearly himself again. He loaded up his arms with seven new novels and three biographies. Some were Christmas presents, though buying for Manjusha and Emily was always difficult. They worked in publishing and probably had free access to all the books he'd just chosen for them. But he had absolutely no idea what to get them beyond books. New cars? Caribbean vacations? Luxury designer handbags?

He insisted on paying Sheila full retail price for his purchases, despite the creased and worn discount card he still carried in his wallet.

He was suddenly filled with gratitude.

"Let me do something for the store," he blurted out. "What do you need? A new furnace? Air conditioning system? More shelves? New windows? Refinished hardwood floors? An event space in the basement? What do you need? I'm serious."

"Malcolm, kind of you to think of us, but we're fine. You're helping us immeasurably by keeping literature on top," she explained. "What do we need? We need another Malcolm Forde novel. But thank you for the offer."

"Promise me that you'll let me help when you need to expand, or change locations, or open a second store. I want to do that. I want to spend my ludicrous earnings on what's most important to me. This bookstore has always been dear to me. You know that. I told you that the day you hired me to work here all those years ago—a lifetime ago."

She smiled at him, took his arm, and guided him to the back door.

"You're always welcome here, Malcolm. You know that, so come again whenever you wish to, whenever you need to, whenever you're able to."

"Thank you, Sheila. Thank you."

He scanned the back alley and quickly saw there was nothing to worry about. Not a soul was around. He climbed back into his Alfa and shortly thereafter made it home safely.

It was nearly 11:00 p.m. by this time. This was when he usually wrote best—on into the early hours of the morning, sometimes going strong until the yellowy glow of the rising sun overtook the eastern sky. He sat back down at his treasured writing desk, where he'd written nearly all of his

novels. Yet again, he opened his laptop and confronted that final, fractured sentence where he'd stopped.

Malcolm Forde felt ready, even excited. Something had shifted. He finally had a sense of the words that came next, of how to end what had been, until then, not so much an incomplete thought as merely an incomplete sentence. He felt comfortable resting his fingers on the keyboard—where they were meant to be. There was a familiarity in the sensation, almost an intimacy. As he gathered himself, a slight pain in his head pushed its way through his excitement and anticipation and into his consciousness. Not long after it arrived, it worsened. The pain wasn't debilitating—it seldom was—but Malcolm wanted nothing to distract or divert him from finishing that sentence, releasing him to write more—to write to the end of the scene, and then eventually to the end of the story. So, he swallowed two Advils from his medicine cabinet and returned to his precious writing desk. He sat back down and waited for the dull ache to subside, restraining himself, delaying the gratification of finally flying his fingers over the keyboard again. But after a time, the pain was still holding its own. He moved his laptop a little to the left and, in the vacated space, rested his head on his folded arms. Without meaning to, he closed his eyes —*but just for a few minutes*, he thought. Then he'd be writing again.

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When he opened his eyes, his head still throbbed, worse than before. But something had changed. He was no longer at his desk. He realized he was lying on his back on the floor next to it. And he was not alone. He was startled to see Manjusha kneeling next to him, at his shoulder. Then he saw the two crouching paramedics, one on either side of him. Malcolm looked at Manjusha, then past her to the leaded window. He could see the snow gathered in the corners of each pane and, beyond, the tall glass condo tower across the way—the same soaring edifice that had robbed him of the dappled morning sunlight on the rug where he lay. He knew where he was. He closed his eyes again. He knew. It was over. He still had no idea what "it" had been, but he knew it was over. He knew he was home.

"Malcolm, can you hear me?" Manjusha asked. "I'm right here."

"Yes, I can hear you," Malcolm croaked, his throat parched, his voice weak. "What happened?"

"I was about to ask you the same question," she replied. "I've been trying to call you for three days now. We finally phoned a locksmith to open your door."

"My head is pounding," he said, wincing. "It was hurting when I was writing after…um…after my library gig, and that's all I remember."

But Malcolm remembered more—much more.

Although he had been shocked upon his arrival in the unireverse, he found himself almost more surprised when he regained consciousness in his old apartment, his old life, his old world. When he turned his mind to it, he really couldn't decide whether he was sad and angry his sabbatical in the unireverse was over, or happy and relieved to be back in what was obviously the real world again—his real world. He needed time to sort

through it all. Lying there on the floor of his writing room, he was left with swirling feelings of resignation, disappointment, and fear. And he had questions. So many questions—most of them about his sanity, his grip on reality.

He was rushed to hospital in an ambulance, the siren blaring, the lights flashing. It was his first time. He made a mental note to mine the experience for a future novel. That's what writers do. Malcolm was admitted and spent the following four days there regaining his strength, slowly getting back to eating, rehydrating, and undergoing a battery of tests, including more than one MRI focused on his brain. With each passing day, his time in his unireverse still seemed just as real, but less and less likely. On occasion, he'd actually forget that he was back and wonder how the documentary about his life was doing at the box office, or when Bigman might pop in for a visit, or whether Ricky was taking care of his Alfa. Then, in an instant, he'd remember where he was. It was a bittersweet, mixed blessing, over and over again.

A multidisciplinary team of specialists poked, probed, and prodded him as they narrowed the range of causes from possible to probable and ultimately to a definitive diagnosis. The final doctor left standing in his room was a neurosurgeon, Dr. Wendy Sutcliffe.

"Malcolm, I've just come from radiology, where I had a long discussion with the attending specialist who did your MRIs," she started. "And we're confident we can now explain your symptoms and exactly what's causing them. And, to put your mind at ease, it's good news."

"Thank you, doctor, I'm relieved to hear it," Malcolm replied. "But just what is the so-called good news?"

"The MRI revealed a tumour the size of a lentil on your hippocampus—it's a complex brain structure embedded in your temporal lobe," she explained.

"Forgive me, Dr. Sutcliffe, for not doing celebratory handsprings, but a brain tumour scarcely feels like good news to me."

"Well, I was saving the best part for last," she replied. "Tumours of this shape, size, and positioning are almost always benign. And it is in a wholly

accessible location, making it fairly safe, almost routine, to excise it surgically, usually with no lasting side effects."

Malcolm closed his eyes and gave silent thanks to whomever might be listening and responsible.

"So, are you telling me that of all the brain tumours with which I might have been afflicted, this is one of 'the good ones'?"

"It's not just one of the good ones—your tumour in particular is one of the best," she said. "If you must bear the misfortune of a brain tumour, you want this one."

"Thank you, doctor. And while you're here, I have a question. I was reluctant to mention this earlier—though I probably should have—because I feared it suggested insanity. And I like to avoid leaving that impression," he said. "But while I was unconscious on my writing room floor for three days, I had the longest, most vivid and realistic dream of my life. So vivid that for its entire duration, I thought it was real. I was certain it was real. I had no idea it was just a dream, a hallucination. I felt in complete control of my own faculties, my own free will. I had physical sensations, complete awareness, daily interactions with people, places, and things that made me fully accept I was somehow living in a parallel but all-too-real universe, an alternate reality. Was it really all just a dream?"

"I'm very glad you mentioned this," said Dr. Sutcliffe. "You'll be pleased to learn that your experience, Malcolm, merely affirms your diagnosis. The hippocampus is believed to play an important role in our dreams. Further, the particular positioning of your tumour is consistent with increased dream activity, though we really can't yet explain what's happening physiologically or neurologically. We just know something is happening. You're not the first patient with this particular type of brain lesion to describe living an alternate existence in a different world."

"So, all that I experienced in my dream had to be rooted in my own thoughts," Malcolm said. "All of it was in my head—a very, very vivid figment of my active imagination."

With a look of pure sympathy, Dr. Sutcliffe merely nodded.

Malcolm didn't know how to process this.

He realized his unireverse wasn't real after all. Intellectually, he understood, even accepted it. But despite being a rational, reasonably well-functioning human being, in his bones and in his heart, if not in his mind, he still struggled with the idea that it was all just a dream.

He'd come to know Bigman and Wonderwoman. He'd enjoyed the plush, comfortable seats of his own jet. He'd watched a brilliantly produced full-length documentary on his own life. He'd felt the power of his Alfa's twin-turbo V6 vibrating through the steering wheel. He'd immersed himself in the passion of seventy thousand fans at the most exciting book talk he'd ever given. And there was more—much more. But it was all in his head. It was not of this world. What had begun as unfathomable and impossible had quickly morphed into credible and concrete, and then just as quickly returned to unfathomable and impossible. It had all been a whirlwind tour of his own mind.

He felt like Dorothy in the last scene of *The Wizard of Oz*, where she struggles to accept that the yellow brick road simply wasn't real, that her journey along it never happened, while part of her still clings to the belief that somehow it did.

"I understand that the tumour could have triggered the ultra-realistic dream, but all that I saw and did and learned and felt could only have come from what was already in my brain," he said. "And I honestly don't know how some of what I saw and learned came to be in my head in the first place."

"There's just so much we don't understand about the brain and how it functions," Dr. Sutcliffe replied. "I wish we knew more, but we don't. Not yet."

"If I declined the surgery—not that I'm suggesting this—might I dream like that again?"

"Malcolm, you need the surgery," Dr. Sutcliffe said. "It may only be the size of a lentil right now, but it won't be long before it's as big as a lima bean. At that stage, the medical consequences become much more serious."

"Doctor, are you a vegetarian, by any chance?"

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Two weeks later, Malcolm underwent brain surgery. Just as when he'd taken his inaugural ambulance ride, he observed his entire surgical odyssey as closely as he could, just for future writerly reference. And, as Dr. Sutcliffe had predicted, not only was the lentil tumour benign, but the operation to remove it was—at least in the realm of brain surgery—a simple, straightforward, and by all accounts wholly successful procedure. During his recovery, he frequently mentioned to his few visitors that he'd won the brain tumour lottery.

He spent Christmas in hospital, but this didn't bother him much. He had no family to speak of and usually spent Christmas alone and writing anyway. It wasn't a sad occasion for him. He was quite happy writing, which was how he occupied himself that Christmas Day in hospital. It was much like all the other days, except he had something new that year for which to be thankful. Manjusha, Emily, and Sheila all kindly spent time with him in his hospital room over the holidays. In fact, he loved how quiet the city was in that serene stretch between Christmas and New Year's. He usually wrote well in that period.

Seven days after his operation, Manjusha drove him back to his apartment. There was still a ways to go in his recovery, largely related to his cranial incision, which was still healing. But he was thrilled to be home, and to be able to return to where he always felt he wrote best. Sure, he had written while in hospital, but he was a creature of habit and felt most comfortable at his beautiful writing desk, with Isla's framed photo always within his field of view. While he had loved his luxury penthouse suite, he realized just how much he'd missed his old, time-worn apartment, even if the shadows of leaves no longer danced on his writing room rug in the morning light.

Thinking back on his brief time in that new and exciting world—even if it was all a mirage in his mind—he'd loved his condo, and his Alfa Romeo. He'd even loved certain aspects of his writestar popularity. And he certainly loved that society had hoisted books and writers onto such a lofty pedestal.

He loved a lot of things about that dream world. Who wouldn't? But as he contemplated his experience and his life as a novelist, he concluded that his real happiness, his true joy, came from writing—the act of writing—and not the material baubles it brought or bought.

He was slightly surprised to discover that he was exceedingly happy to be back home. He was recovering on schedule, and—also surprisingly—he was writing well. His writer's block had disappeared when the lentil disappeared. In his freshly restored mind, it was no coincidence. He could discern no after-effects of the surgery, beyond his nicely healing incision. He was almost relieved that he hadn't suddenly acquired the ability to speak Mandarin or play the violin or solve complex quadratic equations. He detected no anomalies in his thinking or behaviour or, happily, in his ability to write. He felt just as he always had before the lentil was excised, minus the headaches, which had thankfully ceased.

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Oddly for a writer of sound mind, Malcolm could not stop himself from thinking about his time in the unireverse. Like Dorothy, he often forgot that what he had experienced was not real. He fully understood it had unfolded only within the confines of his brain, yet when his mind was on other things, he would remember something about his time in that alternate reality—how comfortable his bed was, the view from his penthouse condo, the multiple heads on his shower (he really missed that shower)—and, for a moment, blithely accept it all as real and true, until he remembered it was neither. But still, he could not stop himself.

When he felt as recovered as he thought he would ever be—even the hair around the incision had grown back, and he looked himself again—he could resist it no longer. As often happens to writers, his curiosity overwhelmed him. One afternoon, he made his way across the street to the glass tower. He realized that not being a resident meant that he couldn't simply walk into the building, saunter right past the high-security concierge desk, and board the elevator to the penthouse. If that were possible, a few

intrepid Malcolm Forde fans would have easily made it up to his suite for a visit—if that world had been real. So, Malcolm carried on around the corner to the loading area at the rear of the building. A moving van was backed up to the dock, and four burly men were muscling furniture from the truck into the freight elevator. A security guard, scrolling on his phone, sat on a chair off to the side. But he didn't exactly look engaged in any activity that might touch upon security. He only had eyes for the screen in his hands.

Malcolm hovered on the periphery until he saw his chance. The four movers were carrying a large dining table, minus its legs. Malcolm figured it could accommodate at least twenty people for dinner. They lifted the tabletop off the truck and then balanced it horizontally on its edge on two small dollies. As they began to roll it across the loading dock towards the freight elevator, Malcolm casually walked beside them, as if he owned the building. The tabletop completely blocked the security guard's view of Malcolm—that is, if he'd even been looking. When the table reached the freight elevator, Malcolm kept going for another two steps and stealthily entered the stairwell, the door to which had been propped open for some reason. He quickly climbed up three or four flights before pausing to rest and take stock.

It was quiet in the stairwell. Even though there were another forty or so floors stretching up above him, he knew that sound travelled easily in closed concrete spaces, and he was quite sure he was alone. He thought briefly about entering the corridor and taking the elevator the rest of the way. But he worried about security cameras. So he walked up flight by flight until, nearly fifty minutes later, winded and wobbly, he reached the forty-fifth floor. The penthouse. He was exhausted and sat down on the top step to recover. His legs felt like rubber, though he feared they'd be very stiff by the following morning. On the other hand, he was proud of himself for completing such a climb in the aftermath of brain surgery. It was a measure of his determination to make sense of what he'd experienced, to satisfy his curiosity—his need to know.

It was chilly in the stairwell, or he might well have sweated through his clothes. It was about ten minutes before he felt up to proceeding. He rose,

opened the stairwell door, and entered the corridor.

Most—likely all—visitors to the penthouse would use the elevator that opened directly into the suite, not the door from the corridor. But, as in his dream, there was that seldom-used second way to gain entry into the suite, the door before which Malcolm now stood. Just to be sure, he pulled his keys from his pocket. As logic dictated, the only ones he had were for his aging apartment across the street. Finally, he mustered the resolve to push the button mounted on the door jamb. He could hear the sound of chimes inside. He wasn't exactly sure what he was going to say if someone answered. But had he not forced himself to push the doorbell, he feared he would have abandoned his plan altogether and headed straight back down the stairs.

Sufficient time passed that Malcolm, perhaps relieved, turned back towards the stairwell. Then the door opened and Malcolm swung around. He could not disguise his surprise at the sight of the older, attractive, well-dressed woman.

"Can I help you…" she started to say, but fell silent when she saw him. She briefly looked confused but then her eyes widened as recognition dawned. His eyes followed suit, for the same reason.

"What on earth!" she started, before gathering herself. "Well, Mr. Forde. What an unexpected but pleasant surprise to open the door and find my favourite writer standing before me."

"And I know you," he replied, smiling. "You're a regular at my talks, if I'm not mistaken."

"Well, yes, I am. I'm Colette Hamill. So nice to meet you, at long last."

"Colette Hamill," he repeated, nodding his head. "Your name is Colette Hamill? How extraordinary."

"It's a name that has served me well, but I hardly think it's in any way extraordinary."

Malcolm did his best to maintain his equilibrium.

"It's just that I feel as if I've, um, already met you somehow."

"Well, we've not met, but I did attend your reading just before Christmas."

“Right, of course. Um, just to put my own frazzled mind at ease, that reading wasn’t at the MegaDome, was it?”

She burst out laughing.

“You are a pistol, Mr. Forde. I wish it had been at the MegaDome. You deserve an adoring audience of that magnitude. But no, the reading was at the library down the street, which has seen better days. Surely you remember such a glorious evening.”

“Just my twisted sense of humour,” he said. “Of course, I remember seeing you at the library. And now that I somehow find myself standing in front of you, could I ask you a question?”

“Of course.”

“I know you’ve attended many of my readings, always carrying a copy of whatever book I’m promoting at the time.”

She nodded.

“But you always leave before the event is over. So, we’ve somehow never managed to meet until now.”

She sighed.

“Yes, it’s true. I am sorry, but I always seem to escape before the Q&A and any possibility of us actually connecting.”

He looked puzzled but nodded.

“I know, I know, it seems terribly rude, and I hope you’ve never taken offence,” she said.

“Not at all, because I have a theory about this and have always wondered if I’m right.”

“The floor is yours,” she said, still standing in her open doorway.

“It occurred to me that you might be among those few readers who truly consider a book to be a stand-alone creative artifact that should be viewed in complete isolation, without any reference to the artist, his or her intentions or life or influences, so that the work alone, the art alone, speaks for itself.”

Her eyes widened for a second time, but unlike before, her mouth opened, too.

“It is as if you know my mind. You have just expressed a perfect distillation of my view, that the purity of the art itself is sacrosanct, untouched by any other considerations beyond the words on the pages,” she said. “How astonishing that you should somehow divine this about me.”

“A lucky guess,” he replied.

“But I am finding it harder and harder to honour this somewhat rigid view, and I feel myself weakening. I have such a deep respect and love for literature. But I am of two minds, and they battle constantly. On the one side, as you eloquently put it, art should be judged and enjoyed strictly on its own merits. I confess, I refuse even to read the back cover copy, and certainly not the author bio on the back flap.”

Malcolm nodded and she continued.

“But my abundance of curiosity pulls me in the opposite direction and brings me to your events to learn just a little about why you wrote the gem I have just read and loved. So, I compromise and just come for your presentation, and then I flee before the Q&A, where I might learn too much about you—let alone meet you, as I just have. I know it all sounds silly. But I fear the more I know about the writer, the less objective I am in judging the writer’s art. Am I a madwoman? Does that make any sense to you at all?”

“Now that you’ve explained it, I can certainly see your logic. You’re trying to protect the integrity of the art by not delving too deeply into the life and views of the artist—in this case, of me,” he replied. “I find it quite admirable. I only wish I had always known what prompted your early departures.”

“Well, I’m afraid my curiosity has been asserting itself more and more aggressively lately, and I think it’s time to indulge it further. So, may I say that it is lovely to see you, but how did you come to be standing here at my front door?”

“Um, please forgive the intrusion, but I fear you wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” Malcolm said.

“Well, Mr. Forde, I’ve believed every word in every novel you’ve ever written, so I suspect I’ll believe you now. Why don’t you come in and try

me?”

She didn’t wait for an answer but turned and walked inside. Malcolm’s own curiosity got the better of him again. He smiled, nodded, and followed her across the threshold.

To his astonishment, the suite looked just as it had when he’d briefly occupied it in his mind. The layout, the view from the terrace, even the choice of paint colours and at least some of the furniture were the same. It was unnerving. The biggest difference was the library. Of course, his writing desk was gone, replaced by a classy glass table that, by the looks of it, Colette was using as a workspace. Naturally, his awards were no longer hanging on the walls. While the beautiful built-in bookshelves appeared to be the same, the books gracing them were different. They were her books, not his—except for the seventeen novels sitting, yes, on a middle shelf, between what looked exactly like the typewriter bookends sitting on his own middle shelf across the street. Stunned, he quickly headed towards them. He placed his hand on one bookend as if testing its corporeal properties.

“I found those on Amazon,” she said. “I love them.”

“That’s where I found mine, too,” he said, nearly in a trance.

Standing there before Colette’s bookshelves, he was reminded of Dr. Sutcliffe’s recent declaration about the mysteries of the brain and how much there remained to learn about it. He decided that some things in life simply could not be explained and would likely never be understood. So, he stopped trying to figure out how Colette and he had come to swap living spaces in his unireverse, and how he knew his way around this penthouse suite when he was at that moment standing in it for the very first time. It was beyond explanation, but he pledged not only to accept it, but to be ready for more connections between his dream life and his reality. Then he rested his hands on top of his lineup of novels, as he often did at home.

“I don’t understand,” he said.

“Well, it’s easily explained,” she said. “You are my favourite writer. You always have been. I’ve seen you at several readings over the years, and your

talks are nearly as good as your books. So, it stands to reason that your oeuvre would occupy a prominent place in my bookcase."

"Thank you. Um, it's always a thrill to see one's novels on someone else's shelves," he said. "How long have you lived in this wonderful place?"

"When my sportswriter husband died thirteen years ago, I stayed in our home just outside of the city for a year or so but found there were too many memories. I bought this suite and moved in here when the building opened a decade ago."

Malcolm was looking past Colette to the large terrace beyond the picture windows.

"Are those solar panels on the terrace?" Malcolm asked, pointing.

"They are indeed," she replied. "I'm a retired professor of electrical engineering. Photovoltaics was my specialty, or rather, is my specialty."

"I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage, Professor Hamill."

"Colette, please," she replied. "It's the process of converting light into electricity, usually through solar cells. You might say I still dabble in the science recreationally. It keeps me out of trouble when my nose is not buried in a novel."

Bewildered, Malcolm couldn't help but look around the spacious and luxurious penthouse unit.

She nodded, then raised her hands and swivelled her head, taking in her lovely surroundings.

"All right. I know what you're thinking. How does a retired professor who was married to a sportswriter live here? Well, in my research, I developed a solar cell that allows sunlight's photons to release their electrons more efficiently, much more efficiently," she said. "As in many scientific discoveries, luck played a role, but my team and I were able to refine, patent, and ultimately commercialize the process and product…well, leading to my somewhat enhanced living quarters. I share the patent and the proceeds with the university and my research team."

"How wonderful. Thank you for your service to science and to the public interest."

“Curiosity is a wonderful gift.”

Malcolm chuckled. “As a writer, I’m usually the guy extolling the virtues of curiosity. But I can see how it also applies to breakthroughs in electrical engineering,” he said. “But staying with curiosity, have you ever been in the old apartment building across the street?”

“Funny you should ask. Two roommates and I lived there for a few years several decades ago, when I was an undergraduate,” she replied. “I loved that apartment—207 I think it was, a corner unit.”

Malcolm smiled and nodded.

“Why do you ask?”

“Well, it might make more sense if we table that question until…well, until I finally inscribe your Malcolm Forde collection.”

He still had one hand resting on the lineup of his novels on the middle shelf.

“Oh, that would be grand, but it can wait for a little bit longer,” she said. “I still don’t know how you came to be standing on my doorstep, but I do love a good story. Please sit and tell me all about it. You already have my rapt attention.”

And so he did. Other than his brief conversation with his neurosurgeon, it was the first time he had shared the story of his visit to a different world. He didn’t want her to think he was suffering from delusions, so he began by summarizing his recent brain surgery, and how that lentil of a tumour explained the story he was about to share.

His opening words were these.

“It began the night we were last in the same room together. It was after my reading at the library down the street.”

He then told her the whole tale. Waking up in that very suite and finding it filled with all his possessions. He told her everything. Manjusha, Emily, Sheila, Wonderwoman and Bigman, and Eliza, his biographer. The EVTOL and the MegaDome show. The crazed fans camped outside. His Alfa Romeo and private jet. The red carpet at the Hollywood premiere. The enlightening dinner with the Deputy Prime Minister and the incredible work of Aline Gagnon. Meeting Colette in the old apartment building across the street.

The endless personal demands, the time pressures, and the writer's block. All of it. He even told her about the new words *unireverse* and *writestar* and what they meant. He left nothing out. And Malcolm really knew how to tell a story. After all, he'd been an accomplished storyteller for most of his life, so it all came quite naturally to him. He warmed to his task as he warmed to her.

Colette sat across from him transfixed, spellbound, and—just as she had described herself some time before—rapt.

Nearly an hour later, he ended with the scene of him regaining consciousness on the floor of his writing room, in the very same apartment once occupied by one Colette Hamill, not just in his dream, but apparently in real life, too.

Colette shook her head, perhaps trying to process what she'd heard. Malcolm left her to her thoughts.

"That is the most wonderful, breathtaking, thrilling, mystifying, yet edifying story I think I've ever heard," she started. "And what is most extraordinary about it is that, against all odds, I somehow believe what you've told me. As in your novels, the details and the characters in the story, and the words you used to express it all, leave me with no choice but to accept it as truth."

"Thank you. That is every writer's goal," he replied. "And you are really the first person to hear the full story. You can understand why I have not shouted it from the rooftops. In a strange way, I wish to keep it to myself, for myself, as I try to fathom what I experienced."

"And how surprising is it that, even though we'd never met until today, I am somehow part of this story, too?" Colette said.

"I'm at a loss to explain it. To me, this is not the first time we've met," Malcolm said. "Obviously there are questions about the brain—about my brain and my very vivid dream—that we cannot, and may never, understand."

Malcolm had been talking for a while, so he let the silence hang between them for a time.

“But tell me—if you even know at this stage—what have you concluded from this odyssey?” she eventually asked.

Malcolm considered her question for a moment or two and breathed deeply before answering.

“Well, I can say that I loved driving that Alfa. And I loved living in that penthouse—sorry, in *this* penthouse. And flying in my own Gulfstream jet wasn’t too bad, either. But beyond those ephemeral luxuries, I must admit that in the end, I felt ready to come home. It was great fun at the start, but slowly I came to resent fame’s countless demands. The meetings, the public appearances, the media interviews, the pressure…it was exhausting, and in some ways crippling. Beyond taking up nearly all my time, I found they sucked the creativity right out of me and left me less able, in fact unable, to write. It frightened me.”

He paused for a moment, thinking it all through.

“In my writing life, back here in the real world, I often do talk shows, media interviews, and festival appearances, but on a completely different scale. I am never overwhelmed, and even at its peak, in the weeks following the launch of a new novel, it never compromises my writing. It never hobbles my ability or my desire to write. But in that alternate universe where writers live in the very top tier of the cultural pantheon, I was overwhelmed almost every day. I was just trying to keep up.”

“It surely was a different world than this one,” she said. “Books and writers revered? It sounds wonderful.”

Malcolm nodded, remembering.

“Would I like more people to read and buy books, preferably mine? Absolutely. Would I like to see governments lend more support to the creative arts and accept that writers and painters and composers and so many other artists are not just influencing our national cultural heritage, but often creating and curating it? Of course. Would I like for booksellers and publishers and writers and readers to thrive and earn enough to sustain a literary culture? Without question.”

“But…” she said.

“But even if we could achieve that—as attractive as it sounds—I don’t think I’d want to see the pendulum swing as far to the other side as it did in my dream,” Malcolm said, before pausing and shaking his head.

“I think art requires a certain stability, a certain freedom, a certain space within which creativity can breathe, and grow, and flourish. If my experience is any indication—even if it all unfolded only in my head—unlimited fame and celebrity inhibits creativity and likely will not yield the next great work of literature. Sure, artists would be more financially secure than they have ever been before—some would even be filthy rich—but would they still create? *Could* they still create? Would the literature and the art measure up?”

“This has been weighing on you,” she said.

Malcolm smiled.

“I guess it has. And what I seem to have concluded is that, in my parallel universe, my writing seemed just a means to an end. A means to money, fast cars, private jets, penthouse suites, and unbridled fame. What I learned living that way in my dream is that for me, writing is an end in itself. The rewards are the words alone and the stories they tell,” Malcolm said, pausing before continuing. “Yes, that’s my epiphany. Writing is an end in itself.”

“*An End in Itself* sounds like a possible title for the book you ought to write about this experience,” she said.

“Hmmm. I think you might be on to something,” he replied, nodding.

He then inscribed all of Colette’s Malcolm Forde novels, and eventually took his leave, feeling exhausted but uplifted. They agreed to have dinner the next evening, at a lovely bistro just a short walk up the street on which they both lived. At Malcolm’s insistence, Colette agreed that she would then tell him the rest of her remarkable story. He was happy she seemed to have completely abandoned her noble inclination to isolate the art from the artist, at least where he was concerned.

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The following morning, on a whim—or perhaps it was something more—Malcolm opened his laptop and made his way to the website of the federal Department of Culture. He started exploring the various news releases, reports, and other communications materials publicly available for download. Eventually, he stumbled upon a recent report by a professor at a major university entitled *The Economic Domino Effect of Community Literacy and Reading Programs*. He downloaded and read the paper. The professor theorized that the broader long-term economic and societal benefits of simply turning a community's citizenry—and ultimately a nation's—into avid readers would be surprising, perhaps even profound.

Though the report was entirely speculative, with little in the way of concrete evidence to substantiate its thesis, it was an eerily similar story to the one the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Culture had shared with Malcolm in his unireverse. In the news release about the report, the Literacy and Reading Promotion Unit of the Department of Culture was cited as the research sponsor.

So, he called the Department of Culture, using a 1-800 number he found online.

"Culture," the woman's voice on the phone said. "General Enquiries."

"Yes, hello, my name is Malcolm Forde and I'm a writer. Um, I really don't know where to start, but I'd like to speak with someone, anyone really, from what I believe is called the Literacy and Reading Promotion Unit. But I don't know how to find them. I guess that's why I called General Enquiries."

"As you should have," said the operator. "Well, let's see here."

He waited and could hear her fingers clacking away on her keyboard.

“Can you give me another minute while I look for it?”

“Of course.”

A few minutes passed but eventually she came back to him.

“Okay, I have managed to find the Literacy and Reading Promotion Unit. It’s a very new and small group that works out of our Arts and Literacy policy branch. If you give me your name and number, I’ll pass them along to the new unit manager and then someone will call you back. Would that work?”

Malcolm gave her his name and number and thanked her.

After he ended the call, he just stared at his phone for a while, until he no longer saw it. He was looking right through it, deep in thought, when it suddenly rang. He wasn’t sure how long his eyes had been trained on it, concentrating. He wondered if he’d somehow willed his phone to ring.

“Malcolm Forde,” he said, in his customary clipped manner.

“Mr. Forde, it’s a pleasure to speak with you. I’ve read and enjoyed many of your books,” the voice of a young woman said. “I’ve just joined the government as the manager of the Literacy and Reading Promotion Unit, here in the Department of Culture, and your message was passed along to me.”

Malcolm waited.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I nearly forgot. My name is Aline Gagnon, and I’m very happy to be the one returning your call.”

His incredulity long lost, Malcolm paused and smiled.

“Well, Ms. Gagnon, I doubt you’re as happy as I am.”

It was still mid-morning when their call ended—not a time when he traditionally felt creative or compelled to work. Yet, still seated at his gleaming desk, with Isla’s photo in its place, Malcolm Forde opened his laptop, created a new document, and began to write.

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Terry Fallis
Toronto, February 2026

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TERRY FALLIS grew up in Toronto and earned an engineering degree from McMaster University. Drawn to politics at an early age, he worked for cabinet ministers in Ottawa and at Queen's Park. His first novel, *The Best Laid Plans*, began as a podcast, then was self-published, won the Stephen Leacock Medal for Humour, was re-published by McClelland & Stewart to great reviews, was crowned the 2011 winner of CBC's Canada Reads as "the essential Canadian novel of the decade," and was adapted as a CBC Television series and a stage musical. His next two novels, *The High Road* and *Up and Down*, were finalists for the Leacock Medal, and in 2015, he won the prize a second time, for his fourth book, *No Relation*. His other novels, *Poles Apart* (a Leacock Medal finalist), *One Brother Shy*, *Albatross*, *Operation Angus*, *A New Season*, and *The Marionette*, were all national bestsellers. A skilled public speaker, he lives in Toronto with his wife.

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