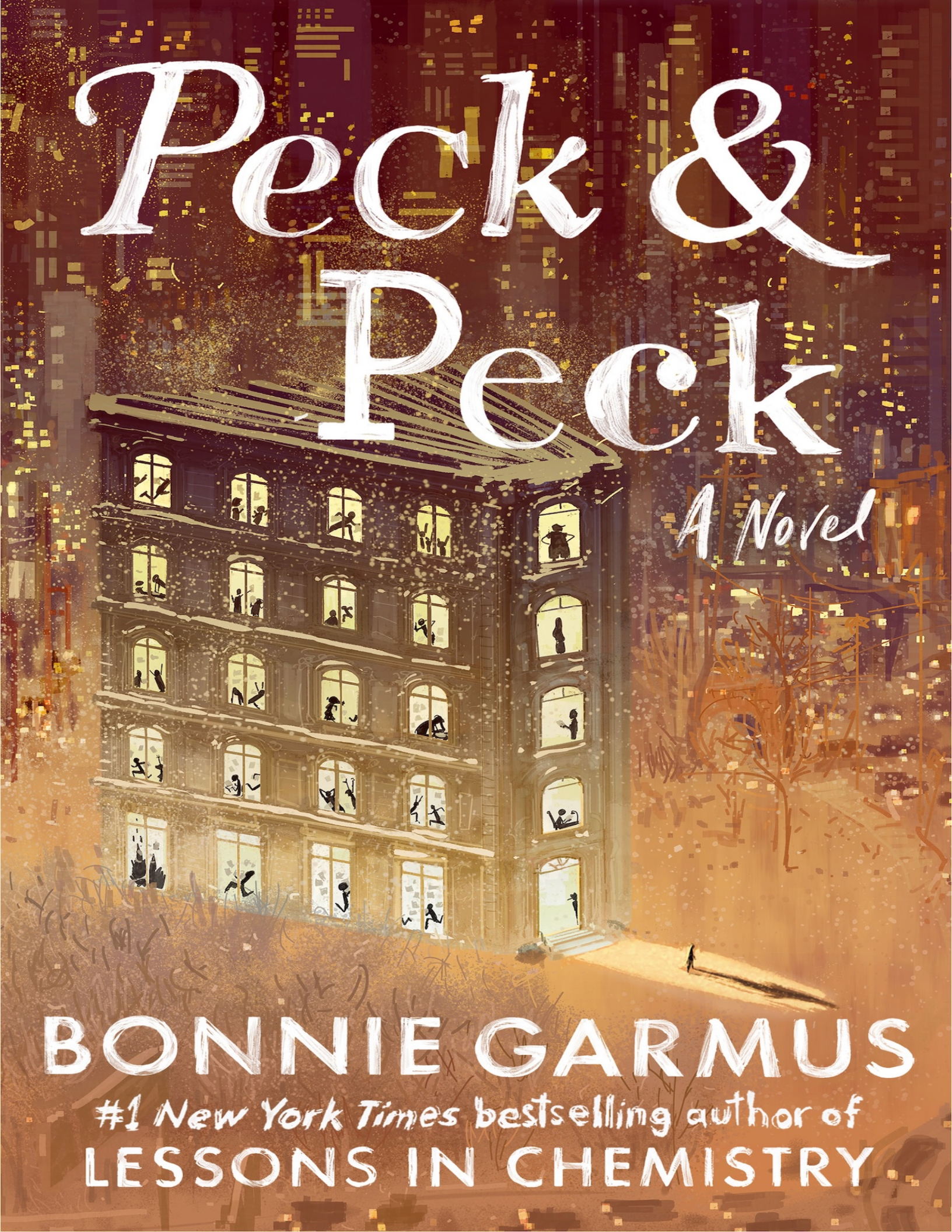
Peck & Peck

A Novel



BONNIE GARMUS

#1 New York Times bestselling author of

LESSONS IN CHEMISTRY

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The number one bestselling author of global sensation *Lessons in Chemistry* returns with an irresistible, delightful, and tender story about a young man whose life turns upside down when he is hired by the most prestigious, secretive, and dysfunctional poetry journal in the world: the renowned Peck Peck of New York City.

Batter Gray is worried about his future. Even when he was eleven, his classmates seemed to have settled on a goal: doctor, lawyer, broker, engineer. Good jobs that automatically command respect, security, 401Ks. Now Batter is in his early twenties, living in New York City, and he wants something different; something that alienates some readers and bores most. Poetry. And yet—to him and exactly thirty-nine editors at a company called Peck Peck—poetry not only represents the power of humanity but holds the key to its survival.

Batter is named after his mother's heroic dog. An identical twin who lost his brother at birth, he finds himself confronted by the everyday dualities that make up life: right vs. wrong, truth vs. lies, rejection vs. acceptance. It's almost as if his dead brother is a reminder: there are always two sides to every story.

No, wait. Make that three.

SELECTED PRAISE FOR LESSONS IN CHEMISTRY

GOODREADS CHOICE AWARD WINNER

A BEST BOOK OF THE YEAR: *The New York Times, Washington Post, NPR, Elle, Oprah Daily, Newsweek, GoodReads, Bookpage, Kirkus*

"Full of charm, energy and hope—and featuring a really great dog—it's one to savor."
—***People Magazine***

"The most delightful novel I read this year—fresh and surprising—was *Lessons in Chemistry*: a fish-out-of-water story about a feminist hero who never stops pushing for what's right. (I laughed out loud!"
—**Philip Galanes, *The New York Times***

"Darkly funny and poignant... Irresistible, a gorgeous tribute to resilience and the many types of love that sustain us."
—**Leigh Haber, *Oprah Daily***

"*Lessons in Chemistry* will make you wonder about all the real-life women born ahead of their time—women who were sidelined, ignored and worse because they weren't as resourceful, determined and lucky as Elizabeth Zott."
—**Elizabeth Egan, *New York Times Book Review***

"It's the world versus Elizabeth Zott, an extraordinary woman determined to live on her own terms, and I had no trouble choosing a side. *Lessons in Chemistry* is a page-turning and highly satisfying tale: zippy, zesty, and Zotty."
—**Maggie Shipstead, author of *Great Circle***

"A breath of fresh air—a witty, propulsive, and refreshingly hopeful novel populated with singular characters. This book is an utter delight—wry, warm, and compulsively readable."
—**Claire Lombardo, author of *The Most Fun We Ever Had***

"Elizabeth Zott swept me away with her intellect, honesty, and unapologetic selfhood... [A] story for all the smart girls who refuse to dumb themselves down despite a culture that demands otherwise. Though a creation of the 50s 60s, Zott is a feminist icon for our time."
—**Rachel Yoder, author of *Nightbitch***

Bonnie Garmus is a coffee-dependent American novelist. Her debut novel, *Lessons in Chemistry*, was a *Good Morning America* Book Club Pick, a Goodreads Choice Best Book of the Year, spent nearly two years on the *New York Times* bestseller list and was named by *Times* readers as one of the top 100 books of the 21st century. Translated into over forty languages,

Lessons in Chemistry was honored with sixteen international literary awards and made into an Apple TV limited series. *Peck Peck* is her second novel.

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Dear Reader:

Bonnie Garmus's debut novel, *Lessons in Chemistry*, was one of the most beloved and bestselling books of the past decade. If you read and loved it, as we did, you may be coming to her follow-up with certain expectations. Expectations of a dazzling, unforgettable, and deeply original novel, electrifyingly written. Happily, *Peck & Peck* fully meets those.

But we want to let you in on a secret.

From the first line, when our hero, Batter Gray, introduces himself as "a thief, a rebel, an upstart . . . and Prisoner 83A0956," you may think you know what kind of story you're entering. But you don't. And that's the point. *Peck & Peck* is a book that delights in overturning expectations.

The book is set in 1980s New York City, where Batter lands a job at the most prestigious, secretive, and dysfunctional poetry journal in the world. So, you may think *Peck & Peck* is a story about poetry—the words, typefaces, editors, and mysterious machinery behind what gets published and what doesn't. And it is. It somehow celebrates and demystifies poetry and poets in an inimitable way. But if you stop there, you'll miss the real magic.

Because *Peck & Peck* is also a novel about belief.
Belief in talent.
Belief in instinct.
Belief in originality.
And belief in the quiet, often inconvenient voice that tells us who we are—long before we're ready to listen.

You see, Batter Gray is surrounded by people who are brilliant, maddening, loyal, hypocritical, visionary, and lost—sometimes all at once. They're people he loves and people he loathes. Or does he? Batter's journey is as much about learning to *see* as it is about learning to *be*.

We at Scribner could not be more thrilled or proud to publish this extraordinary book. And we can't wait to hear what you think.

Happy reading,

Marysue Rucci
VP, Publisher
Scribner Books

Nan Graham
Publisher at Large, Editor
Scribner Books

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Peck & Peck

A Novel

BONNIE GARMUS

Scribner
New York Amsterdam/Antwerp London
Toronto Sydney/Melbourne New Delhi

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For David, Zoë, and Sophie, founding members of the Fantastic Four, and my three favorite people on earth.

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Peck [*pek*]**:** to pierce; to kiss; to type; to carp.

Pecking order [*pek•ing ·or•dər*]**:** the importance of members within a family or company.

Feeling peckish [*fēl•ing pek•ish*]**:** to nibble indifferently; to be in want of something.

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Peck & Peck

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1.

I’ve been called a thief, a rebel, an upstart, a traitor, and—maybe this one won’t come as a surprise based on the others—Prisoner 83A0956.

But mostly I go by Batter, a good family name passed down like a cherished ring, although not from my father or grandfather or even an important distant relative, but from a dog.

I never met the dog I was named for; he died just before I was born. But I’ve always wondered if he would have preferred a different name. King, Spot. Maybe Rex. The problem with being named Batter is that it’s not really a name; it’s a word. Some assume it’s preppy, like Banks or Bennett; others insist it must have foreign roots. Still others ask (cautiously) if my dad was “really into baseball” or if my mom “enjoys baking.”

Besides my name, I’m unusual in one other way. I’m an identical twin. I don’t bring it up much and for good reason: my brother was stillborn. Before you feel sorry for me, just know that the same thing happened to Elvis Presley; his brother didn’t make it either. There are things in life you can’t control; it’s nobody’s fault. Still, whenever I hear “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry,” I know why Elvis recorded it.

As for what I’m in for, I’m not really supposed to say without my attorney present, but I can tell you this: whenever a fellow prisoner asks me about my crime and I tell them, they’re visibly unimpressed. It’s not until I mention that this was actually my *second* crime—my first was back in the sixties and involved drugs—that I get any respect at all.

2.

In the spring of 1967, I was ten years old, and according to the news, things were going to hell in a handbasket; Vietnam raged, hippies smoked, pastels languished, neons blazed, and the radio was full of people screaming and banging on drums.

The one person who didn't think the world was going to hell in a handbasket was my mother, Rainey Gray, age forty-two, a professional type designer. She was married to my father, John Gray, age forty-six, a historian at the local community college and hell-in-a-handbasket enthusiast.

"What the hell are they *thinking*?" I can remember my dad shouting at the TV as Agent Orange spewed, Detroit burned, and astronauts died. "*Stop it,*" he'd demand as each new televised tragedy revealed that humankind was neither human nor kind, his eyes taking in another monstrous event he'd had no ability to stop but would be forever burdened to explain to future generations. Such is the fate of historians—no one seems to take their lessons of the past seriously.

"It's revolting," my mother would agree. "But at least people are out there protesting. At least they're making their voices heard. And from a professional standpoint, the protest signs aren't half bad. You can read END THE DRAFT from a mile away. That's because of Geoffrey Lee, though. He designed that typeface. It's called Impact. Offers excellent readability at long distances."

My mother knew everything about type.

"Type," she'd often explain, "is as fundamental as physics, each letterform as basic as the atom. All written communication depends on it. To make a difference, put the letters in the right order. First a word, then a sentence. Letters—in the right order and typeface—are the best way to inspire people to make better choices. Make a choice. Act."

My mother was big on both choice and action. As it turns out, morality requires both. But so does crime.

.....

"Hi, honey," she called as I arrived home from school. I was a fourth grader at Franklin Elementary School in Yuba City, California, a small town in the hot-as-hell Central Valley about forty miles north of Sacramento. Yuba City

is home to the Sutter Buttes, the world's smallest mountain range. I have always been proud of that fact.

"I'm in here," she added.

I dumped my stuff in the front hall and walked in to find her, head down at the kitchen table, surrounded by a pile of capsules.

"I can get them uncapped," she was saying as she demonstrated pulling a capsule apart. "And I can dump them out," she said, shaking the contents into the trash. "I can even refill them," she said, pointing at a box of powdered sugar. "But what I can't seem to do is get them back together. I think they changed the design." She glanced up at the clock, then shoved her bangs off to the side and kept at it.

"What is all this?" I asked uncertainly.

"It's my medicine."

My mother suffered from something called nerves. I wasn't sure what nerves were, but hers were a problem.

"But aren't you supposed to take it?"

"Yes, but I don't like it. It makes me feel awful."

"So why not just tell the doctor you don't like it?"

"I have, but doctors think they're God. They never listen. Tell me about school," she said. "Learn anything?" She was wearing a bright orange dress, which, in the right light, made her red hair look like a mass of glowing embers. It fell just slightly above her knee and featured two large, bright concentric circles—one purple, one pink; she called it her "moving target" dress, commenting that while the other mothers hadn't quite embraced 1967 style with the same gusto she had, she appreciated that not everyone felt comfortable diving into the deep end of anything, food, fashion, or otherwise.

"But won't you get in trouble for not taking your medicine, Mom?"

"Why would I get in trouble, honey?" she said, standing up. "It's my body."

I put the capsule down. "But isn't this your *nerve* medicine?"

"It is," she said, "but my nerves are fine. A *lack* of nerve—that's where the trouble starts. Here," she said. "See if you can't connect these two ends." She watched as I tried. "Oh—good work!" She smiled at me as she made her way to the sink. "Anyway," she continued, "the medicine isn't for me; it's for your father. I take it, he feels better. Your father suffers from anxiety,

Batter. Most historians do. This is because they've seen the past and know the future is going to be a repeat."

"It is? Why?"

"Because people never learn, honey."

"But Dad says historians teach people about the past so they *will* learn. So they won't repeat the same mistakes again."

My mother turned around slowly. "Yes, and every year those same historians—who also happen to be fathers—tell their children a heavyset man wearing an expensive velvet suit is going to slide down a filthy narrow chimney carrying talking dolls into a roaring hellfire." She returned to the table and picked up two sides of a capsule, filling one end with a tiny bit of sugar. "Keep going," she said. "We need to get these done before your Dad comes home."

"But I still don't get it," I said uneasily as I fitted the capsule back together. "Why does Dad feel better if *you* swallow the pills?"

"Anxiety is complicated," she said, sitting back down next to me. "In addition to being a historian, your father also suffers from a guilt complex."

"What's that?"

"It's when a person makes a mistake, admits the mistake, but still can't forgive himself for that mistake. If there was a test in forgiveness—whether for oneself or for others—most people would get an F."

"What kind of mis—"

"Admitting you made the mistake in the first place isn't easy," she said, ignoring my question. "Our brains are better at dodging responsibility than accepting it. In fact, some people can even convince themselves that the mistake wasn't really theirs—or get this—that no such mistake existed in the first place. You tell yourself enough stories, honey, and guess what: pretty soon you believe them. It's called self-deception."

"So Dad—"

"Admitted his mistake, accepted his mistake, apologized for his mistake, but hasn't yet forgiven himself for his mistake—even though I did. The thing eats at him. Thus, the guilt complex, thus the anxiety. So I take these sugar pills"—she picked one up as an example—"and he feels better. Because he thinks he's helping me. Because he thinks they'll help my damaged nerves, which frayed because of him. And I'll admit they did fray at first, but they recovered. As I said, it's the lack of nerve that gets you in

the end. I'm not going to argue this is the most sensible approach in the world—taking sugar pills—but like I said, anxiety is complicated. Ditto for marriage."

I thought about how, just last week, one of my father's former students had been killed in Vietnam. As he fought back tears, he snapped at me and rattled the newspaper and said something about how the good *always* die young and gave my mother the strangest, saddest look and my stomach dropped. My twin had died young.

"Rainey, did you take your medicine?" he asked, his hands shaking, and she said, "Not yet," and got up and disappeared into the bathroom, returning with a pink capsule and a glass of water. As she took the pill, sure enough, my father's shoulders softened, and a few minutes later he was okay again. The only time this didn't happen was when she was talking about Batter, that dog I'd been named after. If the dog came up, Dad left the room.

"Can dogs get anxiety, Mom?" I asked.

"I'm not sure anxiety is something you get—more like something you have. And it's usually the result of trauma, worry, bad experiences, excessive imagination, doubt, fear, anger, accidents, disappointment, or too much coffee."

My mother drank a lot of coffee.

"Everyone has anxiety," she continued. "It's a given. But it comes in a huge array of types and some people have more than others. Athletes get performance anxiety; so do actors. Artists get anxious because the work they do is subjective, meaning there's no way to measure its true worth, meaning some artists get away with murder while others should simply *be* murdered—you know what I mean? Like those poets you read; they're an anxious bunch, although that's mostly because they know poetry is the bottom of the barrel arts-wise and they'll never make a dime. Not having enough money really makes people anxious. So do war, families, loud noises, the Industrial Revolution, genetics, timed tests, poor diet, bad weather, and corporate culture. Have you read Auden's *The Age of Anxiety*? No? Don't worry; you're not alone. What was your question again? Do dogs have anxiety? Yes. But not Batter."

"I like Auden."

"You do?"

I did. Like most kids, I'd started with Dr. Seuss's rhymes, but unlike

most kids, I just kept going. I'm not sure why, really. I think it was partly because I liked how short most poems were but also how they contained secret messages you had to decode. To get at the secret message, you had to read the poem again and again: really *think*, you know? Take Auden for instance. He wrote, "Evil is unspectacular and always human,/and shares our bed and eats at our own table." At first I thought he meant that evil wasn't all that big of a deal due to the word "unspectacular." But then I realized Auden was saying, stop wasting your time worrying about the monsters under your bed; they're nothing compared to the real ones: Stalin, Lee Harvey Oswald, every bully in the universe.

"Actually, I'm wrong," my mother said, tapping my arm to bring me back to the capsules. "Batter was anxious the day I got him. Probably because he wondered where I was."

"What do you mean? How could Batter know you were coming?"

"I never said the dog knew I was coming. I said he probably wondered where I was. That's how life is, honey. Unpredictable in terms of time. You know something's coming; you just don't know when."

I hesitated, trying to picture the whole thing in my head. My mom went to an animal shelter, got a dog, brought him home, told her parents that life's unpredictability had caused the whole thing—and they said *Sure*, *honey*? No way. I'd only met my grandparents once, but they hadn't struck me as the sure-honey type.

"You always said Grandpa and Grandma didn't like pets."

"Everyone has a blind spot."

"But they let you have Batter."

"'Let' might be the wrong word."

She dumped out a few more capsules. "Look," she said, "I've told you this before. I didn't go to the shelter because I *felt* like going; I went because I *had* to go—because if I hadn't gone, Batter wouldn't have been able to do all the important things he had to do."

"Like—?"

"Like acts of heroism."

I rolled my eyes.

"Don't mock it," she scolded me. "Being a hero is a tough job. It's not something one is automatically born to do; it's not magic. Anyone can be a hero; it's just that most aren't up for the sacrifice."

“I know, Mom, but a *dog*?”

“You’re asking how a dog becomes a hero. That’s a very good question and the answer is simple: he has help. All professional heroes have help. Like in your comic book—Batman. Batman has help. He has— What’s the Commissioner’s name?”

“Commissioner Gordon.”

“And the young man.”

“Robin, the Boy Wonder.”

“That’s right, Commissioner Gordon and the Boy Wonder. Although I’m unclear on how much help either of these two actually provides. It seems to me like the commissioner is always the one asking for help, and Robin is more of a hero intern. Does next to nothing.”

“So you’re saying Batman *doesn’t* have help,” I said as I pressed two ends of a capsule back together.

“No, he does. But it’s often the most unlikely person who provides the real help. The one person everyone dismisses. In this case, Alfred, the butler.”

“No, Alfred dusts the mansion.”

“He does. And he hand-washes Batman’s bat suits, and polishes the Batmobile, and waxes the Batpole, and makes gourmet dinners while *also* making the millionaire Wayne family appear perfectly normal to the outside world. Which they are not. Consider this: Bruce Wayne disappears from his own cocktail party for the fiftieth time; Dick Grayson can’t explain why he never goes to school; nosy guests want to know what the hell is going on in that basement. So who do they ask about all of this? Alfred. Who immediately comes up with a set of flimsy excuses, which, for some reason, everyone instantly believes.”

“So, Alfred’s a professional liar.”

“No, I’m saying Batman and Alfred were a team. Like Batter the dog and I were a team. I did what *I* had to do in order for Batter to—”

“Fulfill his destiny.”

“Exactly! Now you see!” She seemed relieved. “In life, if you want to make a difference, you can be Batman *or* Alfred. They both matter the same.” She dusted the table with her hand. “Oh look, we’re done!”

And we were. But I couldn’t figure out if I’d helped my mom or harmed her, and the whole thing made me pretty anxious myself.

3.

The next day at school, my fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Barksdale, announced it was Career Week and asked each of us what we were going to *be*—not do, but *be*—when we grew up.

"Prima ballerina," said one girl, whose hair was pulled back so tight, her eyes were reduced to little slits. "Stewardess," said another. "Vice President, Sales," said this guy I could not stand. "Vet." "Fire Chief." "Doctor." "TV star." And so on. I had no idea where everyone was coming up with this stuff.

"What about you, Batter?" Mrs. Barksdale asked. "What are you going to be when you grow up?"

"A poet." A bunch of people laughed.

"A worthy goal," Mrs. Barksdale said supportively. "But one thing you should know: being a poet means you have the interesting opportunity of working *two* jobs at once. That's because a poet's take-home pay isn't always exactly— How do I put this? Adequate. But with two jobs, the poet can still eat and write. What kind of other job would you like to do to ensure you can still eat and write?"

"The thing is, I'd be writing all the time," I explained. "So, I don't think I'd have time for another job."

"Robert Frost worked as a cobbler," she reminded me. "Walt Whitman was a clerk."

"Yeats didn't have a second job."

"You know Yeats already? So maybe you also know he was landed gentry. That means he owned a lot of land—he was born wealthy." Her tone indicated she understood her students, most of them from Yuba City's hardworking farm families, were not. "Wealthy people tend to have different options," she said gently. "So how about this: go home tonight and think about what a fun second job might be and report back tomorrow. And remember, everybody, we're all going to the Natural History Museum in the morning. Lots of career ideas there, too!"

When we walked into the museum the next day, I had to wonder what Mrs. Barksdale meant by career ideas. Like what? Undertaker? The place was full of bones.

“Keep moving, Batter,” Mrs. Barksdale said. “It’s a big museum and we still have two floors to go. Take a picture. That way you can see it all when you get home.”

“So the dodo’s gone forever?” I said, snapping a photo of a diorama with my Brownie 127 camera. It featured an odd-looking bird being approached by hungry-looking men wearing petticoats.

“Yes,” she said. “The Dutch found them on an uninhabited volcanic island in the Indian Ocean. The dodos had flown there to get away from predators on the mainland and stayed and stayed and never flew anywhere again. Until the Dutch showed up; then they really needed to fly. But guess what? They couldn’t. Because their wings didn’t work anymore. Who knows why?”

“Evolution,” Ruth, the smartest kid in our class, said.

“That’s right, Ruth. Use it or lose it—that’s evolution’s motto. So, when the Dutch showed up, the dodos had no choice but to allow themselves to be clubbed to death. Do you know what that’s called, class?”

“Mass murder?” my friend, Bill, offered.

“Stupidity. Because had the Dutch allowed some of those dodos to live, their food supply would have continued. But no, the Dutch killed them all and the dodo went extinct. Extinction, children, is brought about by those with short-term goals and zero foresight. Ignorant people. They’re everywhere.”

“I wanna kill a dodo!” Kyle, the class bully, shouted.

“Thank you for proving my point, Kyle,” Mrs. Barksdale said.

According to the museum’s information sheet, the name “dodo” may have come from the Dutch word *dodoor*, meaning sluggish, or *dodaar* meaning fat-assed. Those Dutch didn’t mince words. Neither did the museum’s information sheet.

Our ability to destroy, either by killing or habitat destruction, is matched only by our inability to conceive of any possible consequences, the sheet read.

"Do you understand?" Mrs. Barksdale asked us. "It means think things through, kids. If you don't, we'll go extinct, too, and the aliens will open their own museums and stuff them full of dioramas to show who the real dodos had been. *Humans reached extinction*," she said, adopting a *Twilight Zone* voice, *because they no longer used their brains. Because they got lazy and created machines to think for them. While this type of error seems unimaginable by our standards, humans were renowned for their unprecedented levels of idiocy.*"

We all stared back at Mrs. Barksdale, our mouths agape.

"Let's go see the dinosaurs," she said cheerfully. "They're all dead, too."

4.

Career Week turned into career eternity.

"I met the most interesting person today," my mother said one evening after dinner. "He was a district attorney. Imagine being all grown up and going to parties and saying, *Oh me? I'm a district attorney*. I bet the entire room would drop dead from envy and excitement."

"People love district attorneys," my father agreed. "You know what else they love? Financial planners. Engineers. Doctors."

At the mention of doctors, my mother frowned, then turned to me and my book. "What are you reading, honey?" she asked, peering over my shoulder. She hesitated, then donned her reading glasses to get a better look. "That's twenty-two-point Helvetica," she said, tapping the page. "Helvetica was designed by the Swiss. It's meant for facts, numbers, train schedules—cold, hard truth sorts of things. Is this a textbook?"

"No."

“Good, because textbooks are full of errors. Helvetica is a sans serif,” she said, which I already knew. “‘Sans’ means without, and ‘serif’ means, well, you know, serif. A serif gives words more weight—do you know what I mean? Importance. I’m not saying Helvetica doesn’t have a place in the world, I’m just saying it’s boring. So what’s so boring and unimportant it didn’t rate a serif?”

“Poetry.”

My father looked up. They exchanged glances.

There isn’t a parent alive who wants their kid to grow up and be a poet. Surgeon, yes; poet, no. Can you blame them? If you need a transplant, poetry is not going to get the job done. If you want to buy a home, your poem will not serve as collateral. You cannot fly to Tahiti based on the number of poetry points you’ve accumulated. The words “I made a killing in poetry” have never been uttered.

So I understood why my parents wanted me to go for a future that promised financial stability. It was because they hadn’t. My dad hadn’t finished his Ph.D., meaning he was a teacher, not a professor, meaning he got paid next to nothing. My mom had been in nursing school, but after a patient died due to a typographical error, she switched to type design. Which also paid next to nothing.

And it wasn’t that they didn’t love their work in history and typography—they did. It was more that their work didn’t love them back. As evidenced by their paychecks.

“What about becoming a pilot?” my father would ask. “People love pilots.”
“A pilot doesn’t have to buy clothes,” my mother would add. “The airline gives them a uniform—*and* a pension. Think about it. You know how much you hate to shop.”

They also tried to encourage my hidden talents—all of which must have

been really well hidden because they never once made an appearance. Like on Sports Day when I got last place in the fifty-yard dash? My mom patted me on my back and reminded me that lots of Olympians started out as slow runners. “Take Wilma Rudolph for instance,” she said. “She overcame childhood polio to become an Olympic gold medalist.” “You don’t even have polio,” my father pointed out.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Barksdale crowded my desk with biographies filled with all the important things scientists and senators had done. “That second job,” she’d whisper, placing the book next to my stack of poetry anthologies. “So you can eat *and* write.”

I did my best to look interested in all of these suggestions, and believe me, I wanted to. It’s no picnic growing up in a home where the penny jar holds more than the checking account. It’s not like we were begging in the streets, but things were tight enough that our electricity got shut off a few times.

That’s why, without telling anybody, I’d secretly settled on becoming a poet or a baseball player. Sorry. I meant *world-famous* poet and/or *world-famous* baseball player. *World famous*. That was the key. World-famous people made fortunes.

But that idea got ruined the day I discovered that being world famous caused problems all on its own.

.....

“Shoeless Joe took a *bribe*?” I cried as I sat at the kitchen table reading his biography. “And so did seven of his teammates?”

“You’re referring to the White Sox,” my mother said as she cracked open the oven door, black smoke escaping from all sides. “The baseball players who threw the World Series in 1919.”

“But Shoeless Joe had one of the best batting averages in the world! He didn’t need the money!”

“Everybody needs money,” my mother said. “There isn’t a person in the world who says, ‘I have exactly as much as I need. Please. Stop paying me.’”

“But Shoeless—”

“It’s psychological,” my mother said. “No matter how much someone has, it’s never enough.”

“Do we have enough?”

Dead silence.

“What’s for dinner?” my father asked as he came in the back door.

“Have you ever taken a bribe?” I asked her.

“Oh, honey, no, I’m a type designer; we don’t get offered bribes. Although, honestly, I wouldn’t mind being asked at least once. Imagine someone thinking you’re so influential, they’re willing to pay you to cheat. Bribes are devious though because they end up making two criminals at once: the payer *and* the payee. Normal crimes don’t do that. If you’re mugged you might lose your wallet, but no one’s going to ban you from baseball for life.”

“But—”

“The real crime here was that Shoeless Joe was illiterate. Education should be available to all. Isn’t that right, John?” she said, squeezing my father’s defeated-looking shoulder. “Education changes lives.”

“Are you okay, Dad?”

“I marinated the Cornish game hens in the last of the bourbon,” she told him. “I hope you didn’t want a drink because we’re out.”

He heaved a heavy sigh.

“Teaching history is hard,” she said, patting my dad’s shoulder again. “And you know what makes it even harder? Knowing that history is completely dependent on who’s telling it. For instance, some historians insist that Christopher Columbus discovered America, while others argue the guy couldn’t find his way around Macy’s. And what does ‘discover’ mean anyway? The Indians were already there. I don’t recall any Indians saying, ‘Hey—thanks for discovering us! So, what happens next?’”

My father placed his head in his hands.

“They had a Macy’s back then?”

“What I’m trying to say,” my mother continued, “is that good historians are always trying to get at the truth of the past. But it’s hard because everyone they need to talk to, can’t. Because they’re dead.”

My mother placed two small, charred birds in the middle of the table. “New recipe.”

My father heaved a second deep sigh.

“Is that true, Dad? Everyone you need to talk to is dead?”

His third sigh was the longest.

5.

Remember that poetry anthology I mentioned? The one in twenty-two-point Helvetica? My school librarian finally just gave it to me. “Takes up too much shelf space,” she said, shoving it back in my direction. “If you’re interested, I have tons more I’d love to unload.”

That’s how I went from A. A. Milne to Bukowski in five years. By the time I reached high school my parents worried in earnest.

“I wish you’d stop reading that,” my mother said one day as she looked over my shoulder at a poem set in a liturgical typeface. “It’ll ruin your eyes. Typefaces are both practical and emotional, a volatile combination that should only ever be handled by a trained professional. That’s a typographic felony. You could go to jail for that.”

“It’s an *assignment*,” I said, even though it wasn’t. I was seventeen years old and in AP English. Anything with a spine could pass as required reading.

“I’m just saying, a typeface influences perception. This one’s trying to make you think the Pope endorsed it.”

“Well, maybe he *did*,” I said through gritted teeth, although that wasn’t possible given the content. It was “Sonnet #2” by Ted Berrigan, the guy who subverted the form. I didn’t even know that was *allowed*—dismantling a strict poetic construct that had been around since the thirteenth century. But Ted did it, and when he did, new patterns emerged and cadences sang. Naturally this was followed by a lot of really bad imitators trying to do the same thing.

How do I know? Because I have perfect pitch. That may not sound like a very big deal, but in the music world, perfect pitch is what defines a legend: Mozart, Duke Ellington, the guys in Steely Dan—they can practically hear the color of music. Same concept applies to poetry; I can *hear* the color of words. The difference is, because it’s poetry, no one cares.

Sometimes I liked to think my perfect pitch came to me as recompense. I'd lost my brother; I was gifted an ear. We all have our fantasies. But there was a more obvious reason. Poetry is what I practiced.

From elementary school, through junior high, and now in high school, I've read *everything*: anthologies, chapbooks, *The New Yorker*'s poetry selections, everything in the *The Paris Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, Copper Canyon Press, plus all the usual suspects: Shakespeare, Larkin, Keats, the Beat poets, the Classics, the romantics, Rod McKuen. I didn't love it all. Some of it was boring. A ton of it was confusing. But I kept at it. That is how an ear is built. Not through gifts, through practice. I know this because the one thing I didn't practice was my own writing. The writer who doesn't write. Know any?

"And it only reinforces my point about the importance of typography," my mother continued. "With the right typeface *any* poem can seem important. Even poems written by elephants. You know what I'm referring to, right? That ridiculous book that came out a few years ago—the one by that famous elephant researcher who trained elephants to work with paintbrushes. Remember? He taught them to paint suns and little houses with smoke coming out of chimneys, and even words—'cat,' 'dog'—that sort of thing. And certainly, that is a feat. But is it *poetry*? Honestly, I think one of the so-called poems—I kid you not—went like this:

birdie me
so soon

"Publish that in a Garamond and you basically look like a slobbering idiot, but set it in Elephant Brush Type and suddenly it's brilliant. That's the power of typography, Batter. Choose the right typeface and anything can seem better than it really is. I'm sure elephants are smart, but they don't know the first thing about readability. Poetry is already a slippery slope, but when elephants get involved, it only makes matters worse."

"*Poetry?*" my father said, shaking his rapidly graying head a few months later, when he got a courtesy call from my school's college counselor letting him know I was planning to go to college and major in something without a future. "We've talked about this. I know you like your poetry books and I'm sure you'll read some new poems in freshman English, but no—no one

‘goes into’ poetry. That would be like ‘going into’ macramé. You don’t do that on purpose.”

“Batter,” my mother said, “look at it this way. If poetry disappeared tomorrow, would the world end?”

I pictured the last flightless dodos being clubbed to death.

“It’s just not serious,” my father said. He paused for a moment and gazed out the window. “Well,” he said, in a conciliatory way, “perhaps one could argue that ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’ is serious. It *is* about war. But that’s my point—it’s about war. We already know war isn’t a picnic, so move on, get to the point. If six hundred men rode directly into the Valley of Death—an idea that already smacks of poor decision making—shouldn’t our top priority be to determine how many are dead, alive, or wounded? What are the *facts*, Batter? I would have no objection if you wanted to be a journalist. What about a TV anchor?”

“But I’m good at poetry, Dad, and besides, poetry is part of the humanities—what you and Mom pursued. I thought you’d approve.” This was a complete lie, seeing as how my parents had been mentioning everything *but* the humanities for the past eight years.

“But history and typography aren’t subjective. Poetry is. There’s no way to check its authority.” My father rubbed the back of his neck. “Anyway, do you really want to spend your life in a field where half the experts insist E. E. Cummings is brilliant, while others argue he’s a hack who was too lazy to get his shift key fixed? And what about Plath? No one’s going to claim that ended well.”

“I think what we’re trying to say,” my mother interjected, “is that just like no one deliberately selects a typeface that isn’t readable unless they don’t want anyone to be able to read what they’ve written, no one consults a poetry anthology for—well—anything, really. Things of substance require clarity. Besides, have you actually written any?”

When I didn’t answer right away, my mother shook her head.

“Batter, honey,” she said, “don’t bother. When it comes to subjectivity, poetry is worse than figure skating. At the end of the day, you’re never going to convince that Russian judge you deserve a ten.”

6.

Fast-forward to 1975. I'd done semi-well on my standardized tests and, by a complete fluke, was going to be salutatorian at my high school (Go Honkers!), although that last one was only because the Honor Society seniors (I wasn't one of them) contracted giardia on a field trip to the Sierra Nevada thanks to drinking directly from a stream without considering the need for iodine protection, thus proving that intelligence comes in several flavors.

My parents were thrilled with my salutatorian status, and I was thrilled because they needed to be thrilled about something. They insisted I attend a four-year college, urging me to apply to all the big-name schools "just in case." Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth, Princeton, et cetera, even though I wasn't a legacy, hadn't attended prep school, showed no extraordinary promise, required a major scholarship. Rejections broke all land-speed records. They were swiftly followed by a rejection from the gigantic in-state university, which I'd assumed took all of us in-state kids. Wrong.

Anyway, when I said I'd done well on my standardized tests, I just meant the verbal. My math score was so low it may have set a few national records. Nevertheless, at the final hour, a pricey, picturesque New England university sensed my true worth and accepted my parents' nearly empty checkbook with open arms. I left for college four months later, still unsure about my future.

Unfortunately, my freshman roommate came to college already certain of his. Within five minutes of my meeting him, he announced he was going to be a politician, an unusual goal back then. It was 1975, and Nixon had just been run out on a rail. People my age didn't want to grow up and *be* politicians—we wanted to grow up and get *rid* of politicians—to work outside the system.

His name was Paul. He was tall, with *GQ* features topped by a halo-like

Afro (“I’m half-Asian, half-Black,” he informed me, “my mother was Miss Malaysia; my father is Harry Belafonte’s cousin”). He took in my plain face, my Allman Brothers T-shirt, my frizzy hair, which looked a lot like dried seaweed. “I’ve got some conditioner for that.”

He’d gone to Exeter and smoked a tobacco pipe. As we unpacked our bags, he puffed and tapped it repeatedly, announcing that he had every intention of being in the Senate before he was thirty. I nodded, trying to work up the courage to tell the future senator there’d been a mistake; I’d requested a nonsmoking roommate; perhaps talking to the housing people now rather than later made the most sense. But before I could he said, “I’m so glad you’re not a smoker. Cigarettes kill.” And then he waved his pipe around in a friendly way as if we both understood pipes wouldn’t dream of doing such a terrible thing.

I watched as he unpacked his four large suitcases, each of which was filled with weather-beaten polo shirts in a spectacular array of colors, a few dry-clean-only blazers, and ironed jeans. He looked athletic, although he made it clear that he didn’t go in for sports (“in case you were assuming I was here on an athletic scholarship; that’s racist by the way”). On his neck lay a thin beaded necklace; on his right wrist, two weathered woven bracelets, on his left, an antique gold watch.

“Is Batter short for something?” he asked. “Battermore?—or—help me out.”

“I was named for a dog.”

“Interesting.”

“And you?”

He moved his head slightly as if to indicate this wasn’t a question one asked.

“What kind of dog?” he pressed.

“A mutt.”

There was a small pause as he took this in. Then he uttered the two words that would forever be his calling card, a simple, nonjudgmental pronouncement that automatically endeared him to everyone. “That’s cool.”

We spent the next two hours unpacking—or rather he did. I was done in ten minutes.

“You need all those hangers?” Paul asked, pointing at my closet.

“Help yourself.”

He reached in, visibly flinching at the sight of my Bed Bath & Beyond laundry bag.

"It was free with purchase," I explained as he threw it in the trash.

"Are those your albums?" he asked, pointing to the only box I hadn't unpacked.

"Books."

"You *brought* books to college? Why?" He leaned over and sliced through the tape, the cardboard flaps springing to life. He looked down at the contents.

"Emily *Dickinson*?"

"I'm into poetry."

He rose to his feet and placed his hands on my shoulders. "Here's the deal, Bat," he said, pressing down hard. "Poetry sounds romantic; I get it. But you're never going to attract any women with those books, and don't fuck with me; I know that's why you brought them. No one likes poetry—not even the hairy armpit girls who say they do. So here's my advice: learn guitar. Actually—scratch that. Just get a guitar. Keep it in the corner so the ladies can see it. Then about twice a week sling it across your back and walk around the campus."

"The thing is," I said, "I'm pretty good at poetry. I have an ear."

He slung his arm around my neck and pulled me to the window. "Take a look." Down below other freshmen were unloading boxes from station wagons, parents standing off to one side like awkward extras in a B-movie. "In about two hours, this campus will shift from a bunch of badly mortared bricks into a near-perfect environment of drugs, music, pizza, and sex. This special environment lasts four years—possibly five, depending on the drugs. I'm just trying to help you maximize your experience, that's all."

Of course, Paul was right—he was right about everything, and even when he wasn't right, he sounded right—an important skill for a politician. But his reasoning was flawed in one specific sense: college would have been a near-perfect environment if it weren't for the way it ruined the whole thing by insisting everyone declare a major. The word "declare" alone just about

killed me—as if this was information worth shouting from the rooftops: It's a boy! It's a girl! It's Medieval Studies!

"So, you're a virgin, right?" he said, coming away from the window. Like it was tattooed across my forehead. Naturally I denied it, making up a girlfriend on the spot. Simone Santalorian. Pretty good name, right?

"We've been having regular sex since 1972," I claimed.

"Regular sex since 1972," he repeated slowly, taking in my painter's pants with little loops that had never once held a paintbrush. Then he pointed to two enormous Bose speakers and motioned that I should help him hook them up. "What brought you to New England anyway?" he asked.

"I didn't get in anywhere else."

"*Really?*" he said, looking as if I'd just announced I regularly drank blood.

"Okay, then what about you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why are you here?"

"Why wouldn't I be here?" he said, surprised. "Listen," he commanded, his back turned toward me while he dug through a box of record albums—one of about fifteen thousand. "Since you're a poetry lover, maybe you've heard of this new thing that makes poetry tolerable. It's called music."

He slipped an ancient-looking record out of its aging sleeve and onto the turntable, turning the volume to nine. "I know it's old, but I love it. HIS NAME IS TOM JONES," he shouted as the first notes of "It's Not Unusual" blasted from the Bose speakers. "HE'S *WELSH*."

That was Paul: unexpected, opinionated, cool. He had a lot of friends, all of whom he made within a week after he'd introduced himself to just about everyone on our six-thousand-student campus. Girls adored him. By the third weekend, he was spending Saturday night elsewhere, returning Sunday morning with a dazed look of sexual fulfillment that took hours to wear off. And when he wasn't making new friends and having sex, he was doing important things like organizing marches or meeting with school janitors to talk about their wages. I remember how furious he was when he discovered he had to take freshman English. "Batter, are they serious?" he fumed, "I went to Exeter, and you went to . . . wherever." Then he

suggested we make an appointment with the college president to express our mutual outrage.

I didn't have the nerve to tell him I wasn't outraged—not about freshman English, not about the economy; not really about anything. The truth was, I was grateful the college told me what classes to take. I just wish they'd kept it up all four years.

7.

"Batter Gray?" intoned a sullen, heavyset history professor named Dr. Doug Payne as he stared at my mostly blank form. My appointed adviser. "First thing, no nicknames." He scratched out Batter. "What's your *real* name?" He sounded pissed, like I'd already stepped over the line.

"It—really is—Batter."

He glanced up at me, then exhaled, his stale breath coating my face.

"Okay. Right." He shook his head. "Major?"

"I'm not really sure yet. I was hoping that maybe we could—"

"Interests?"

"Poetry. I also like music. Although I don't play an instrument."

"You're saying you *write* poetry. As opposed to *thinking* you might write poetry."

I didn't answer.

"This is a liberal arts school, Mr. Gray," Payne continued. "We offer an education second to none. With it you can do anything, but commitment is a requirement. Let's put poetry aside for now. What are your career aspirations? Law? Medicine?"

"Again, I haven't really, uh—solidified that particular area—"

He kneaded the back of his neck. "Let's take it from a different angle," he said. "Let's say you're on a plane."

"Okay."

“And you need to land.”

“Okay.”

“You look out the window, but all you see are jagged, snowy mountains and violent oceans.”

“Wait. I’m actually *flying* this plane?”

He exhaled again. “Yes. So where do you land?”

“I—I don’t know. I mean, I guess I’d keep flying—look for a safer—”

“But you’re out of gas, Batter.”

“I *am*?”

“Should have checked that gas tank before you took off.”

“But I’m not a pilot. Why would I even—”

“A crash landing is a horrible way to die.”

“What is your *point* here?”

“Make a flight plan. Because until you do, I’ll be making one for you.” And here he paused and looked at the ceiling as if consulting the heavens. “Math major.” He wrote on my form in ink.

“But math is my worst—”

“Maria Pappas?” he called. He was already at the door, scanning the hallway. “Maria, you’re next.”

.....

The registrar’s course catalog suggested that math majors start with Linear Algebra and Computational Analysis, but at the very bottom of the list was something called Accounting for Lovers, a class I later learned was developed by an anxious economist who couldn’t sleep at night knowing half the student body didn’t know how to balance a beer budget, much less a checkbook. The class description promised I would “fall in love with columns.”

“*Accounting?*” Paul said, noticing my textbook later that night. “At a liberal arts school? What’s the world coming to? Put that down right now and come with me to the rally. I’ll introduce you to some women.”

“Thanks, but I promised I’d play foosball with the guys down the hall.”

He shook his head as if I really had to work on my priorities. “By the way, your parents called,” he said, holding out a message slip. “Your dad sounded kind of anxious.”

“I hear Doug Payne is teaching Ancient Greek History,” my father said. “Avoid at all costs.”

“Actually, Dad, he’s my—”

“Met any nice girls?” my mother interrupted from the extension. In high school, I rarely dated, avoided parties, dreaded group class projects, didn’t run for student council. I did play baseball, I did have friends, but given the choice, I’d choose a book over a kegger. You’d think this would be every parent’s dream, but no. Make no mistake—my parents were glad I was a reader—they just didn’t approve of what I read. “Tell your AP English teacher to recommend something else,” my father would say, cringing at the sight of yet another poetry anthology. “The newspaper, an adventure story, a mystery.” Which never made sense to me. Poetry *was* the news, *was* the adventure story, *was* the mystery.

“How’s the roommate?” my father asked.

“Paul? He’s fine. I mean, I barely see him. He’s busy.”

“With classes? That’s admirable.”

I thought about this. Did Paul actually go to classes? How would he have time, given all the marches and sex and drugs? We’d lived together three months already and I’d never seen him do any classwork. Or drugs for that matter.

“Does he already know what he wants to major in?” my father asked.

“He’s pre-law.”

“Pre-law!” my parents chimed.

“Who’s on the phone?” Paul boomed as he strode into our room. “It’s not Regular-Sex-Since-1972, is it?”

“What happened in 1972?” my mother asked.

I pressed the phone against my stomach. “*Parents*,” I hissed to Paul.

“Historically speaking, 1972 is the longest year on record,” my father was saying. “It was a leap year, so it was already twenty-four hours longer. But then someone added two extra seconds.”

“What on earth *for*?” my mother asked.

“Lemme say hello,” Paul said, grabbing the phone before I could stop him. “Mr. and Mrs. Gray, what a pleasure! Yes. It’s Paul Acheson—Batter’s roommate. Yeah! Same!” He bobbed his head while my parents said

whatever they were saying, followed by Paul saying, “That’s right—pre-law—plan to be in the Senate,” followed by some obvious oohing and aahing from my parents followed by Paul reassuring them that I was “something else.”

Within two minutes my parents were in love with Paul, just like everybody else. I felt a wave of nausea. Was this sibling rivalry?

“You’re too kind,” Paul was saying. “Thank you. The presidency? I’m honored you think so.”

“—No, unfortunately, Batter had to run,” he said, hitting me in the head with a pencil. “Auditing another graduate-level course. Yeah. He’s so ambitious. What’s that? Is he still reading poetry?” He threw me a look. “Must have been a phase. The only book I see is *Cranial Surgery Techniques*.” He beamed at me. “I guess that explains the Neuroscience audit. Yeah. *Exactly*. No, no, believe me, *he’s* the good influence here. Okay, I’ll tell him. It’s been a pleasure speaking with you Mr. and Mrs. Gray.”

“Jesus, Paul,” I said after he hung up. “*Neuroscience?*”

“Throw your parents a bone, Batter,” he said. “Every parent needs to feel like the last eighteen years weren’t a total waste of time and money.”

“I’m *aware*.”

“Hey, I’m sorry, brother,” Paul said, picking up on my tone. “I didn’t mean to—”

“I have to go study,” I interrupted, heaving my backpack on my shoulder in obvious irritation. “And listen, Paul, for the record, poetry is not a phase. JFK himself said ‘When power corrupts, poetry cleanses.’”

“He did?” he said. “Weird. Okay, sorry. I guess I didn’t realize there were actual poet jobs. I always thought it was the sort of thing one did on the side. A hobby.”

I cringed at the word “hobby.” Also at the word “jobs.”

“I’d be happy to read some of your stuff sometime,” he added.

I still hadn’t written any.

“Again, sorry,” he said, noting my discomfort. “I was only trying to help.”

“Look,” I said. “I’m just not sure what to major in yet—or do, or become for that matter. But you, you already know you want to be a senator. How can that be? We’re eighteen, Paul; we’re still in our acne years.”

“I hear what you’re saying,” he said, looking back at me from a face that

had never once required Clearasil. “When Hamlet said ‘To thine own self be true,’ he oversimplified it. Plenty of us don’t know who we are, or worse, *can’t be* who we are.” But at this, his face sagged with doubt. The change was so abrupt, I tipped my head toward his.

“Hey. Are—are you okay?”

Of course I am,” he said, but his voice was empty of conviction. “Be true to yourself.”

“But that’s just it, Paul,” I said. “I came to college to be *un*true to myself. To reinvent myself—to *find* myself. Which turns out to be a pretty shitty plan considering the person I’m trying to lose *is* me.”

He stared back at me, his handsome face revealing an army of worry lines that lay in wait like future snipers. “I get that, brother,” he said. “Believe me, I do.”

8.

As soon as I got to the university library, I did what I always did: I went to the poetry section. It was located in the upper stacks, tucked away in no-man’s land, its slim collections grouped together like awkward girls at a school dance. The entire section smelled of dust.

I selected a book, read the first two poems, set it aside, reached for another. The problem with poetry is that just about everyone seems to think they can write it.

Luckily, there was one particular quarterly that seemed to know how to separate the wheat from the chaff. I’d only seen it one other time, when I was eleven. My school librarian, Mrs. Martin, had been scolding me about my quick dismissal of Rod McKuen as overly sentimental, a critique she found “callous, uninformed, annoying, mean—you’re eleven years old for god’s sake!” as she reached for a key I’d never seen before.

“Okay, Mr. Critical,” she’d said. “I’m about to show you something really

special, but first I’m going to pre-answer the questions you will invariably ask. No, you cannot check it out. No, you cannot drink chocolate milk anywhere in its vicinity. No, you may not underline anything. You can only sit right there”—she pointed to a chair—“and read it in front of me. When recess is up, you must return it directly to me. Got it?” Then she unlocked a cabinet behind her desk and withdrew the slim journal like it was the Holy Grail.

“It’s called *Peck & Peck*,” she said with a catch in her throat like someone had died. “This is Issue 274. And no,” she said as I reached for it, “you may not brag to your friends that I let you read it.”

Like that was ever going to happen.

“A subscription to *Peck & Peck* is very expensive,” she continued. “And that’s *with* the library discount. I don’t know who these Pecks think their readers are anyway—the Rockefellers? Yet another reason why I don’t read poetry. It’s elitist.” But the reverence with which she handed over the quarterly to me belied her outrage.

Bound in a thin, leathery field-guide-type cover that seemed to suggest it could survive any storm, *Peck & Peck* was completely devoid of any of the trademarks of a modern publication. There were no happy blurbs extolling the virtues of the work inside; no hints of what might be included; no table of contents; no banner running across the upper right; nothing that seemed to indicate any faith in or excitement about what lay within. Even the word “poetry” was missing. On the cover—and I would later learn that every cover was the same—was an exquisitely detailed drawing of a mottled quail egg. The egg, which stood on end, seemed to emit a small glow.

Just above the egg was the publication’s name, *Peck & Peck*, perfectly set in a thirty-two-point serif type called Bembo, a humanist typeface designed in 1496 by Francesco Griffo. (There were very few printed items that made their way into our household that weren’t identified by typeface. “Has anyone seen the newspaper?” my father would call. And my mother would answer, “For god’s sake, John, could you be more specific? Is it the one with the incredibly uninspired use of Caslon, or the one that substituted

Baskerville for Sabon—as if they thought we wouldn't notice." By age eleven, I knew hundreds of typefaces by sight.)

Just beneath the Peck & Peck imprint was the Issue number—in this case, 274. The number itself was hardly noticeable, and yet it was important to note it because it was literally the only thing that distinguished one *Peck & Peck* edition from another.

The quarterly's spine was equally quiet—or maybe even more so—choosing to forgo *Peck & Peck* in favor of a simple *P&P*, a smaller version of the same quail egg now nestled into the ampersand. Just beneath this *P&P*, at the very bottom of the spine, was the edition number again.

In short, the quarterly, at least from the outside, was oddly beautiful, instantly looked intriguing, and made very little sense. Fitting, considering the contents.

Opening to the first page I encountered just two words:

Come
Home.

I knew it immediately. A poem by a Scot named George MacDonald. The entire poem was

Come
Home.

It was followed by a list of forty-one editors, two of whom were the Editors in Chief. And after that, about eighty pages of—and I know this sounds ridiculously dramatic—throat-grabbing, life-changing words.

I read for an hour, missing both lunch and recess.

"Is—is this the only issue you have?" I asked as the bell rang.

"Yes, and don't get too attached because we're not buying the rest. Like I said. Overpriced." But she sounded wistful.

"But why does it cost so much?"

"Maybe," Mrs. Martin said quietly, "and this would be very rare—maybe because it's worth it."

9.

Despite the fact that Paul was the most popular person on campus and was eagerly sought by every fraternity, private club, and organization on the school's six hundred big-lawned acres, he announced one day as we neared the end of our freshman year that he'd taken it upon himself to secure the best room possible for us in the fall.

"Really?" I said, surprised that he wanted to live with me again. Based on my aversion to his pipe, and in light of his constant knocks about poetry, not to mention his point-blank comments about the way I dressed ("Jesus, Batter, you can't wear black boots with a brown belt—how do you not know that? By the way, I took the liberty of donating that sweater your mother sent"), I'd assumed—unhappily—that we'd be going our separate ways.

But instead, he plopped down on the bed he so rarely slept in and said, "I bribed the room lottery people and got us a suite next year. Has a fireplace. If you can't get a woman to that room," he said, referring to how I'd never gotten one to our current room even though I'd implied I'd slept with Trish Plonsky, a popular freshman who'd seemed interested in me at a party until I realized her true love was the Jell-O shots table just behind me, "I'm going to have to take extreme measures."

"Yeah, sounds good," I said casually as relief flooded my body. "I guess I thought you might join one of those fraternities."

He looked up from his record collection with an expression of surprise. "I'm stunned," he said, "that you think I'd want to live amongst those pretentious assholes. I'm nothing like them and neither are you." He went on to explain that his entire life had been spent in the company of pretentious assholes. By comparison, I was a breath of Yuba City fresh air.

He'd long ago filled me in on his upbringing—nannies, prep schools, European ski trips—adding that because he was biracial and wealthy, he was not only automatically suspect but in constant demand as the one biracial friend every white person desperately needed to complete their I'm-not-a-racist profile. "But not you," he said. "You don't even have a profile."

My humble beginnings seemed to fascinate him; he didn't know too many financially strapped white people. It was during one of these talks that I finally admitted I was an identical twin minus the twin.

"An identical twin without his twin," he said, his voice dropping. "That's truly shitty, brother." He pulled over, then draped his arm around me the way I'd always pictured my real brother would have.

Eventually I let on that my mom suffered from nerves and my dad from not finishing his Ph.D. Paul nodded sympathetically. "My dad suffers from being an asshole," he said. "And my mom suffers from living with an asshole."

"You're lucky to have sisters," I said, trying to keep the self-pity out of my voice. "Someone to talk to about this stuff. I wish I had a sib, but after my brother died, I think my parents gave up."

"Siblings aren't always friends, Batter," Paul said. "They're competitors, too. Lots of people would kill to be an only child. And kids are expensive. Maybe your parents couldn't afford another."

I felt a flush of embarrassment. Of course.

10.

I guess it was during sophomore year that I got a reputation as the guy to go to if you needed help with a paper. I'd done well in freshman English and because of it, found myself approached by others who hadn't.

I'm thrilled to say some of these help seekers were girls—I mean women. (Paul had instructed me that I was to stop calling girls "girls." "It's demeaning, diminutive, sexist, and wrong," he said. "Nor do we call them 'chicks,' 'babes,' 'baby mamas,' or 'tomboys.' Treat women with respect, Batter. They're half the world's population, and only they can create life.") Anyway, a few women sought me out, a development I found alternately frightening and exciting. One of my collegiate goals was to fall in love.

Actual love. I'd never been in love with anyone, minus Simone Santalorian, but I felt funny about counting her since she didn't exist.

"If you moved this paragraph here," I'd say, "then you could lead with this idea. And maybe delete this one line," I said, lightly crossing out four.

"I guess this just comes naturally to you," they'd say, which always bothered me. Like talent wasn't something you'd worked hard to earn.

But despite the help, none of my rescue missions resulted in a single date.

"It's this *Beowulf* shit," Paul said, pointing to my bookshelf. "It's a turnoff. Look at my shelf: *The Autobiography of Malcolm X; Our Bodies, Ourselves*."

"*Our Bodies, Ourselves?* Isn't that for girls? I mean women?"

"Exactly," Paul said.

"But I like *Beowulf*."

"Exactly," Paul said.

Meanwhile, my major continued to elude me. For two solid years I threw my net wide, taking as many non-English classes as possible in different areas in case one spoke to me—and I mean that literally—I even tried Spanish. But after a few months of *buenos días*, I was back in the library reading *Peck & Peck*.

My indecision did not escape anyone—not Paul, not my parents, not Doug Payne, and not the registrar, whom I visited so often a few of the staff actually thought I worked there. It was the registrar who suggested I try the Ancient and Contemporary Literature major. "It includes a few classes in poetics," she said. "You'll love it."

My mid-semester results indicated she couldn't have been more wrong.

- The Quatrain in 17th-Century Revolution: D+
- Advanced Poetic Theory: F
- Modern Themes in Ancient Poetry: C+

I'd gotten better grades in ceramics, and that was without finishing a single pot. I didn't understand it either—I'd actually *liked* some of these poetry classes—I'd even gone out of my way to *attend* them on a consistent basis.
Worse, I was getting better marks in something I *didn't* like: Accounting II—the class that follows Accounting I—and that I'd been told to take because the registrar said I needed a "hard science" class to round out my "knowledge base." Whatever that means.
By the way, Advanced Poetic Theory should have been called Formulaic Poetry as Taught by Smug TA. We had to know exactly how many lines made up a rhyme royal, a cinquain, a rondeau. Not *why* the poems had been designed like that—only how. Basically, it was a math class *disguised* as poetry. Worse, each example was followed by a poem demonstrating the form, plus a summary of what that poem "meant." In other words, the TA's *opinion* of what it meant. That, too, had to be memorized for the test.

But poetry is supposed to make you think, not follow, so I challenged his opinions. Unpopular move. The third time I did this, he interrupted me with one word—"wrong"—which prompted me to suggest that his quick dismissal of me seemed "wrong," which prompted him to ink an F next to my name in his grade book, which prompted me to make an immediate return to the registrar.

"I tried Ancient and Contemporary Literature," I wrote in the space reserved for the reason for the change. "But the landing was bumpy, and there wasn't much to see once I got there."

11.

"How's the plane crash going?" Doug Payne asked.

Mid-junior year. I'd received a note insisting I see him immediately.

"I've landed, Dr. Payne. I'm in Philosophy now."

"Yes. I'm aware. For three whole days. So, what do you plan to do with

this one? Be Socrates? Because they killed Socrates."

I felt a heat rash starting to form under my flannel shirt.

"Let's review all your majors to date, shall we?" Payne continued. "Math—I think that was my choice—then Ancient and Contemporary Literature, Physics, Sociobiology, Spanish, Archaeology, and"—he let out a small whistle—"Ceramics." He sighed and rubbed his eyes. "I just learned you're John Gray's son. You remind me of him."

"I do?"

"We were graduate students together at Dartmouth. He quit everything, too."

This infuriated me. "My father is not a quitter, Dr. Payne. He teaches at—"

"Yes, I'm aware," he said. "Yuba City Community College. Too bad. He was smart."

"He *is* smart," I said defensively. What the hell was Payne trying to imply? That teaching at a community college wasn't as impressive? I had news for him: some of the best teachers in the world choose the least hallowed schools because that's where they're needed most. Socrates should have checked out public education—maybe he would have lived longer. But just as I was about to explain this to Payne, he plunked himself down on the arm of my chair.

"So, Mr. Gray," he said. "How goes the poetry writing?"

I busied myself with a pen.

"That's what I thought." He tossed me a flyer.

Poetry Writing Workshop, it read.

12.

I don't know how familiar you are with poetry workshops, but first you have to *apply.* Then you have to be *selected*.

"This workshop is for serious writers," the poet who ran the workshop, a

handsome fiftyish man who'd once had two poems published in a *40 Under 40* anthology, told me. I actually had to go interview with him.

"We don't write papers here," he told me. "We write *life*."

"Writing life is my mission," I lied, already uncomfortable with the way he was leaving out prepositions.

He nodded, sizing me up. "Fill out this application and include two samples of your work. This is a very competitive workshop. A lot of people want in."

Two samples? I nearly passed out. The application also asked that I include a short paragraph describing my creative process, plus list five of my favorite poets. But the question that really gave me pause was "How long have you been writing?"

I suspected most of the other applicants had been at it since at least age five. Obviously, I didn't want to lie, but neither did I want to supply the truth: "I haven't started yet." So I compromised. "Age seven," I wrote.

I got in.

Here's how this type of class works. The poets to be "workshopped" (a process roughly equivalent to being burned at the stake) make their poems available a week ahead in order to ensure the rest of us can devote plenty of time (five minutes) to reading their work. Then we offer constructive comments to help the writer improve his or her "craft."

The evening started with the professor giving a few introductory remarks, reminding us, in a serious way, that we had all been handpicked. This news made each of us puff up a little even though later I heard only seventeen had applied for one of the twenty openings. Twelve had decided to enroll.

He asked that two of tonight's poets stand and read their poems aloud, which they did, each delivering their sad lines in that slow, overdramatic voice that gave the impression they'd taken a handful of quaaludes first. It reminded me of TV news anchors; how they, too, always sound alike, as if all these people go to the same School for How to Read Stuff Out Loud; the TV anchors turning left for News, the Poets turning right for Readings.

After the poets were done reading, we began to dissect their work. The constructive criticism, mild at first, was soon delivered with small punches,

and later, as wine intake increased, with baseball bats. I watched as the professor drank deeply from—I was certain—a thermos filled with vodka. He said something about how one of the poems contained a nonessential assonance, causing the rest of us to nod in drunken agreement like the worldly apostles we were. A short break followed.

"How're you finding it?" a woman named Clara asked as I stood in front of the cheap red wine selection fighting the urge to drink straight from two bottles at once.

"It's—amazing."

"Amazing." The most overused word of my generation.

"What about you?" I asked. Clara was speaking to me voluntarily and I didn't even have a guitar.

"I think Professor Schotz is a genius."

"Genius." The other most overused word of my generation.

"Well—" I hesitated. "He's definitely smart, but I'm afraid he's not right about that assonance. There's nothing nonessential about assonance—it's—" The expression on her face made me stop.

"So, you know more than him." She put her hands on her hips.

"No, of course not," I said. "It's just that I think it's important to ask questions—you know, question authority." I got that from Paul. "I think one should always say to oneself, 'I wonder if I can trust this information?'" Paul again.

"So according to you, the workshop *isn't* amazing."

I was beginning not to like Clara very much.

"Going back in," Clara said stiffly.

I refilled my glass, then reluctantly rejoined the turtleneck crowd.

The professor was still sitting in his armchair grimacing at the next two poems up for workshop. Guess he hadn't read them before. "All right, people," he said, as everyone reclaimed their spots. "Time to work."

The next poet droned through his piece, which was followed by a very long and thoughtful silence while people tried to figure out what the hell to say. This is the problem with poetry critiques—it's probably easier to analyze the chemical composition of Velveeta. Finally, someone inquired if the poem was autobiographical. Naturally the poet said no even though he used his own name as well as the real names of all the women he'd slept with in the past year.

“Tone? Content? Meter?” the professor nudged.

One of the poets who’d been crucified before the break decided it was payback time. “It was just so *reductive*,” she said. “Do you know what I mean? Just, so remissive.” (Remissive?) “And I don’t like the name of the poem either. Jenny? Feels mainstream. What about Cassandra?”

That broke the dam.

“Feels like something I’ve read before.”

“The sex parts were boring.”

“Was this supposed to be iambic?”

“I just wanted to exhale.”

Clara raised her hand. “I’d like to point out that I actually know Jenny,” she said, glaring at the poet. “And she is *not* a slut.”

The professor checked his watch, then called another poet to the stake. Same thing, different poem. Two hours later, three hideous facts stood out: we were amateurs, the work was awful, our comments were meaningless. But on we went, like self-taught surgeons critiquing each other’s sloppy stitching while blissfully ignoring the fact that we’d sawed off the wrong leg.

I made an immediate return to the registrar.

Once up at the window, I dropped the workshop and declared myself pre-law, filling my course form with high-level political science classes, which the registrar allowed me to do because, as she said, I was practically “family.”

Was I interested in law? No. But I needed something solid. Plus, I’d gotten some very distressing news earlier in the week from Pete, my favorite librarian at the university library. When I walked in the door, he’d waved me over, his face grave.

“It’s about *Peck & Peck*,” he said. “It went belly-up. I put Issue 313 on hold for you. It’s the last one.”

I was stunned. I read *Peck & Peck* every day.

“Out of business,” Pete repeated. “Poof.”

“But why?”

“I’m thinking small market, limited interest. The Pecks, whoever they

are, finally had to go get real jobs like the rest of us. It *was* really expensive."

"Because it was good, Pete."

"I know," he said, his voice dropping. He revered it as much as I did. "But we'll still carry all the back issues; you can always reread. And look on the practical side: less time in the poetry section means more time in the real world."

I nodded in agreement. But we both knew poetry *was* the world. And part of it had just died.

13.

With only three semesters to go, I made myself a bunch of promises. I would stop reading poetry; see pre-law through to the end; impress women with bookshelves filled with case law; become a serious person.

I failed at all but one—pre-law.

My new professors quoted my papers and praised my arguments, and one even mentioned that if I were to apply to law school, he'd be happy to write a recommendation. I couldn't believe it. I didn't want to be a lawyer!

In our senior year, I told Paul that Professor Grisson had suggested law school, and his response was, "Jesus, Batter, why the long face? That asshole gave me a D on my last paper. Lemme see yours." He grabbed it off my desk and, after reading the first two pages, frowned. "Where do you get your ideas?" he asked. "This is good."

I'd argued that minimum wage was not now, nor had it ever been, a living wage—not exactly rocket science, but across it Grisson had scrawled, "Uniformly insightful and significant."

"Langston Hughes," I said reluctantly.

"Hughes," he repeated, writing it down. "Wait. I know that name. He was in the state senate, right? Delaware?"

“The poet, Langston Hughes.”

He looked at me with disappointment. Then he set down his pen and rubbed his eyes, shaking his head like a rehab counselor who was about to explain for the fiftieth time that the first step was admitting I had a problem. “Back to the poetry crap again, are we, Gray?” he said, his voice heavy with disapproval. “Is that what you’re telling me?”

I *was* back to the poetry crap. And like every good addict, I pretended it wasn’t a problem. But getting back to Paul: when I told him Langston Hughes had given me the idea for my paper (if you’re interested: “Mother to Son”), I didn’t mean the poem was about minimum wage. I just meant the poem schooled me in hardship; in how it feels to be underpaid and undervalued—a direction I definitely seemed to be heading—thus allowing me to write about minimum wage with, well, I hate to use this word: *meaning.* Not in the new-agey sense—my paper was still full of facts and figures—but rather with the sense of being fully informed. And while some would further argue that “Mother to Son” was really about being Black and facing the kind of unfairness that required a toughness others would never have to muster, I’d also argue that its message had the power to make me feel that unfairness firsthand, to yank me out of my own world and allow me to experience someone else’s.

That’s how I used poetry. To understand the world. To decode, analyze, interpret, think. Gave me a huge leg up. For instance, in my government classes the professors would ask, “But does the checks and balances system really work, because if so, how do you explain Nixon?” I knew how to explain Nixon: Dante. Adultery? James Dickey. Despair? Too long to list here.

The poetry section, with the now defunct *Peck & Peck* leading the pack, was like that: full of short, distilled explanations of where and why people went wrong—and occasionally right. It didn’t seem to matter what the topic was—love, war, hate, jealousy, crime, retribution, revenge, or reconciliation—the poets had it covered. And they provided actual answers. Plus, despite what my pre-law classes would call an appalling lack of evidence, their answers always seemed right. Or something even more unlikely. Truthful.

I kept trying to convince Paul that poetry might help his essays; that reading “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” could make a difference in his understanding of why corporations are breeding grounds of alienation. I

pointed out that even the Allman Brothers read poetry—that's where the title *Eat a Peach* came from—*that* poem. But he threw my copy of T. S. Eliot right back at me.

"This is pompous bullshit, Batter," he said, his voice filled with frustration. "You've really got to stop with this crap. It's annoying and elitist, and it's never once helped you in the girlfriend department. At some point you have to be honest with yourself."

But that didn't feel fair. Because how many of us are?

14.

Graduation day. Paul had decided that since we'd already lived together for four years, why not three more? He'd gotten into Georgetown and had already rented a two-bedroom apartment with the idea that I could join him right after I passed the LSAT. "Here," he said, handing me a bunch of papers at the graduation reception right in front of my parents. "I took the liberty of getting you an application." I wanted to kill him.

"Law school?" my father said in obvious relief. "Thank god."

"Where are your folks, Paul?" my mother asked. "We'd love to meet them."

"They're here somewhere," he said, looking around. "Oh, there," he said, pointing. There were about a dozen parents standing around listening to a professor pontificate. Doug Payne.

"Maybe later," my dad said.

"You'll need a year to study for the LSAT," my mother said, getting back to my fake news. "It'll be so nice to have you back home. You can really focus."

"Oh, well, thanks, Mom," I said, quickly. "But I've already nailed down a job. I thought I told you. In the city."

"City? What city?"

"New York City. I thought I told you."

“New York?” my mother said, alarmed. “New York City is dangerous.”

“Now, Rainey,” my father said, patting her arm, “he’ll be fine. He has a job and plans for law school. It’s good news.”

But the truth was, I didn’t have a job. In fact, I didn’t even know I was moving to New York City until that very moment when I’d made it up. Also, I wasn’t going to law school. I’d never had any intention of going to law school or studying for the LSAT. Not now, not ever.

Paul looked at me quizzically. For the first time in four years, he managed to remain silent.

“I found a great little apartment in the city. It’s near a park,” I said. “And I got a job with a print shop. It doesn’t pay much, but I don’t need much. I just plan to study.”

“A print shop!” my mother said. “What kind of presses do they have?”

I immediately regretted the print shop detail.

“I’m sorry, guys—I thought I told you,” I said, avoiding my mother’s question. “I guess it all came together so fast—I was studying for finals and applying for jobs and looking for apartments and—”

All of this was coming from the panic many twenty-one-year-olds encounter when they realize they really *can’t* go home again—and further, don’t want to. College, with all of its freedoms, had given us things we could no longer do without: music, food, friends, independence. None of it fit in the childhood bedroom.

But I also didn’t want my parents to see my failure up close. After four years at an expensive college, all I had to show was an unusually high number of unrelated classes. If it weren’t for my pals in the registrar’s office, who’d somehow managed to craft my disparate credits into an actual degree, I wouldn’t be standing here. Like most, I’d gone to college to become something but in the process had managed to become nothing at all.

“But do you even know anyone in the city?” my mother asked, concerned.

“Don’t you worry about that,” Paul interjected. “I’m planning on sleeping on his sofa just about every weekend. We have big plans. Study sessions, New York pizza, bagels, the works. And Columbia already gave us passes to use the law library.” I looked at him with surprise and gratitude. With lying skills like that, maybe he would become a senator one day.

“Wonderful,” my father said. “Good for you.”

“I can’t believe you got a job at a press,” my mother continued. “That’s

hard to do. Who is it? Maybe I know the typesetter."

"I don't think so. It's a new place," I lied.

"What kind of law interests you?" my father asked.

"Criminal," I said, influenced by my own answers.

15.

My mother claims that Batter never lied to her. I'm not sure dogs *can* lie, but my mother's special pride in Batter's honesty was a consistent theme.

"Did I ever tell you about the time Batter found a wallet full of cash on the street?" she asked one day when I was nine. "It was a man's wallet—small, good-quality leather. And inside were three crisp one-hundred-dollar bills."

"Three hundred dollars! Wow, Mom! Was it stolen money? Did somebody rob a bank?"

"Of course it wasn't stolen money, Batter." She looked at me, disappointed; she didn't like people who immediately thought the worst. "Anyway, in addition to the cash, the wallet also contained three wallet-size elementary school pictures—two boys and one girl—plus a Chinese fortune that read, 'An important person will offer you support.' So that proves it. Definitely not stolen."

I didn't follow. "I've never seen a one-hundred-dollar bill, have you?"

"They're rare. Sometimes they're given as gifts—like for bat mitzvahs or special birthdays. Three one-hundred-dollar bills, three children. It's called math, honey."

I nodded, encouraging her to go on, but already the story didn't sit right with me. What parent in the entire history of parenthood would give their kid a one-hundred-dollar bill? Not mine.

"Anyway," she said, pouring herself a cup of coffee, "there was one important thing missing from the wallet. Can you guess what it was?"

I frowned, thinking about what my father kept in his wallet. "Lottery

tickets?”

“Come on, Batter, think. Wallets are the keys to our inner lives. They say who we are, where we live, whom we love, what kind of person we are. Wallets contain everything: photos, credit cards, membership cards, identification. If you’re ever stranded on a desert island, believe me, you will want your wallet.”

“My scout leader says waterproof matches are actually the best—”

“You’re missing my point,” she said impatiently. “Now *think*. What was missing from this man’s wallet that should *not* have been missing?”

I shrugged. Ever since she’d revealed the money wasn’t stolen, I’d started to lose interest.

“His identification, that’s what!” She leaned back in her chair, her face set in a can-you-even-believe-it? expression.

“You mean like his driver’s license?”

“Exactly. Three photos, three one-hundred-dollar bills, a Chinese fortune, but no ID. A normal thief takes cash but leaves the ID. But in this case, the thief took the ID and left the cash!”

“But why would someone steal his ID, Mom? I don’t understand. Did Batter find it? Did he fix everything?”

“Those are all very good questions, honey. I don’t understand why people steal other people’s IDs—although something tells me that could be big business someday.”

“Okay,” I said, bored by the ending I could see coming. “So, Batter turned the stuff in to the police, and—”

“What*?*” she interrupted. “Where did that come from? You can’t just give wallets filled with cash to the police; everybody knows that. They’re fraud experts; to keep up with current trends, they sometimes have to practice it themselves. So no; he did not turn the money in to the police. Instead, he went directly to the nearby elementary school and waited until he saw the three children from the photographs.”

This caught me by surprise. Could a dog really identify kids from photographs? Especially the school-sponsored wallet-size ones, which usually involved wearing clothes that, normally, you wouldn’t be caught dead in?

“But what if the pictures were old?” I asked as my mom got up and put her coffee cup in the sink. “Or what if the man had been here on a business

trip. What if didn't even live in the area?"

"The pictures weren't old," she said. "They were brand new. And the backdrop behind each child was the same one used in all the public school pictures that year. These things are standardized."

"Wait a sec," I said, my mind searching for more interesting possibilities. "Maybe the kids had been kidnapped. Maybe the three hundred bucks was ransom! Is that what Batter found out? *They'd been kidnapped?*"

"No," my mother said sharply. "Everyone knows three hundred dollars is not ransom—that's more of a rental rate. And anyway, a school picture does not prove a person is still alive. Not even a candid shot could do that."

"Wait," I said with growing excitement. "What if—what if—the man with the wallet was supposed to *kill* the three kids in the photos? What if the hundred dollars was a *per* kid kill payment?! WOW! Maybe Batter saved those kids' lives, Mom!"

My mother turned away from the sink in disgust. Grabbing the laundry basket, she tossed her head in the direction of our backyard.

"Of course the man wasn't supposed to *kill* the children, Batter," she scolded as she slung wet sheets over the already crowded clothesline. "Honestly, I don't know where you get your ideas. What I'm trying to tell you is that Batter took a risk. He went to the school playground and gave each child a very close look."

"Dogs aren't allowed on the playground."

"That's why it was a *risk*," she said. "*Anyway*," she continued, "Batter found them. I know because I was there, just outside the gate. He laid a one-hundred-dollar bill in each of their poor little hands."

"Wait. They were *poor*?"

"This was right after the Depression. Everyone was poor."

"But Dad says the Depression was in the 1930s. Batter was alive in the—"

"Honey. It was the *Great* Depression. People were depressed for years—decades, even. The point is, Batter could have kept that money for himself, but he didn't. Instead, he trusted his instinct, took a risk, set things right."

I felt confused, as if I'd missed some key facts along the way.

"But what about the Chinese fortune? *'An important person—'?*"

"Batter was the important person, honey. The fortune should have read, "An important dog will offer you support," but there was probably a mistake in the translation—Chinese is a tonal language; it happens. The point is, Batter

was the important entity. *He* got the money to the children in the nick of time."

"*Nick of time?* Now it's the *nick of time*? Were they about to keel over dead or something?" My mom's stories were always like this—started off strong but fell flat at the end. "So now you're going to tell me whoever stole the wallet—I mean ID—was never caught, right?"

"Wrong," my mother said. "The truth finally came out, but it took forever. Justice is like that: slow. That's why so many people who seek justice die waiting. Injustice, on the other hand is fast."

"But—"

"The only reason this wallet situation ended well was because of Batter—*because* he was a dog. Dogs trust their guts, whereas we question ours. If that meant he had to enter a school playground illegally, so be it. Sometimes taking a risk or breaking the law is required to right a wrong. Because of Batter, those children got their money and later went on to college."

"What? College? *When?*"

"I don't know—ten years later? They must have invested it very wisely. That's what I meant about the nick of time. The market was just beginning to improve."

I turned away from her, mad.

"Anyway, the point is, other dogs might have sensed the crime and kept the money—buried it somewhere. But not Batter. He delivered it."

"Mom, come on. Dogs don't know *anything* about money!"

She looked at me, surprised, and then—if I'm not mistaken—hurt.

We went in the house, me silently trailing her by quite a distance. I thought about what I'd do if I found a wallet with three hundred dollars. One image came to mind: an orange Sting-Ray bike with flames on the sides.

16.

I did move to the city. After I'd lied to my parents, what choice did I have? By Tuesday I'd rented a tiny walk-up in the South Bronx, with noisy neighbors and sour cooking smells. It was on the fifth floor, above the proverbial pawnshop, whose rattly iron cage shook my windows whenever it was raised or lowered.

I took every job I could find—the first at Copy-a-Go-Go running photocopying machines; a second at the Gap folding T-shirts; and a third at a restaurant called the Just Okay. The Just Okay prided itself on serving food that was, well, just okay. The place was packed 24⁄7.

With all three jobs, I was working about sixty hours a week, sometimes more. I don't know why, but jobs requiring very little brainpower really suck the life out of a person. Still, I accepted it. Hard labor mixed with small paychecks make a person grow up fast. Because of it, I had very little time for poetry. And, just as Paul had predicted, about five minutes later, I got a girlfriend.

Her name was June. We'd met at the Gap, folding T-shirts. June was from Wisconsin, where she said people were nice. She herself was nice—one of the things I liked about her—but I guess in her Wisconsin city, nice had been done to death and she didn't want to be nice any longer. When she moved to New York, she got her nose pierced, cut her hair in an unflattering way, tore holes in her fishnet stockings, and tried her best to be edgy. I thought she was brave; I myself had not drifted from my standard rock-band T-shirt fare. But whoever said clothes make the man—or woman—was, in June's case, wrong. Her Patti Smith look was at constant odds with her candy striper personality, and soon enough the act wore thin on everyone, including her. About a year into our relationship when we were at a graffiti art show, she turned to me, her little nose stud glinting like a radioactive pimple, and said in a tired voice, "Batter, this is bullshit. Do you want to know what this really is?" She pointed at a portion of a wall that had been preserved from a decommissioned subway station. It featured explicit words and a few questionable drawings. "It's defacement of public property. And most of it is not even spelled correctly."

Before I knew it, June was boarding a bus bound for Fond du Lac with firm plans to become an underwriter.

I was sad to see her go—not because I was in love with her nor she with

me, and not because I was finally having consistent sex (which exceeded all my expectations), but because she was my only friend who also didn't have a plan for the future. It ruined the whole thing when she found one.

Before she left, she took my hands in hers and said, "Promise you'll keep in touch. We're nearly at that point of no return—when youth ends and adulthood begins and we start doing all the things we thought we'd never do. Like wearing penny loafers."

"We're not old, June."

"We're getting there."

We were walking through the Meatpacking District at the time, and even though it was two in the morning, the city was still pulsating with possibility and danger and grit and music. God, it was great.

"I'm really going to miss this," she said as we heard someone shouting Shakespeare from a rooftop. "There's very little Shakespeare in Fond du Lac at two in the morning." She stopped in the middle of the street. "I have a confession to make. I found some of your poetry. I know you like poetry, but I didn't know you wrote it."

I almost died. I'd only started writing it because I'd banned myself from reading it.

She gave me a curious look. "You know how aging starts, Batter? By putting off the future. You know you're getting old when you start saying stuff like 'I could *still* run a marathon; I could *still* write that book.' It's the 'still' that gets you. You've got to do what you want to do right now. That way, when you have gray hair, you'll be able to do what you need to do right then."

"So you actually *want* to become an underwriter?"

"Yes," she said, annoyed. "Someone needs to keep risk takers out of the insurance pool. And I think you should write. But switch to novels. Poetry is just so—yuck."

"I don't want to write, June," I said. "I want to discover. Like the way Brian Epstein discovered the Beatles."

"How do you do that?"

"No idea."

"Then find out," she insisted. "Because the moment you hear yourself say, 'It's not too late,' it is."

After she left, I got started. A small bookstore here, a street reading there, within a month my obsession had bloomed into the Save the Sad Poets Society—a club formed by me and of which I was the only member. My intention wasn't just to discover new work but to perform a public service—attend the empty readings; make the lonely poets feel like someone was actually interested—you know—imply the unlikely existence of a fan base. My favorite part was watching their faces change when they realized there was someone in the audience with whom they did not share a direct genetic connection.

"You know what poetry is?" June had said the one and only time I'd dragged her to a reading. "It's masturbation. Bunch of self-absorbed egoists dying to tell everyone how they feel about autumn leaves." She gently poked at her inflamed ear, which had swelled to twice its size in protest of her latest cartilage piercing, which she'd done herself. "Why don't we go to a slam?"

Slams were just getting started back then.

"I don't go to slams."

"You don't go to slams." She just looked at me.

"Because slams are usually contests," I explained. "They're a little too theatrical—too performancy—for me, at least."

"Yeah, well I can see how we wouldn't want a reading to get too performancy," she said. "God forbid we wake up the people in the back row. Oh wait. There *aren't* any people in the back row. Or *any* row for that matter."

"Readings aren't for everyone."

"I think you meant *anyone*," she said, sweeping her eyes across the empty room. "That's why it's masturbation."

"It's *not* masturbation, June," I said, irritated. "Look, I know I've made a point about how I 'know' poetry, but I may have underemphasized the one other area in which I excel. If these readings were masturbation, I'm pretty sure *I* would know."

"An ego trip, then," she said.

"They're artists, June. It's a difficult artform. These people are brave. I'm sorry I brought you."

She fiddled with her bracelets as we walked down Avenue D in silence. “Sorry, Batter,” she finally said. “After all the crummy art shows I’ve taken you to—like that period installation.”

“What period installation?”

She looked at me strangely. “The Only Women Bleed exhibition at Fashion Moda. The used sanitary pad and tampon sculpture? Last week? It was in the shape of a huge uterus?”

“June, I was *kidding*—of course I remember.”

I didn’t. Thinking back, I recalled a rusty-looking pile of what I thought was used gauze—like someone had pawed through an ER’s garbage cans, hauled it home, filled a glue gun, and molded it into the aforementioned lump. By lump, I mean art. You see this sort of thing in New York all the time. Jesus. Did women really bleed *that* much? I’m embarrassed to say I did not know.

“Sorry,” June was saying. “I think it’s nice that you go to these readings. I don’t really get poetry. Maybe it’s just not my thing.” She pulled hard at her ear.

I continued my undiscovered poet search. If my schedule allowed—which it often didn’t—I’d drop in at the 92NY, the Nuyorican, St. Mark’s. Otherwise, I’d pick up self-published work left in forlorn piles on café counters. But did those piles yield anything good?

Once. A poet by the name of Andrew Smith. The poem was so good, I read it three times, folded it in half, and took it home. But the rest? “Yuck,” as June would say. She had a point. Beginner poets usually make the same mistake: they write about what *they* feel instead of paying heed to the actual job at hand: making the *reader* feel.

Here’s what I mean about making the reader feel. There’s a poem called “To a Poor Old Woman” by William Carlos Williams. If you can, look it up right now. It’s about an old woman eating plums. Now, obviously I’m not old, I’m not a woman, and I’m not particularly fond of plums. But by the end of this piece, I knew what it was to be all three. I heard this piece read aloud—not by Williams himself, but by someone who *knew* exactly how to read it—which is a gift—and when I heard him repeat “they taste good to

her," I was ready to take all the savings I do not have and buy every plum in the tristate area, then hand them out to anyone who looked sad, hungry, cold, or forgotten.

That's what a poem can do.

17.

1981. My friends from college were enrolled in grad school, working in the banking industry, or teaching (which just about killed me—like any of us should be spreading our limited knowledge to the next generation). Two were dealing drugs. With the recession in full flower, many of my friends who'd sworn they'd never work in the family business went straight home and did just that. Meanwhile, I was still working the same three jobs, earning minimum wage and exactly one accolade that entire time: Employee of the Year at Copy-a-Go-Go.

"How many copies?" I asked every single day.

To say I was worried about my future was the understatement of the year. I was depressed, embarrassed, poor. When I was in college, I'd secretly taken out several school loans to help my struggling parents. That's how I wound up in bed with Sallie Mae, the famous financial terrorist who preys on ramen-eating collegians by offering loans impossible to pay back in any lifetime. The woman owned me. You can avoid old friends, you can move fifteen times, you can go into the Witness Protection Program. Sallie will still find you.

One day, during one of my weekly worry sessions, my phone rang. I wished for it to be my dead twin brother—someone who would understand my past and be supportive about my still-blank future, assure me failure wasn't my fault—it might even be genetic.

"Hey, Batter," a voice boomed out from my Panasonic answering machine. "It's me. What the *hell*, brother, why don't you ever return my fucking

calls?”

Paul!

I started to reach for the receiver—it was so good to hear his voice. But something made me stop. I lay back and held my breath as if not to give myself away.

“Sick of Georgetown,” Paul was saying as he puffed on his pipe. “One more semester and I’m thinking of moving to New York City postgrad. That’s why I’m calling. I’m coming to the city next weekend to feel things out, counting on you to be my congenial host. My train gets in Friday around seven and I need your address. Call me!” Even though I already had it, he left his phone number—repeated it twice.

Panic set in. Paul was almost done with law school? Impossible—in two years? We’d graduated in 1979; it was now 1981. I glanced at my Proverb-a-Day calendar, a parting gift from June. *Actually it’s 1982*, the calendar claimed in twenty-eight-point VAG Rounded. *1982, you slacker.*

I gripped the edge of my chair, envisioning Paul’s arrival in the South Bronx, his eyes filled with concern as the cabbie insisted, “Yeah, this is it,” followed by a worried glance at the pawnshop, a careful step around the street junkie, a slow trudge up five filthy flights of stairs until he reached my door, where I’d stand, arms wide, inviting him in to enjoy my pullout sofa bed, my stained walls, my dripping faucet, desperately pretending all was well, my voice pitched unnaturally high as he took in the fruits of my last three years; my Gap T-shirt, my body permanently reeking of the Just Okay’s popular ranch dressing.

Paul lived in a beautiful brownstone with a bathtub that fizzed with Jacuzzi jets—I’d visited several times. Last time I was there, we’d run into someone from our freshman dorm, a talented musician who’d set music aside to go to law school. “You know how it is, Batter,” he said with a shrug. “At some point you have to choose between the life you want and the life you need.”

I didn’t return Paul’s call.

.....

With two and a half hours left before my shift at the Just Okay, I decided to attend another amateur reading. Sure, I continued to hear a lot of bad poets

this way, and yes, my mere presence offered encouragement to some who probably deserved to have their writing instruments taken away forever. But so what. I admired them. At least they were *trying*. And anyway, not all of it was bad.

Well.

Yes, it was.

As long as I'm in a confessional mood, I might as well admit I had one other self-serving reason for going. I thought if I spent a little time listening to someone else's treacle on autumn leaves, it might help me stop. That's right: thanks to June's encouragement, I was still attempting to write poetry. But unlike in college, when my pages remained mostly blank, now deep thoughts and precious rhymes came rushing out of me like diarrhea. I could easily write seven poems in a single morning about how the frying pan looks after making scrambled eggs and have ten more on clouds before noon. It was horrifying.

The poets I admired wrote with ideas and used imagery and did something that somehow forged a bond and resulted in explaining not just how something looked or seemed, but how it *was*. And to get at this "was," they agonized for hours, days, weeks—even years—over a single word, a single syllable, or worse, a single *comma*. That bothered me, too. I was spurting out commas like a jackpot-happy slot machine.

I hopped the subway in search of a new bookstore featured on a flyer someone had shoved in my hand at St. Mark's. But after marching ten blocks in what I thought was the right direction, nothing remotely resembling a bookstore materialized. So, I backtracked, or tried to, making a few random turns whenever I thought I spied something familiar. But that's the problem with the city. Things always look familiar—the same small dog poops around the same unhealthy-looking trees; the same taxis careening past, their shock absorbers bouncing the people inside around like Super Balls. I checked the street signs and doubled back again; then I did it again. I mean, I knew *where* I was; New York was built on a grid, after all. I just didn't know *where* I was in relation to *where* I was right *then*.

I finally decided to duck into one of those little cigarette and magazine stores, the bell tinkling my arrival. "I'm lost," I confessed. The big guy behind the counter seemed friendly enough, carefully listening to my description of the phantom bookstore offering poetry readings while resting

one hand on what was probably a loaded revolver. He rubbed his bristled chin a little, then lit up.

"Oh sure," he said. "The poetry place. Sure, sure. *That* place. I've been there."

Unlikely. When I walked in, he'd been reading *Soldier of Fortune* magazine.

"For a kick-ass party!" he added, making me all the more certain we were talking about two very different places. Nevertheless, I listened politely as he told me to go north eleven more blocks, then turn left down an alley, then go left for two more blocks, then turn right. The building I wanted would be there—I couldn't miss it. He even drew me a map.

I thanked him and left, following his directions, but it was getting dark, and from out of nowhere, autumn decided it was done, and snow began to fall. Within fifteen minutes, street signs were covered with fat flakes. I counted down the blocks, cursing my stupid idea, forcing the directions like a kid practicing his locker combination. Was it left, then right, then left again?

Until I looked up from the map, confused.

And there it was.

18.

Standing at the crux of a three-way intersection, a very thin, very elegant, five-story building rose defiantly from its triangular lot envelope as if challenging the dirty skyscrapers that sat fat and crass on its neighboring corners. It was the strangest sight: unexpected, like a bright red poppy that blooms in a parking lot otherwise filled with broken glass and wrecked cars. Classically beautiful in a European sort of way, it almost seemed as if it'd been snatched from its original home in some cobble-streeted hamlet,

airlifted in, then put to rest here in the megalopolis—an endangered animal on display for bored zoo goers.

About five stories tall—and by that, I mean runway model tall—it was defined by a series of huge French doors, all of which were set at regular intervals—six to every side and story—and each framed in limestone and opening out to spidery-black balconies. From where I was standing, I could see that every balcony contained a large stone planter, and in each planter, in lieu of the usual seasonal flowers—or in winter, in lieu of nothing—were carefully tended English boxwood topiaries. The topiary shapes were odd and varied—not the usual round balls or simple squares, but complicated forms that, despite the snow's attempt to cloak their dips and curves, seemed vaguely familiar. I took a few steps back to try to understand their pattern, but when I did, my attention was immediately seized by the building's crowning achievement: two magnificent greenhouse-like glass domes that rose like softly glowing parachutes—a smaller one in front, a larger one in back—capping the structure with purpose, like an elaborate sundae topped by two out-of-season cherries.

With its slender, triangular shape, its odd plantings, its overly tall French doors, its two glass domes, the one in back emerging like a cake that had outperformed the baker's wildest expectations, it was one of the strangest—and most beautiful—buildings I had ever seen.

Despite the snow and cold, I stood and stared for a very long time. It's getting more and more rare to see something unexpected, something entirely original. We live in a time that encourages uniformity, worships the mundane, lives for the mall. Wherever you go, there you *still* are. But this building defied all of that.

It was eight o'clock on a Sunday night, so it made sense that all the other businesses in the area were closed. But for whatever reason, this building was alive. Every floor was lit, and I could see bodies moving—a few of them rushing, as if en route to an emergency.

I moved in close, the snow coming in at a dizzying angle. Directly in front, just above the door, a carved egg-like shape sat calmly on end, and just beneath that, illuminated by an old zinc lamp, was the company name, etched in a familiar typeface.

I must have read the name five times before I could say it out loud.

"Peck & Peck."

19.

“Commitment” is a funny word. When speaking in terms of marriage or sports, “commitment” is positive. But when paired with “mental health” or “prison,” it instantly becomes something we’d rather not talk about. That’s what I remember most about that evening; I was seeing commitment. The good kind.

I must have stood in front of Peck & Peck for another twenty minutes, transfixed by the movement of people inside who stopped in front of the tall windows, heads dropping in unison to search papers, point at specifics, nod heads. Beneath it all, thanks to its thin-paned windows, ran a muted soundtrack of IBM typewriters.

I am no stranger to busy work environments; I work in a crowded restaurant; I know what the after-Christmas sale at the Gap is like. But this—this looked like something else. Behind the windows at Peck & Peck were people who were very different from me—people who believed in what they were doing.

I glanced across the street to where a man stood in the darkness, similarly transfixed. He took a moment to clean his glasses, then forced himself to move on. I had to do the same: I was late for my job. But I hesitated, trying to understand how a business that had definitely died, was suddenly alive and well. And I knew it had died. I’d checked other libraries for a full year.

Just then the front door opened wide, and a man and a woman stepped out.

“I’m exhausted,” the woman said, pulling a thick pumpkin-colored scarf over her shiny hair to protect the top of her head. “That may have been the toughest yet.”

“You always say that,” her companion said as he set his briefcase down to adjust his coat over his midfifties paunch. “Every issue, you always say the same thing.”

“Well,” she said, irritated, “it doesn’t help that he hasn’t hired anyone yet. It’s getting ridiculous.”

“It’s not that easy finding the right person,” the man said. “Plenty of people are qualified, but it takes a certain talent—”

“But we don’t *need*—” she began to argue, until her words were lost in the midst of a scarf readjustment. “ . . . editorial . . .” I heard her say, “ . . . critical . . .” she added. And then after she’d wrapped her scarf right over most of her face, I swear she said, “someone who can read. That’s all I ask!”

“You know how he is.” The man sighed.

They made their way down the front steps, the woman holding a small stack of books in the crook of her arm.

“Was this *ever* fun?” she asked, despondent, pulling her scarf away from her mouth. “Did we *ever* enjoy this, Hernandez?”

He hesitated. “You know we did.”

She stopped on the bottom stair and leaned into him as if not to be overheard. “Do you ever—you know—miss—him?”

Hernandez looked at her with certainty. “No.”

“Really?”

“We were *ruined*,” he said. “All of us. For years.” They said a few more things, but a breeze blew through, rattling garbage cans, and their words were lost.

But what wasn’t lost was this: Peck & Peck was hiring.

20.

I was an hour late to the Just Okay, a fact that was really not okay with my manager.

“I don’t know why your generation thinks being late is a way to rail against the machine,” Mr. Raley admonished me, even though this was the first time I’d ever been late and I’d never thought of the Just Okay as much

of a machine. “But I won’t stand for it. Do it again and there will be consequences.”

“I understand, Mr. Raley. It won’t happen again.”

We all had to call him *Mr.* Raley.

“All right, then,” he said, mopping his face with a table napkin. “It seems like I’m always having to get after you, Alex.”

Mr. Raley called everyone Alex—the name of his teenage son.

“You can’t get through life with a sloppy work ethic, Alex. You want to become something, don’t you?”

“Yes, Mr. Raley,” I said. I’d long since stopped bothering to correct my name. I liked Mr. Raley, partly in that way you sometimes like someone because you feel sorry for them. He was a widower and single dad to Alex, his awful kid, whom he sometimes pressed into service on the weekends, usually as a form of punishment for something he’d done or not done at home. But after ten minutes of busing tables, Alex usually ended up in the back alley, smoking pot. “That is illegal!” we’d hear Mr. Raley yell. “What is *wrong* with you?”

So when Mr. Raley asked me if I wanted to “become something,” I took no offense. I thought it was because he felt he never had and, worse, suspected that his kid never would either. What a burden that would be—to know your child wasn’t going to amount to anything. It occurred to me that my parents were carrying exactly the same burden.

But now, I reminded myself as Mr. Raley continued his lecture, that burden was soon to be in the past. Peck & Peck was hiring. They had an open position in editorial—a *critical* position. They wanted someone who could read—and by that I knew the scarf woman had meant *read poetry*. Someone with talent, not just credentials.

After I got off work, I stayed up all night crafting my résumé and cover letter. Finding exactly the right words to imply I’d been told of their opening without mentioning I’d been eavesdropping on a private conversation was tricky. I also decided to include a few of my own poems—dangerous, I know—but I thought they might demonstrate my full appreciation for the genre. Plus, even though I didn’t like my own work, it seemed others did. One of my poems had recently been accepted for publication by the Poetry in Buses Contest people.

If you’re not familiar with it, the Poetry in Buses Contest is run by the

New York City Transit Authority. Someone got the idea that putting poetry in buses might calm things down a bit—remind people of life's essential beauty as they lurched around the city in public transportation vehicles stuffed with other economically strapped riders.

It was June who had submitted my work; she'd done it without telling me. I'd called her, pretending to be annoyed, but I was so thrilled by the acceptance (*your work was selected out of many entries*) I doubt she bought my fake outrage.

"You miss all the shots you don't take, Batter," she'd said, quoting her Proverb-a-Day tear-off calendar. It was the same calendar she'd given me.

"You're right," I said.

"The journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step," she added.

"That it does."

I took that single step the very next morning. On way to the Gap, I stopped by Peck & Peck to drop off my résumé and poems in person. But as I reached to open the door, my progress was immediately blocked by a security guard.

"Whoa, there," he said, holding up a hand. He was an older man, mid-seventies, with a broad forehead and meaty earlobes. The name above his pocket read *Andy* in gas station type. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Oh," I said. "Hello. I'm Batter Gray. I'm just dropping off my résumé. I'm applying for the opening."

"What opening."

"Editorial."

"There's no opening in editorial."

"I was informed there is." I tried to sound confident. "And they're expecting this." I hoped he wouldn't ask who was expecting this.

"What's in there?"

"My résumé."

He looked at me as if he didn't believe me. "You a poet?" he asked suspiciously.

"Actually, I *am* a poet. I've just had a piece accepted by the—"

"In that case, I'm going to have to ask you to leave," he said in a

threatening way. He even put his hand on his holster.

"Excuse me?"

"Poets aren't allowed in. They're over-sensitive. Known to be unstable."

"But I'm applying for the opening," I insisted. "This is my résumé."

He took the envelope from me and opened it. Withdrawing the contents, he skimmed my résumé and my cover letter, then, frowning, read my poems. I couldn't believe it.

"Want some advice?" he said, not looking up. "Don't include the poetry."

"But—"

"Just giving you my two cents."

"But—"

"Up to you. Just sayin'."

"This one won an *award*," I insisted.

He raised his eyebrows in obvious doubt, then stuffed everything back in the envelope. "All right," he said. "I'll make sure he sees it." He cocked his head toward the street, indicating I should leave.

Two days later, my phone rang.

"Hello?" I said, nervously. It was probably too early to hear, but one never knew.

"Batter?" my mother said. "Are you okay? You sound funny."

"What? No. I'm fine." Could she really pick up on nervousness that far away? "What's up?"

"Nothing really—it's just that we got a call from your old roommate, Paul? Said he was worried about you. Said he'd tried to call you several times. Said he'd even been in New York City recently and although he'd planned to stay with you, had never even *seen* you. I told him it was probably that answering machine you have. I call all the time and never hear back from you either; those things aren't completely reliable, honey, you might want to get a new one. I promised you'd give him a call—I've got his number right here. Somewhere. It *was* right here—hold on—anyway, I told him you were working ridiculous hours and—"

"I *am* working a lot, Mom." But that wasn't why I hadn't called him

back.

“I know, I know. It’s just that, you know, he called. Maybe he’s lonely. Everyone says law school is hard, but who really knows. It could be just one of those things people in law school say—you know, the standard brag about how hard everything is when it’s not any harder than what the rest of us are doing. I think you should call him.”

“I will, I promise, Mom. But I’m running late for work.”

The phone was back in its cradle less than thirty seconds before it rang again.

“Hello,” I said, assuming it was my mother calling back with Paul’s phone number. She’d never managed to locate it on her desk during the last call.

“Hello,” a voice said. “Mr. Gray, please.”

“*Speaking*,” I said with a touch of sarcasm. When my mother said Paul might be in touch soon, she didn’t really mean soon—she meant *now*. Last time I was in Georgetown, Paul had been interviewing candidates to be his personal assistant. “To answer my phone and type my papers and assist with PR,” he’d told me. Sometimes Paul’s easy wealth and obvious ambition got to me. “I won’t be running for office for a few more years,” he’d said, “but pre-prep is everything.” This person definitely sounded like a personal assistant.

“I’ve got Mr. Gray on line one,” the voice said to someone else.

“*Well*,” a new voice said in an angry sort of way.

“Okay,” I said, “I know, I know. I am *such* an asshole; I’m sorry I didn’t __”

“What? Who is this?” the voice said impatiently. And then the voice turned to someone else and said, “Something about an asshole.”

“Hello?” said the first voice again, in a testy way. “Hello. We’re looking for Mr. Gray. Is he there or not?”

21.

What does one wear to the interview of one's life? In my case, it was the Gap's Sta-Prest slacks, a button-down shirt, and a tie, all of which I'd lifted from the very racks I was meant to guard and donned in the employee bathroom next to a door that led to an alley, the tags carefully preserved for a later return. My interview had been set for Friday morning at 11:00 a.m. I was to meet with Salton Peck, the Editor in Chief of Peck & Peck, and I was instructed to be on time.

When I arrived, Mr. Peck was on a phone call—or so I was informed by his personal assistant, a well-dressed, Ivy Leaguish–looking guy about my age who seemed to take an instant dislike to me.

"Do you even *have* an appointment?" he questioned.

"I have an interview. At eleven? Batter Gray."

"Not seeing it," he said, looking down at the appointment book, where I could see my name penciled in. *B. Gray. Eleven.*

"That's me," I said, tapping the entry.

"Would you . . . Do you mind? Please. Do not touch the calendar."

"Oh. I'm . . . I'm sorry."

He dropped his pencil in irritation. "Well, he's on a call."

"Okay," I said, thinking that was fine. The man's on a phone call. But then there was this silence. "I'll just wait over there, then."

The assistant exhaled, his eyes following me to my chair.

I will admit this to you: I'm one of those people who want to be liked. I don't like being disliked, especially when there is no proof yet that I am unlikable, although I'm sure I can be. Everyone is unlikable in some way. Still, I strive for likability.

"Are you sure you're not just here to pick something up?" he asked from across the room, his tone of incredulity holding steady.

"I'm interviewing," I said, although doubt was beginning to bore little holes into my confidence. "For the editorial position."

He snorted. "Right. Well. No. Not possible. There's no opening in editorial, and even if there was, you'd need at least two advanced degrees." He paused for a moment and took a long look at my qualifications.

“It’s funny, but I’d been under the impression that Peck & Peck had gone out of business,” I said from across the room. “I’m so glad I was wrong.”

“You seem to be wrong about most things,” he said, staring down at my résumé.

In addition to wanting to be liked, I want to be respected, but there under the word “Experience” lay the cold crevasse of inexperience. No internships. No corporate appointments. No summa cum laude.

At least I’d done something at the copy shop. It was there I’d been inspired to write about the sound copy machines make when they’re collating—like birds in frenzied flight—that’s how I’d put it. As it turned out, those were the words that had caught the fancy of the Poetry in Buses Contest people, and soon those words would be read and enjoyed by thousands of riders each day. According to the contest directions.

“By the way, it’s not on there,” I said, “but I’m also a published poet. Or about to be.”

I hoped he wouldn’t ask where. Because while I’d recently learned that the Poetry in Buses people had gotten thousands of entries—well, okay, hundreds—only about eighty of us had managed not to describe the metro experience in all-capped swear words. To be fair, metro wasn’t the problem. It was all the other stuff that made the ride impossible: traffic jams, greasy Big Mac wrappers, boomboxes that promised early hearing loss.

He looked up, letting my résumé drift from between his fingers back to his desk. When a small light flickered off, he said in a bored tone, “He’s off the phone. Follow me.”

I tagged along behind him down a long oval-shaped hallway lined with black-and-white photographs of famous poets, all of whom looked suicidal, plus one close-up of a cracked lightbulb.

He rapped twice, and then swung open the door, filling the hallway with light.

“Salton,” he said, “your eleven o’clock.” As I turned to enter, the assistant knocked hard into my left shoulder.

I had never seen an office like this before. I wasn’t even sure it qualified as an office. It was more like an expensive museum that uses white space to

emphasize the importance of whatever graced the walls, except this room had no white space and every single thing in it looked important.

Heaps of slender books in a multitude of languages lay everywhere: on the floor, on the shelves, on side tables, under the lamps, like a huge school of fish that darted about a coral reef composed of two identical eight-foot-long mahogany desks. The way the desks' back sides pushed up against each other in union—or possibly combat—their twin surfaces worn and nicked by time, seemed to indicate that only serious work had ever been done there. On both, papers spilled off to one side and books lay open on the other, each pile neighbored by jars of red pencils, erasers, an IBM Selectric, coffee mugs stuffed with non–photo blue pencils, a few framed photographs, and a stack of notebooks. One desk was littered with pink "While You Were Out" messages. The other had none. Beneath the desks lay a yellow-hued silk rug—probably Persian—its color a burst of unexpected cheer, its edges revealing a parquet floor that crept toward the ceiling-height bookshelves. Short and wide, tall and thin, at first glance the shelves' placement seemed erratic, but upon closer study, I could see there was cadence, like well-placed punctuation. The room was lit by a small army of table lamps, each providing a much-needed calm to the shard of sunlight that poured down from one of the enormous glass domes I'd noticed that night on the street. There was something about the color of the room that I particularly liked. To this day, I cannot name that color.

Off to one side stood a short man—he was five foot four at the most—and he was wearing—I swear this—cargo shorts. It had snowed just a few days before. When he raised his meerkat eyes to mine it reminded me of those picture puzzles—the kind that challenges the viewer to find the one thing that does not belong.

"What the hell do you want?" he snapped.

I'm a big believer in gut feelings, and in that moment my gut said, Flee. Nevertheless, I stuck out my hand, listed the facts—interview, editorial position, eleven o'clock—and waited for him to offer me a hand in return. He did not.

Pointing to a chair he barked, "Sit," then proceeded to ignore me.

I looked up at an enormous clock that commanded the room's airspace. Suspended on nearly invisible cables, it was a huge, Edwardian-looking contraption, with graceful hands and exquisite numerals, its worn face

having clearly marked time elsewhere—a Slovakian train station, the clock tower of a bucolic village—before being pressed into service at Peck & Peck. I watched its hands creep for nearly fifteen minutes before I found the courage to speak.

"Perhaps another time might suit you better, Mr. Peck," I ventured. "I seem to have caught you at a—"

He swung his head sharply. "I *said* I'd be with you in a moment."

I shrunk back.

Twenty more minutes labored by.

I wasn't comfortable waiting like this. My mother, who believed in punctuality like others believe in God, preached that punctuality is not only one of the factors that separate the nice people from the rude, it is also a precondition of achievement. "Batter," she'd say, "ninety percent of success is not just showing up. It's showing up *on time*."

I turned my attention to a side table strewn with delicate seashells. I reached out a hand to examine one of them more closely, but Mr. Peck, sensing a break in the room's equilibrium, whipped his head around and fixed his large, unblinking eyes on my hand as it hovered over the shell.

"ABSOLUTELY NOT," he shouted.

I retreated as if I'd touched a hot stove.

He returned his attention to a book he'd opened. Drawing a letter opener out of his back pocket, he sliced a page right out of it, then stuffed the page in his front shorts pocket and threw the rest of the book in the garbage.

Another ten minutes passed. I counted down by fives silently in Spanish. He walked to his desk. Sat down. Rifled through papers. Then, in a calm voice he said, "You're here, Mr. Gray, because I like you. I like your work."

I leaned forward in my chair, uncertain I had heard correctly.

"I'm not being completely forthright," he said, picking up my résumé. "I *love* your work. Found it refreshing. Just right. I had Dexter book you for an interview right away."

Dexter? The asshole assistant?

"Oh. Well thank you. I'm . . ."

"Everyone's a poet—aren't they?" Salton Peck shuddered. "People have a nasty habit of picking up pens and *writing*. I find that nauseating. Personally, I think poetry is genetics. Either you're born with it or you're not. You agree with me, of course."

I nodded, mentally inventorying the number of poets in the Gray bloodline. Zero.

“Poetry is a birthright; it’s a calling. It is not learnable—it’s not—”

“A trade,” I offered.

“*Don’t* interrupt me,” he shot back. “Poetry is not a trade. You can’t just wake up one day and decide you’re a poet, in the same way that you can’t get up in the morning and say, ‘Today I’m a doctor.’ Does not work that way. I don’t know the first thing about looking down people’s throats and I don’t want to. I also don’t know the first thing about fixing my car’s carburetor and this is why? Because I’m not a mechanic. I hate cars.”

I nodded in agreement, although wasn’t fixing cars—even fixing bodies—a trade?

“Look at me,” Salton Peck said, sweeping one hand up and down his body. “Can you imagine me, this man, going home from work and deciding to re-plumb his apartment? Make his own dinner? Sing an aria? Of course not. My point is, I stick to what I know. Is it so much to ask that others might afford me the same courtesy?”

I started to agree—he had no idea how much I agreed.

“So WHY,” he said, his voice rising in anger, “WHY, do all those lousy BASTARDS wander home from their plumbing and cooking and opera jobs and decide to write POETRY? And then, worse, WHY do they feel entitled to put it in an envelope and *send it* to *me*?” He stood up and slapped both hands on his hips, awaiting my answer.

“Well . . .” I began, my hands growing clammy.

“It’s because no one’s stopping them! It’s a free country! Everybody in the poetry pool! But what I don’t understand—what I will *never* understand—is how these people have the audacity to put their ‘poetry’ in an envelope and mail it to *me*. What am I? A landfill? Does this office look like a huge waste receptacle to you? Should the *Peck & Peck* quarterly have to put up with the stink that comes in the form of an A-A-B-B rhyme scheme?” He laid my résumé back down and hopped up on his desk, both feet dangling above the floor. He leaned forward. “Mr. Gray, I assume you are aware of what we do here.”

“I *am*, and . . .”

“I shouldn’t say ‘we,’ Mr. Gray; scratch ‘*we*.’ I do it. I am responsible for the selection and ultimate inclusion of every line in each and every issue.

Yes, I have”—and here he sighed—“editors and staff and blah, blah, blah.” He waved his hand off into the distance as if dismissing the rabble, then picked up the most recent quarterly, Issue 322, the cover catching me by surprise. The egg was still there, but there was also a starburst, several blurbs heavy with exclamation points, and a subhead that screamed: SNEAK A PEEK INSIDE!

“But I’m the one with the ear,” Salton said, “*and* the financial acumen. I read the poems, I select the poems, I publish the poems. Every night I leave this office completely spent. It takes”—and here he jabbed the side of his head with his index finger—“everything I have to make *Peck & Peck* the best it can be. And it *is* the best. Everyone says so.”

I couldn’t agree more. Which is why when Pete the librarian had told me *Peck & Peck* had gone belly-up, I thought it was the end of an era. But now, as I sat in this space of intellectual superiority with light cascading down upon Salton Peck as if he were the Second Coming, I realized how stupid I’d been to assume the world’s most legendary poetry quarterly would ever actually cease to exist, and how lucky I was to be sitting in a meeting with its editor in chief. ME! BATTER GRAY OF YUBA CITY!

Salton picked up a copy of the quarterly and began waving it around. “Is there something you want more than anything?” he said, swatting the publication against the arm of my chair. “Or are you one of those people who settles?”

I jumped, tucking my arms close to my body. “Well, I—”

“You look like you might be a settler,” he said, eyeing me closely. “I don’t like settlers.”

“No, Mr. Peck,” I said, “I am definitely not—”

“Bunch of whiny bastards.”

“Yes.”

“Set your sights on something; go after it.”

“Yes.”

“Take risks. Break rules.”

“Yes.”

“Shoot the prisoners. Shoot the guards, too, if you have to.”

“Uh—”

He leaned in close, his whitened knuckles shining like cue balls as he gripped the arm on either side of my chair. His breath came out in short

spurts, each miniature explosion shaking the tiny droplets of moisture that had formed above his upper lip.

“Originality is dying, Mr. Gray. It’s being massacred by copiers.” He pushed himself off the armrests and backed into the room, picking up a stack of papers on the other desk and vaulting them into the air. “And I absolutely *hate*,” he bellowed, “COPIERS!”

I don’t scare easy—really—but Salton Peck was testing my fight-or-flight instinct. Short, odd, unstable, sweaty, and prone to tantrums; that’s the description I’d give the police.

“Duplicators!” he shouted, thumping a book. “Copycats!”

And yet as scary as he was, for the first time that morning, I felt relief. So here was our common ground. He hated plagiarists. When it came to people who copy others, Salton and I, no pun intended, were on the same page. Ever since eighth grade, when a classmate copied an essay I’d labored over, then told the teacher I’d copied *him* (I received an automatic F and served three weekends in detention), I’d reserved a mental place in hell for people like that. And in the unlikely event a plagiarist was caught, even their defense was copied. “Oh come on; there aren’t any new ideas anyway,” they’d say. “It’s not like I couldn’t have come up with exactly the same words on my own.” Or my favorite, “No one reads anyway.” Although apparently, they had read. Long enough to copy.

Salton stomped right on top of a book that lay open on the floor and, returning to his desk, planted himself in his chair. He swiveled to and fro like a small child, his tantrum over.

“As I was saying,” he said, tapping the tips of his fingers together, “I very much like your work.”

My greed for praise is so ridiculously off-the-charts needy that instead of asking about the position, pay, or perks, I found myself dying to know which of the three poems I’d sent with my résumé had made such a strong impression on him. What did he like about my work? Was it the phrasing? The structure? But before I could, he said: “I’d like you to start immediately. Monday.”

“ABSOLUTELY,” I shouted without meaning to.

“Good. But I warn you. This is a difficult, demanding job. I won’t accept sloppy work.”

“Of course not!”

“I’ll expect long hours and *complete* loyalty.”

“Understood!”

“Everybody wants to be published in *Peck & Peck*. We get thousands of submissions a month. Mostly from a bunch of sous chefs and babysitters, of course, but because of them we waste a lot of paper. I don’t like waste, or paper. I hate trees as well.”

“Got it!”

“Dexter has what you need up front.”

“Thank you, Mr. Peck,” I said, trying for a more serious tone. “I can’t tell you how much I appreciate the opportunity.” But as I stuck my hand out to shake, he sprang up with such ferocity I withdrew it, flattening myself against the bookcase as he charged past me to retrieve one of the many sheets of paper littering the floor. Stooping quickly, he grabbed it and read it, his face contorting with displeasure. Then he clenched it in his fist, as if choking a small animal.

22.

On Monday morning, following a weekend of quitting my other jobs and telling my friends and phoning my parents and allowing the congratulations to wash over me, thanks in part to a slightly embellished retelling of the story (*he said I was a gifted poet*, I told my mother; *he said he loved my originality*, I told June; *I was selected out of hundreds of other applicants*, I told my father; *he was impressed by my poetic knowledge*, I told Paul—although to Mr. Raley’s sad face all I could say was *I’m really sorry, Mr. Raley*, to which he responded, *I am so proud of you, Alex*, I reported for work at eight a.m. sharp.

Andy, the security guard, seemed astonished to see me again, but when I was able to prove my employment with a form, he pointed to a bench. “Sit,” he demanded. “Don’t move.”

Ten minutes later, Dexter breezed in. I watched as Andy whispered my presence, then pointed, the two of them taking stock of me from across the room. An unsmiling Dexter crooked a finger, indicating I should get up.

The previous week, the security guard had ridden up the elevator with me, then Dexter had taken me back down. That's all I'd seen of Peck & Peck; Salton Peck's office, the lobby, the elevator. And yet based on those three areas, I was already convinced this was the most beautiful interior I'd ever seen. If I had to guess, I'd say the design was based on these principles:

- Spend as much money as possible.
- Break all the rules.
- Repeat the following mantras: beauty over practicality, form over function, creativity over common sense.

From the lobby, an arched opening led to a wide rotunda staircase, which wound to all five floors, spooling like a broad helix up and up, each floor requiring at least two landings and forty pale marble stairs.

Dexter pointed to the elevator; we both got in. Then he punched a button reading FOURTH FLOOR on the elevator's panel. Ten seconds later, the doors slid open.

He took a step out. "Hurry up," he said, even though I was right beside him.

We walked quickly, my hard-soled shoes making clicky-clacky noises on the marble floor. Dexter frowned, clenching his teeth as if he considered my shoes so personally offensive, he couldn't find the words. He stopped abruptly, then spread his right arm like an orchestra conductor. "In a clear nod to the earth's orbit around the sun," he said, "each floor of Peck & Peck is designed in the shape of an ellipse." His voice was pedantic, thick with the knowledge that such a concept might exceed my grasp. "And obviously within that orbit—"

But I was barely listening. I was too stunned by the wall's chroma, a vivid violet, otherworldly rare. This color appears only once a day, at sunset, and then only when fine volcanic aerosols in the stratosphere scatter

blue light and blend with the more common red variety. I retained very few facts from my Electromagnetism class (major: Physics); this was one of them. The violet lasts only a few moments, yet despite its short appearance, it is unforgettable.

"Let me guess," Dexter said in a barbed voice. "You're unfamiliar with the color commonly associated with wisdom."

I was not.

" . . . so six offices on each side plus one mammoth suite at the end," he finished. We sped past a series of huge double doors, each featuring a large round doorknob in the exact center, and each decorated with a small nameplate just to the right. WONG, AGWUEGBO, RAMÍREZ, GUPTA, I read as we flew by, TANG, WATERSON, KOWALSKI, HERNANDEZ, SINGH, DUBOIS, HIGGINS, ALBERT, MONDO.

"What happens on this floor?" I puffed.

"What *happens* on this floor?" Dexter said incredulously while pointing one finger above to a sign that read SENIOR EDITORIAL in approximately 5,000-point Caslon.

"Oh," I said. "Sorry."

Dexter ignored my apology, suddenly busy with his little pager. "Halt," he commanded. He held up one hand and consulted his gadget as if he were a world-class cardiologist. I made my way to the railing, a coal black divider that ran up the staircase and along the top of the balusters, its internal pattern a swirly mass of chaotic twists like a rough sea. I leaned over it to take in the drapery of light afforded by the skylights.

When I was a kid, my parents drove us to the Grand Canyon. As I stood on the edge of the rim looking down, my mom said something about how strange it was that beauty is often paired with danger, which made my father sigh and say couldn't she just enjoy the view for once? Which made my mom point out that eleven people had already died in the park that year, which made my father argue that if the park wasn't safe, the government would shut it down, which made my mother laugh (Nixon was president), which made my father ask if she'd taken her pill, which ended up with the three of us in the car riding in dead silence all the way back to the motel. Weirdly, in the paper the next day, we found out someone did die in the canyon that day. Kicked in the head by a burro.

I stared over this railing. Long way to the bottom.

“Gray,” Dexter said sharply, coming up behind me. “What are you doing? Any idiot can see the railings aren’t up to code.”

“Sorry,” I said nervously, returning to an upright position. “I mean, have people actually—?”

“Where do you think building codes come from? Mistakes. Learning from them.” He clapped his hands together, imitating the fall of a body to the floor sixty feet below. I must have paled because he laughed out loud, then indicated with a crooked finger that I should once again follow. But before we’d taken a single step, behind me an office door flew open and a thin, barefooted woman with long, straight black hair emerged.

“Good morning, Dr. Tang,” Dexter said.

She lit up. “Dexter!” she said. “You genius! How did you find it? And a first edition no less!”

“It was my pleasure, Tang,” Dexter said. “Ask and ye shall receive.”

As their pleasantries continued, I poked my head inside Dr. Tang’s office. It was huge, triple the size of my studio apartment. and crowded floor to ceiling with bookcases overflowing with thin chapbooks and fat anthologies. A large desk sat in the middle, and on that, an IBM typewriter, and next to that, stacks and stacks of thin manuscripts, most of which looked like they were in Japanese, and next to those a teapot and two cups, several canisters filled with—I was guessing—tea, plus three strainers, a clear jar holding a bouquet of red pencils, a neat stack of Snickers bars, and a very crooked, very unhealthy-looking bonsai. The room glowed with morning light thanks to the pair of glass doors that opened to a private balcony. On the railing sat an ashtray filled with butts. There were no curtains, no shades, no shutters—nothing to block the morning sun. Nevertheless, the office maintained its privacy, largely because of five topiaries that sat just outside in sturdy troughs.

I remembered those topiaries from that first night I’d stumbled upon Peck & Peck. I hadn’t been able to make out what they were then—the snowfall had distorted their shapes—but now it was easy to see. They were letters. And they spelled something.

“Any idea if Salton is calling that meeting later today?” Tang asked as I took in her long, tiny-pearled necklace, which radiated a kind of ancient authority. I guessed she was in her late forties.

“Still no word. Have your recommendations ready.”

Recommendations. Ah. So when Salton said he was responsible for the entire quarterly, he probably meant as the publication’s leader. The real editorial work, I was certain, came from people like Tang—a woman who (I’m happy to report) seemed completely normal in every way except for liking Dexter and being barefoot at work.

“Listen. Can I show you one quick thing?” Tang asked. “It’s a minor form of waka. I think you might find it—” She drew Dexter into her office, and I followed like a puppy until Dexter turned with a look that said: NOT YOU. I stepped back out.

He closed the door behind him, leaving me alone. I stood uncertainly, watching as a few other editors arrived, carrying books and papers, sack lunches, an assortment of daypacks, each nodding at the others before opening a specific door, only to disappear behind it with a click. I got the sense a lot of them hailed from elsewhere—one man was wearing dhoti pants; a woman was draped in a Nigerian aso oke. From down the hall, I heard Portuguese.

While I waited for Dexter, I studied the artwork that lined the violet walls. I don’t really understand why some paintings get all the praise and others don’t, but as I peered closer, I realized these weren’t paintings. They were time capsules.

There must have been about forty of them, each ebony-framed, each about four feet high, each elegant and arresting, and each dominated by a clean white mat that, because of its size, drew immediate attention to the small mess in the middle. At first glance I thought Peck & Peck had framed trash. Some held discolored sheets of previously wadded-up notebook paper; a few sported dirty napkins; one was a Playbill; another the inside of a matchbook cover. The only thing they had in common—barely decipherable words. And then it became obvious. These were poems.

A few had been typed, but most were handwritten. Each one was wildly chaotic; each was strewn with retractions and regrets.

Ah—now I got it: it was the fight between the writer and the page—the ugly, miserable part where Concept decides to pick a fight with Execution, the volleys endlessly going back and forth in a slow, fruitless death. Pens had been weaponized to scratch out, obliterate, and/or eliminate whatever had been written before in favor of what was written next, unless that was

bad, too, in which case big Xs were employed. I leaned in close. “P. Neruda” read the scribble in the corner.

I turned, surprised, to find Dexter standing beside me.

“Are these the *actual* poems?” I asked, unable to keep the awe from my voice. “The original manuscripts?”

“Oh, no,” Dexter said. “Sometimes, when we’re really bored, we go down to the local coffee shop and grab old napkins out of the garbage and bring them back here and frame them. We have tons of time for that sort of thing.”

I hesitated. “Sorry. I guess that was a dumb question.”

“Finally. Something we can agree on.”

He gave me yet another once-over as if he still couldn’t figure out how I was allowed to exist, then turned and walked away, me following in his pretentious wake as I weighed the various reasons for Dexter’s rudeness. What had I done?

And then it occurred to me. I must have been hired for a job Dexter thought he was getting. He’d taken the assistant job as a way to break in, but now, years later, he was still in it. He thought he had an ear; he didn’t. *I* did. Salton Peck saw it, knew it, hired me on the spot. Of course Dexter resented me; how could he not? In a moment we’d have to backtrack, Dexter sullenly apologizing for not showing me the office that was to be mine; adding a reluctant mention that my nameplate was on order; confessing that a welcome party was scheduled for me later that day. I almost felt sorry for the guy.

Except it didn’t happen. I dogged him down a flight of forty marble stairs, a descent that felt like a fall in slow motion, my shoes clacking with every step, taking me farther away from the violet walls and the senior editors until we reached the third floor and rounded the corner, the color shifting to a gust of indigo blue so shockingly atmospheric, it felt like my lungs were filling with pure oxygen.

I took a deep breath and instantly was back in the Grand Canyon, except now it was twilight—that sliver of a moment just before dark and well before dawn. We’d returned to our crummy motel, my parents still picking at each other in a way that made my stomach hurt. To escape, I’d gone outside, lay down on the car hood, and stared up at the night sky. I’d been to the planetarium; I’d seen photographs of starry skies in textbooks. But like

all kids raised in a mixture of smog and light pollution, I assumed the night sky was ancient history. Extinct, just like the dodo.

Boy, was I wrong.

Just like a jeweler spreads sparkly gems on a black velvet surface to emphasize their glimmer, stars and planets revealed themselves to me in various clarities and sizes; some with force, others with hesitancy, all blending together like a blackboard partially erased. Sirius, the Dog Star; Mars with its hint of red; Venus with its glitter; Canopus; Vega; Capella; Rigel; Arcturus; and more; all joining their constellations like minor actors late to a reading, occasionally upstaged by a star shooting against the sky. I lay out on the hood of the car trying to commit the whole thing to memory, certain I'd never see it again. And you know what? I never did. Until now.

From above my head poured—no—*rained*—a staggering array of letterforms, thousands upon thousands of silvery metals and burnished coppers, perfectly balanced in precarious-looking mobiles all floating from the twenty-foot-high ceiling like the tentacles of a jellyfish, each a complex arrangement of letters: lowercase, uppercase, all present and accounted for.

As we walked beneath them, the mobiles stirred ever so slightly, placing one letter next to another, as if to imply that poetry was simply a matter of putting letters in the right order. Simple and solvable—why all the fuss?—even though the artwork I'd just seen a floor above proved otherwise. They stretched like long, delicate necklaces around the oval track, the light catching their surfaces just so. I looked up in time to see an "R" from one mobile drift next to an "U" from another and a "N" from yet another.

Run.

Just then came a shout.

"NO!" It was Dexter. "Of course not."

A man, probably mid-sixties, stood before Dexter, his hands held helplessly out to his sides. The type above him moved quickly, as if disturbed.

"Howard, you know you can't just barge in there. If you want to see him, you have to go through me. You *know* how it works."

The Howard-person nodded. "Understood," he said. "I just need five minutes. Maybe you could find me an opening this afternoon?"

"Doubtful," Dexter said, in a slightly more conciliatory tone. "You know what he's like. Maybe Wednesday. He might have a second just before

lunch.”

“Five minutes,” Howard said. “That’s all I need. It’s important.”

As Dexter consulted his pager, I extended my hand to the older man. “Hi, I’m—” but Dexter blocked me with force. To Howard he said, “I’ll call you,” then pointed his finger at me, simultaneously indicating that I should follow, and that Howard should not. I looked back to see Howard slink behind the end office door—the “mammoth suite” as Dexter had called it, the one, I assumed, was reserved for VIP editors. GADLEY, read the old nameplate on the door.

“What floor is this?” I asked, instantly wishing I hadn’t. The sign at the end of the hallway clearly read ASSOCIATE EDITORIAL.

“If I had to hazard a guess, I’d say it’s Associate Editorial,” Dexter answered, pointing at the sign. “Don’t take offense, but you can read, right? It’s sort of a job prerequisite.”

I ignored him, returning my attention to the drifting type above my head. “Boy, my mom would really love this,” I said. “She designs typefaces—in fact, she—”

Dexter turned to me as if in pain. “Stop,” he said, holding up his hand. “Please. No personal details.”

I pressed my lips together.

We walked on, me lagging three steps behind. As we passed, Dexter nodded to a few people sitting in their offices, their doors open, their looks serious. The building had just begun to take on the noisy life of productivity. From everywhere came the hesitant chatter of IBM Selectric typewriters and a few ringing phones. I cast my eyes to the nameplates: ROMANOV, NG, SLATER, DHANIAL, ALVAREZ.

Please, I thought, let my office be on this floor.

As we neared the end of the hallway, I could see that the last office door was open wide. I peeked inside to see four editors sitting in a circle.

“Could we please,” one woman said, “stop revisiting the Lockwood piece? It’s nothing but zirconium. Pretty, but no lasting value. I can’t believe it’s made it this far.”

“I disagree,” another argued. “I think it’s an important exploration of human frailty—”

“And culpability,” added another. “The death stanza, alone.”

“Quick question,” the fourth editor said. “Just wanted to confirm that humor is out, right? We no longer accept anything that might make anyone feel good or possibly laugh?” Their heads swiveled toward the door, drawn by my loud shoes. I smiled apologetically; two of them smiled back.

“Hello,” I called to them. “Sorry—”

I was about to say, “my shoes,” but Dexter yanked me past the open door.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” he hissed. “Running for office? Stop it. These people don’t have time to talk to you.”

“Sorry,” I said, as we made our way down the marble staircase. But each step only magnified the castanets on my feet.

“And you might want to rethink those,” Dexter said through gritted teeth.

“Will do,” I said. I couldn’t help but notice that Dexter’s shoes made no sound at all.

“So, does everyone get their own office?” I finally ventured.

He turned and looked at me, his eyes wide.

“I didn’t mean to imply I would. I assume I wouldn’t. Not yet anyway.”

“You’re just full of questions, aren’t you?”

“I’m just *asking*.”

Something about my tone made him reconsider his approach. “*Of course* you’ll get your own office, Gray,” he said. “We don’t like to share here.”

As we made our way down to the second floor, the walls morphed into a surprising lime, fresh as new grass, and with a vibrancy that carried a hopeful, healthy energy. It almost felt as if someone had opened all the windows to take advantage of the scent of a nearby orange grove. I took a deep breath in.

Dexter was just up ahead—waylaid by one of the editors—a young woman with curly brown hair that trembled as she spoke. She was obviously complaining about something or someone, jabbing her finger in an accusatory way as if to identify the whereabouts of the people who’d had the audacity to fuck something up. Meanwhile, I watched as the other editors roamed the hallways, each carrying a huge armload of manuscripts that they shifted from arm to arm, occasionally poking their heads into others’ offices and saying things like “You won’t believe what I just forced myself to read.”

That’s when it struck me. All the editors on this floor were young—in their twenties and thirties. I felt my anxiety abate. Here, at last, were people like me—people who *knew* poetry and were at the beginning of their careers—a fact made clear by their youth, as well as by the plaque at either end of the hall.

JUNIOR EDITORIAL, it read.

Surely this was to be my new home!

After Dexter had finished with the angry curly-haired woman, we continued our stroll down the hallway, Dexter seemingly lost in thought, which allowed me to take in this floor’s own grand visual display. Here, the walls were lined with hundreds of small glowing eggs, each encased in a translucent frame, a shock of glow against the fresh green walls, their repetition creating the illusion of hundreds of small suns lighting the way. The overall effect was almost church-like in its holiness, the eggs, like acolytes, urging us on.

It took me a moment to realize I was looking at a series of *Peck & Peck* covers; in fact every cover of *Peck & Peck* to date. Hundreds of quarterlies beckoned us around the long track in an unbroken line, each exactly the same minus two details: the edition number, and a flurry of editorial signatures written in a silver pen.

Without thinking, I stopped to examine the one closest to me.

“Whenever a new edition comes out, all of the editors get to sign it,” Dexter explained, stopping midway. His tone sounded almost wistful. “As you walk past, you’ll see the names of the people who’ve advanced and protected the world of poetry for the last eighty-two years. Here’s where the founding Peck & Peck brothers signed.” He pointed reverently at one of the older covers.

I leaned in close, examining the silvery signatory swirls that marked the Peck brothers’ first edition. It was like seeing the Declaration of Independence up close.

We continued down the hallway, the repetition of the egg creating a simple, clean backdrop for the individual efforts that had sought, found, and fought for the work chosen for publication. Some of the world’s most famous poets had gotten their start here—inside these very covers. I thought about what that editor on the third floor had said—how the Lockwood piece

was a bunch of pretty words without substance. Substance. Now I would be one of the people who would help them find it.

I continued to follow Dexter, my heart pounding as we left the second floor and took the last forty stairs down to the lobby. Still no mention of where or how I fit in.

“The lobby is far more than a lobby,” Dexter was saying, pointing at a section of the area I’d missed earlier. “it’s the portal. Where it all begins.” He gestured to a sign that made my heart sink.

MAILROOM.

I asked hesitantly, “Is my office on this floor?”

“Oh no,” Dexter said. “The editorial offices are on the floors we just visited, floors two, three, and four. Salton is on the fifth, obviously, as is the editorial conference room. But the mailroom is important. Small, impossibly warm, and legendarily claustrophobic. We get *a ton* of mail. Take my advice; avoid the mailroom. It’s chaos.” He pressed his ear against the wall, indicating that I should do the same. “Hear that?” he asked as I thought how much the wall color reminded me of unfiltered honey.

There was a buzzing sound.

“Sorting submissions. Can’t believe they’re still here.”

“How many—”

“No idea. They’re parolees. We keep our distance.” He backed away from the wall carefully, as if to ward off a possible swarm attack.

“That’s very progressive,” I said. “Hiring parolees to—”

“Sorry,” he interrupted sharply, “but I don’t really have time for your op-ed piece on social justice right now. Now look: see this cabinet? It opens on either side of this wall. The parolees place sorted mail in here for the junior editors to collect every morning. Then in the late afternoon, the junior editors return the same sacks but now filled with rejected submissions ready to burn.”

“*Burn?*”

“It’s our way of protecting a writer’s work. Just because we don’t want it doesn’t mean some other loser won’t try to steal it. You’re familiar with plagiarism, aren’t you? That’s why the mailroom is so warm. The incinerator.”

“I—”

“Notice the lobby is the only floor without serious decoration,” he continued. “We think of it as a blank slate—full of possibility—not yet written. Poets are forever dropping by; we like to remind them that their poetry is not going to write itself. We provide a few benches for momentary repose: that’s it. No art, no bulletin boards, no gift shop, no conversation. This isn’t a place for them to dawdle. We don’t believe in false encouragement. We’re not the mommies of the writing world.”

I watched as a few poets milled about. It was easy to tell they were poets because they had that built-in look of rejection.

“It goes without saying that we never allow them upstairs. The truth is, we’d really prefer not to let them in at all, but sometimes the guard has a heart—gives them a few moments in the inner sanctum.”

I smiled at one of the poets and he immediately started to approach.

“*I said don’t encourage them*,” Dexter hissed, signaling the guard.

We turned away, Dexter quickly directing me to the far side of the elevator we’d taken that morning. We ducked into a nearby alcove.

“Now,” he said, “pay strict attention. When it’s dark, it’s hard to locate the panel. It’s recessed, but it’s right here.” He pointed to a nearly invisible rectangular wooden surface. “It’s designed to be imperceptible—so even if a wayward poet found their way in here, they’d assume there’s nothing to see.”

I couldn’t see anything.

“Now here,” he said, pointing at the wooden surface, “is the button.” He pointed to a red dot the size of a pencil eraser. “You have to put some pressure on it,” he said, placing his thumb on top, then pressing the weight of his body against it. “You can’t baby it.” He pressed even harder, his thumbnail turning white until a door, previously hidden from view, sprang open.

“Success,” he said. “Now to the bowels.”

I followed him down a steep flight of narrow spiral stairs. This felt worrisome.

“We’re in the old bomb shelter,” Dexter explained once we hit the cement floor. “And I sincerely hope there’s never an emergency, because, honestly, next to this? I’d take the bomb.” Overhead, fluorescent lights flickered like dying flames.

“What goes on down here?”

“Next to nothing,” he said. “This is where we keep all the unimportant stuff. Pencils. Toilet paper. That sort of thing.” I started to relax a bit as we passed shelves filled with normal office supplies. “Now down here at this end,” he said, “is a very large dumbwaiter that leads back up to all the other floors. It’s a fast but somewhat dangerous way to get upstairs without going through the lobby. Climb in, pull on the rope, and it’s up, up, and away.”

“Oh, I see,” I said. “So, an editor could climb in and ride up to their floor to escape any would-be poets.” I was kidding—obviously. Who would do that?

“Yes. Correct.” He stopped for a moment, hands on hips, then turned to the right, pointing at a barely noticeable door—maybe three feet high. “Speaking of poets,” he said, “see that? It used to provide access to the outside alley. The second set of Peck brothers finally removed the doorknobs to discourage unauthorized entry. Still, it wasn’t until they nailed it shut and hired a security guard that they were really able to cut down on the riff—”

Before he could add the “raff,” a horrible jarring sound erupted.

“Jesus Christ!” I said, pressing myself against the wall. “What the hell was *that*?”

Dexter looked back at me innocently. “What?”

Then it came again—a hideous screeching like worn-out brake pads.

“*That.*”

“Oh,” he said matter-of-factly. “That’s our chute system.”

We turned a corner, and he led me farther down a dank hallway until we came to a wall of what looked like large safety deposit boxes—the kind you’d see in a bank vault—but these were made of wood and fronted with thick glass. Each chute was about twelve inches wide and five inches tall, and each featured a small window and label plastered with a last name. Without warning, a cylindrical container whooshed by us with the intensity of a charging bull, coming to rest, I assumed, on the other side of the wall.

“It’s kind of like a drive-up window at a bank,” he said. “They’re pneumatic tubes.”

“I don’t understand. What’s it for?”

He yanked on a doorknob just to the right of the chutes. “What’s it for?” he said, innocently. “Why, Mister Gray, *it’s for you*.” He waved his hand,

inviting me to take a step inside.

"See: you do get your own office."

Inside were three copy machines. That was all.

23.

The room wasn't an office, it was a cell, with old brick walls that leaked mortar and a pervasive smell of mold like a third world country well on its way to becoming a fourth. I took a look around in disbelief. On one of the copiers lay an old baloney sandwich that had been smashed to death by the copier lid. "Fuck this place," someone had written across the copier glass in now-dried mayonnaise. The only natural light came from a narrow rectangular window that had been placed at eye level. About six inches high and three feet long, it provided one thing: a depressing view of the sidewalk. I watched as a pair of patent leather pumps clipped by on their way to one of the glassy high-rises on the opposite corner.

" . . . and then unload the cylinder and follow the copy instructions," Dexter was saying. "Every two hours, fill the hand trolley and drag whatever you've finished upstairs via the dumbwaiter I showed you, or via the spiral staircase we came down. Deliver the assignments to each editor on each floor as indicated, placing the manuscripts in the copy receptacles outside their separate offices. I hope you were paying attention on our tour this morning—making a note of who sits where and on what floor—otherwise, you'll be slow in your delivery, and slow is inexcusable. We're on deadlines here. The editors can't be kept waiting."

"Is this all I do?" I asked, turning to him. "Just make copies?"

"Correct. Just make copies. What did you think? That Peck & Peck was dying to make use of your high school poetry appreciation class?"

"It's just that I was told I was interviewing for editorial."

"No. You *imagined* you were interviewing for editorial."

“*No*, I—”

“Listen,” he interrupted. “If you don’t want this job—if it’s *beneath* you, as you seem to be indicating—don’t worry. We usually hire temps anyway.”

“What’s your problem?” I said, growing heated. “You’ve been on me since we met. Have I done something to offend you?”

“Something to offend me?” Dexter said in mock horror as he splayed his fingers on his chest. “I read your recommendation, Gray. You’ve done *everything* to offend me.”

We stared at each other for at least five seconds, neither of us giving way. What a contrast we were: he in an overstarched button-down shirt that looked incapable of comfort, and I in my ridiculous rayon-blend jacket, the pockets still sewn shut, forcing my hands to dangle helplessly at my sides.

“All right then, Copy Boy,” he finally said, breaking the silence, “I’d better leave you to your”—and here he paused for maximum effect—“*work.* We haven’t had someone down here in weeks, so everything’s backed up. And just so you know, you’ve already inspired a pool. The big money is on you quitting by Friday.”

As he exited, he waved a hand over his shoulder, a motion impeccably timed to coincide with an avalanche of cylinders hurtling through the walls like missiles hot on their target. The door clicked shut behind him.

I stood there alone, frozen in place.

This had to be a mistake. He’d mentioned a recommendation. What recommendation? I’d listed Mr. Raley as a reference, but he said he’d never gotten a call.

And what about the Editor in Chief, Salton Peck? He said that he liked my work. That I was “just right.”

I stood for a few minutes, a part of me hoping that Dexter would walk back in, all smiles, a hand extended, congratulations, I’d passed the test, welcome to the family, sorry about the hazing, it’s just a stupid old Peck & Peck tradition. But no.

I pushed back my hair with trembling fingers and surveyed the room. In one corner lay what looked like a used condom; in another, a heap of smashed Diet Coke cans; in a third, at least forty boxes of unopened paper; in the fourth, more toner than I have ever seen in my life. From behind me came the first notes of the soundtrack that would accompany the days ahead: pneumatic tubes announcing their urgent arrival.

Slowly, as if on autopilot, I lifted the old baloney sandwich from the copier's platen and threw it in the trash. Bending down to retrieve a fast-food napkin off the floor, I spit on it and cleaned the copier glass. Then I refilled the paper trays, checked the toner levels, cleaned the drums, cleared two paper jams, and reset all three machines. Finally, I turned to face the stacks of cylinders that were still hurtling through the walls because, according to Dexter, they hadn't been able to hurtle for weeks now. I chose one and snapped it open, reminding myself that grown men did not cry.

I did anyway.

24.

Despite Dexter's betting pool prediction, I lasted the first week. In fact, I lasted the second and third as well. Although nearing the end of that third week, I was pretty sure I couldn't last a fourth. I was tired in ways I'd never been before, and it wasn't just my body that ached. It was my soul. I'd pursued my passion, but like that burro in the Grand Canyon, it had kicked me in the head.

"Hey, Mr. Raley," I said, dropping by the Just Okay one night after work.

"Alex!" he said, wiping his dirty hands on his apron before clapping me on the back. "How's the big fancy world of publishing?"

"It's great," I said. "Although, guess what. I miss this place."

"No, you don't, Alex," he said, smiling, keeping his hand on my shoulder. "But thanks for saying so."

"No, the thing is, I really do, Mr. Raley. I think I'd like to come back. Full-time if possible. I could work whatever shift you'd like. Any shift. Every shift." I looked around. The place was packed. "I've decided I want to learn the restaurant business."

Mr. Raley narrowed his eyes and removed his hand from my shoulder.

"I could start tonight if you'd like. Looks like you could use the help."

"Did they fire ya?"

"What? No. Nothing like that. I just realize I really like the restaurant business."

"No one likes the restaurant business, Alex. What happened?"

"Nothing happened."

"Don't bullshit me."

I hesitated. "Can I have my old job back or not?"

"No."

I looked around me. Patrons were begging for food and checks.

"Come on, Mr. Raley. Look at this place."

"You know what I think? I think you're acting like a quitter," he said, folding his arms across his chest.

"What?"

"You got that look. The I-give-up look. I don't like that look."

"I'm not giving up, it's just that—"

"You haven't given it enough time."

"No, I have. Really."

"Have some backbone, Alex. No one likes a quitter."

"But I *have* to be a quitter, Mr. Raley," I confessed. "Please. You have no idea."

Raley softened. "It's that bad?"

I thought back to one afternoon when I was delivering copies upstairs. As I walked by one of the offices, I heard someone say, "Who *is* that anyway?" And someone else answered, "Nobody."

"It's worse than bad. 'Bad' is too good a word for what it is."

Raley put his hand back on my shoulder. Then he shoved me hard.

"Hey, what was that for?" I asked, slightly annoyed. "Did you just *push* me?"

Then he did it again.

"Hey!"

"They push you; you push back. That's how a person stays upright," he said.

"Well. I'm not really the pushy type."

"I didn't say 'pushy,' Alex; I said *push*. You go back to your job

tomorrow and you push back. Got that?" He pushed me again. "Don't let people walk on you. Do your job; do it well. Don't be so bendy. Someone comes at you, take a stand."

"*Mr. Raley—*"

"Did you hear me, Alex? There's no job for you here."

"I can't believe this!"

"Believe it," he said as he walked away. "And while you're at it, try believing in yourself. Because until you do, those poetry people are gonna walk all over you."

25.

"Did you know," my mom said as she shoved a thermometer into my mouth when I was about eight, "that I was vice president of my high school's Honor Society?"

I'd come home from school feeling achy, and now there was a thermometer in my mouth. I had a Little League game to get to.

"Mom," I mumbled, my mouth full. "*I gonna be w-wate*."

"You can't go to your game with germs pouring off your body just to prove how vital you are to the team. If the thermometer says you're fine, you can go. While we wait for the results, I'll tell you about my role as vice president. It won't take long because vice presidents never get to do anything."

I plopped down, defeated.

"Minus one thing. Every year the vice president introduced the mayor at the school assembly. It was a big honor and I wanted to do it, but I wasn't sure I was up to it. Peter Bodwitch, President of the Honor Society, also thought I wasn't up to it. *No biggie, Rainey,* he told me in front of a lot of people. *We all know you're gonna blow it, so I'll do it for you.*"

I removed the thermometer. "What a jerk."

“He was. Naturally, I was a little bit in love with him,” she said, sticking the thermometer back in. “This is back when I was an idiot. But his words had an effect. I was now one hundred percent positive I was going to blow it. That’s one thing I always admired about my dog, Batter. He wasn’t fear*less*, but neither was he fear*ful*. He just went ahead and did things. Like save an entire city.”

“Wait. *What?*” I removed the thermometer again. “What city?”

“Minneapolis. It’s where I grew up. Anyway, about three days before the mayor’s arrival, Peter came to school sick as a dog. He did it in that show-offy way—to prove his necessity, to flaunt his sacrifice, but mostly to infect everyone within a ten-foot radius. As a result, on the day the mayor was to arrive, everyone in the Honor Society—including our ancient and beloved adviser, Mr. Williard—woke up sick. Obviously—and I’m ashamed to admit this now—I was relieved. I had a certifiable reason why I could not introduce the mayor. I would not be ‘blowing’ anything.”

“I guess that’s good.”

“No. It was just the opposite. Do you have any idea what it takes to introduce a mayor, honey? Four words: ‘Please welcome our mayor.’ That’s it. And yet I didn’t think I could do it. This is because I was suffering from a common ailment called ‘low self-esteem.’ Low self-esteem is a psychological disorder driven by a belief of personal incapability—a belief reinforced by people like Peter, who also suffer from a psychological disorder, although his is called ‘narcissism.’ Narcissism is an inflated sense of self. Narcissists would have you believe they are at the center of the universe, and that unless they do something, it won’t get done—or at least done ‘right.’”

“Okay, *fine*,” I said. My mom was making me feel worse. “I never said I *was* the best one on my team. I just wanted to play, that’s all.”

“I know that, honey,” she said. “You’re not a narcissist.”

“What about saving the city? Or wait. Did he save you first? Did he have to run to get the doctor? Did you have malaria? Were you sweating like mad?”

“No, not malaria. But I did have something just as dangerous.”

“Diphtheria? African sleeping sickness? Yellow fever?”

“No,” she said, “but close.”

“BLACK PLAGUE? Is that what you had?”

She exhaled with gravity. “Streptococcal bacteria.”

“Seriously? What *is* that?” I rasped. “Is it from swamps? Did you get it from drinking alligator water?”

“What?” she said, feeling my forehead again. “What swamp? I lived in Minneapolis. There was no swamp. *Strep*tococcal bacteria. *Strep* throat, honey.”

“Strep throat? But even I’ve had that. It’s not a big deal.”

“Oh, it *is*,” she corrected. “Some people die from it. That’s why Batter made a beeline for my high school’s auditorium. Because he knew there would be teens in the audience with strep—carriers who might infect other innocent victims. Like the mayor.”

“A dog knows strep is contagious?”

“*Everyone* knows strep is contagious, but dogs can actually smell it. That’s because their noses are so sensitive. Although Batter’s nose was nothing compared to Nick Carter’s.”

“Who’s Nick Carter?”

“*Who’s* Nick Carter?” She felt my forehead again. “Now you’re really scaring me. Nick Carter was a famous Kentucky bloodhound who tracked and caught over six hundred and fifty criminals across practically scent-free surfaces.”

“Wow!”

“You bet, wow. If you ever commit a crime and the detectives put a bloodhound on your trail, take my advice: turn yourself in. Bloodhounds are pros—they’ll find you no matter what. And when they do, they won’t tear you limb from limb but lick you until you’re fully covered in a blanket of their slobbery drool. According to a recent government study, given the amount and viscosity of this drool, nine out of ten criminals would prefer being torn limb from limb.”

“*Mom.*”

“It’s true. Anyway, inspired by Nick Carter’s example, Batter sniffed every kid in that auditorium until he found two with the same strep smell. Huge surprise, it was Peter, professional narcissist, and Leslie, kiss-ass Class Treasurer. To get their attention, Batter made himself a nuisance, and they gave chase—straight out of the auditorium, down the hall, and directly into the janitor’s closet. Once they were in the very back, Batter slipped out

between the mops and pails and nudged the door closed behind him. Click. Locked."

"I don't understand why—"

"Why Peter was in the auditorium? Because he wanted to introduce the mayor—get the glory, prove the world doesn't turn unless he's turning it. As for Leslie, she had a crush on Peter, but she also figured this was her chance to get her picture taken with the future Vice President of the United States."

"I thought it was the mayor."

"Hubert H. Humphrey," my mother said impatiently. "He *was* the mayor of Minneapolis in 1945. But twenty years later he became Vice President of the United States."

"But wait. How did Leslie know Humphrey would become Vice President?"

"I didn't *say* she knew he'd become Vice President. Although, I wouldn't have put it past her. Leslie was an opportunist. That's not as bad as a narcissist, but it's not great. As an opportunist, Leslie was always looking for an opening. Anyone with the smallest bit of fame—bam. She got herself in that photo."

"But," I insisted. "I don't see how Batter putting a narcissist and an opportunist in a closet saved a whole city." I wanted to get to the bottom of this before I died.

"Well maybe if you'd let me *finish*," Mom said. "Maybe if you took a moment and considered that a mayor who would go on to become the Vice President of the United States is probably a very busy person and that our school that day was just a tiny blip on a schedule that included attending a tour of the city water supply, maybe *then* you'd realize that with two strep cases locked in a closet, it was left to the very healthy captain of the football team to introduce the mayor. Naturally. Because school authorities have absolutely no imagination when it comes to stand-ins—it's *always* the captain of the football team—never the vice president of *anything.* Humphrey would back me up on this."

"Mom. My throat is really starting to hurt."

From out of nowhere, she produced a glass of water and some orange-flavored baby aspirin.

"But I still don't understand," I said, chewing the little chalky discs. "How Batter saved—"

“Here it comes,” she said, “the grand finale. As I’ve stated, strep throat is highly contagious. It spreads through simple human contact—a pat on the back, a handshake. Peter and Leslie were on track to shake the mayor’s hand—a hand that, according to his busy schedule that day, would have gone on to shake two hundred and fifty-four other hands.”

“How do you know the number of—”

“Because the mayor was up for reelection. When one is up for reelection, one shakes hands like there’s no tomorrow. So imagine: the mayor would leave my school with streptococcal bacteria all over his hands courtesy of Peter and Leslie—and then go to all the other places he had to go, including a tour of the city’s *water supply*, where he would shake other people’s hands. It’s a question of math. Within days, the entire city would have been infected.”

“Oh,” I said. “I get it. So Batter prevented strep from getting in the city water supply. Whoa. That’s major.”

“Actually, no. I don’t think strep can be spread by the water supply. It’s just that a lot of people work at the water supply place, and knowing Humphrey, he would have shaken *every* one of their hands—two hundred and fifty-four. That’s the kind of vice president he was. A bit of a glad-hander.”

What a boring ending. I couldn’t believe it. “That’s *it*? Did at least something happen when Peter and Leslie finally got out of the closet? Did they tell on Batter?”

“Oh, something happened all right.”

“Really? Did the police try and arrest Batter? Were you in big trouble?”

“Well, no, honey. Batter just saved the entire city from being infected with streptococcal bacteria. Why would he or I be in any kind of trouble?”

“But—”

“And besides. Who’s going to believe a wild story about some dog locking two hormonal seventeen-year-olds in a closet? Does that even sound plausible? No. Anyway, everyone knows the janitor’s closet is always locked.”

“But—”

“It’s because janitors’ closets are filled with dangerous cleaning fluids. Keeping it locked is school policy. It was only open that day because the janitor was undoubtedly doing a last-minute disinfecting of the auditorium’s

bathroom. In case the future Vice President of the United States would need it."

"But—"

"The point is, Batter—well, there are two points, really—one, that when one is sick, one should stay home, period, the end. There's nothing heroic about making others sick. Point two: had *I* been less fearful, none of the rest would have happened."

"None of the rest of *what* would have happened?"

"You look tired, honey. I think you should rest." She stood up.

"Mom! Wait! What else happened?"

She sighed and sunk back down on my bed. "I'm not sure it's entirely appropriate to tell you what happened next," she said softly. "It may shock you."

"Really?" This sounded good. "Come on, Mom. *Please*."

She looked me straight in the eye. "All right," she said. "Like I said, maybe if I'd just *believed* in myself a bit more—taken the leadership role a vice president is actually entitled to—"

"Mom!"

"Then maybe Leslie wouldn't have gotten pregnant."

"*What?*"

"And poor Mr. Willard, our beloved Honor Society adviser, wouldn't have died from complications arising from a severe penicillin allergy—an allergy he didn't know he had until he swallowed the pills prescribed by his doctor based on a test result showing the presence of streptococcal bacteria. Which Mr. Willard had contracted from the President of the so-called *Honor* Society, Peter Bodwitch. Professional Murderer."

"*Seriously?*" I lay my hand on my throat.

Just then the phone rang, and my mom left to answer it. I barely noticed; I was too busy envisioning a dark closet filled with toxic chemicals and the yucky scent teenagers give off, a scent so strong, it overwhelmed their pus-yellow bacterial infestation, goading them to grab each other between dirty mops and gallon drums, their scrawny high school legs wrapping around each other with amateur passion. Meanwhile, across town, a nice old man

filled a glass with water and counted out his pills, sick and achy, completely unaware that at that very moment, the bacteria communicated to him by a narcissist was being used by an opportunist to create life where it wasn't wanted. His life, on the other hand, was over.

"Your team won, honey," my mom said returning. "Twelve to three."

I didn't respond. Frankly, I was too sick to care.

26.

No question: Salton fit the narcissist profile. We all run into narcissists; most of us struggle to deal with them. But what I didn't understand was what makes a narcissist in the first place. Genetics? Upbringing? Diet? The only thing I did know was that it was my sixth week at Peck & Peck and I was miserable.

Quitting wasn't an option. I'd crowed just a little too loudly to everyone I knew when I got this job; implied that I was a little too important; suggested that when it came to poetry, the greatest publication on earth was pulling out all the stops to hire me. Only Dexter knew the truth of what I expected versus what I got, but since he never spoke *to* me, it seemed unlikely that he would speak *of* me to anyone.

By the way, it turned out my paycheck was just as unimpressive as my job title.

Actually, I hadn't been given a job title.

In short, if I thought I'd been on the lowest rung of the ladder before, my job at Peck & Peck proved that sometimes there is no ladder at all.

Every day I stood in front of three copy machines that never stopped running, swapping one set of poems and analyses for another, filling the paper trays, checking the toner, fixing the jams, loading the hand trolley, and delivering the manuscripts to forty-one separate offices. Paper was the lifeblood of Peck & Peck. Upon it, every poetic opinion and decision was

argued and made. When Salton said he hated trees, he meant it. Under his management, I singlehandedly killed entire forests.

Part of the reason for all this paper made sense—this was a publishing concern, and like all the others in 1982, it was still dependent on typewriters. But the amount of paper I went through did not make sense—not in this age of recycling and the ecology movement and all that. I soon realized that if I could just double-side everything, I'd save not only paper but my back as well.

Thus, because of my concern for nature—and my back—I decided to heed Mr. Raley's advice. I decided to be less bendy. I sent out a memo.

MEMORANDUM:

Greetings, Peck & Peck Editors!

Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Batter Gray, the newest member of the Peck & Peck team, in charge of the Copy Center. Please feel free to stop by and say hello!

I wanted to take a moment to encourage you to take advantage of a relatively new idea in copying. It's called "back-to-back" or "two-sided" copying, and it refers to using both sides of the paper in the copying process. By checking this box on the new copy form, you can help Peck & Peck save up to fifty percent on copying costs while doing your part in fighting deforestation all over the world.

I hope you will join me in taking this small step in preserving our planet. As Joyce Kilmer once wrote, "I think that I shall never see / A poem lovely as a tree." (Of course, it's possible Kilmer hadn't read Peck & Peck!)

Sincerely yours,
Batter Gray

I thought this memo might help prove that I had initiative. And, yes, fine, I also thought it might remind the people upstairs that there was someone down in the bomb shelter with whom they might want to interact—a new team member in the Peck & Peck family—a real live being who could write upbeat memos, quote poetry, and was worth getting to know. I sent it out late Wednesday afternoon.

The very next day—I'd arrived at 6:30 a.m. to get a jump on my work—

a tall brunette wearing lavender shoes cracked my office door open about four inches and said, “Hello there. Anyone there? Hello?” Then she tipped herself in like a teapot. “Oh . . . hello,” she said, surprised. “You *are* here, then. I . . . I . . . wanted to . . . uh . . . stop by and say hi. You must be the new copier guy.”

“I’m Batter Gray,” I said, sticking out my hand.

“Well, welcome, Baxter. Glad to have you here. What brought you to Peck & Peck? And don’t say poetry.” She laughed a little.

“I’ve always been interested in publishing.”

“Okay.” She shook her head slightly in disbelief.

“And you—?”

“I’m one of the Senior Editors. Louisa Higgins. But everyone calls me Lou.”

“Oh right! Of course! I’m so sorry Mrs. Higgins. Of course.”

“*Ms.*”

“Ms.”

So—” she said, “that was some memo you sent out.”

Some memo?

She glanced around, taking a seat on one of my ream-stacked chairs. “How long have you been here again?”

“Six weeks.”

“No kidding.”

It was obvious she’d never noticed me in the hallways.

“So—” she said again. “You’re probably wondering how long I’ve been here, and the answer is ten years, more or less. Has Salton been down to see you yet?” She laughed. “Kidding. Salton doesn’t come down here. Are you a poet?” This time she looked concerned.

“Well. One of my poems *was* accepted by the Poetry in Buses—”

There was a knock at the door.

“I guess it could work,” she said, standing, “putting poetry on buses. But I don’t really think so. Do you? No, I sincerely question that.” She opened the door a crack. “Sam, hello! There’s a . . . surprise. Come meet Baxter.”

Sam stretched his hand out as if to shake mine, but then rescinded the offer, perching his hands on his waist instead. He wore a black turtleneck under a black blazer. “How long have you been here?”

“Six weeks.” But the question hadn’t been meant for me.

“I just got here,” Lou replied. She gave him a hard look and then turned toward me. “Sam Slater is one of our brilliant Associate Editors. Get to know Sam.”

“What have you learned?” Sam asked her.

“His name is Baxter Gray.”

“Batter,” I corrected.

“What kind of name is Batter?” asked Sam.

“A nickname,” Lou guessed.

“A *nickname*?” Sam disapproved.

“Actually, Batter is my real name,” I admitted.

Sam glanced in my direction, then turned his attention back to Lou.

“No, what I meant was, what did you learn from the Drusecca poem?” He leaned up against one of my copiers. “I’m curious if you were taken by the derivative nature of her work. Her voice is . . . well. I think she’s trying too hard. I tired of it almost instantly.”

Lou narrowed her eyes. “You tire of almost everything instantly.”

He checked his watch, avoiding a reply.

Lou studied him for a moment, then swiveled back to me. “So you’re settling in okay, then?” she asked, glancing at her watch.

“Yes. Thanks.”

More silence. That’s when it occurred to me. The condom in the corner. Neither Lou nor Sam had expected to find the copy room occupied.

Sam Slater exhaled with importance, the stuffy room growing stuffier as each huff indicated the mental labor he’d applied to this ridiculous Drusecca person and her pathetic poetry. Drusecca was, according to Sam, a “fourth-rate Sylvia Plath.” He reminded me of a few of those jerks in my poetry writing workshop—the pontificators, the people who could never be a Rod McKuen on their very *best* day.

“Every time I read Drusecca”—Sam sighed like Atlas toiling under his important load—“I feel like I’m coming down with something.”

“Because she’s a dissonantist,” Lou said.

“That’s what I’m saying.”

“The thing is”—Lou shrugged—“Salton’s on a dissonance kick.”

Sam threw his hands up in the air. “Okay, then. Well. That’s *that*.”

What did Lou see in him? Her lavender shoes; her healthy red lipstick; her entire head, shiny like a new penny. At forty-two, maybe forty-five

years of age, she was still quite pretty; a Senior Editor—one of the big fish in a small pond—and a bright spot next to the arrogant Sam, who thought he was better-looking than he was and, by the way, wore a wedding ring.

"I'm not sure you *understand* dissonance," she said pointedly and, without waiting for his protestation, followed that with about three hundred brilliant words on the subject that made me realize that I, too, had never understood it, although I did now. Sam looked away. Maybe Lou wasn't so desperate after all.

"Baxter's a poet." Lou tipped her head in my direction, attempting a subject change.

Sam took in this news without expression. "You're wrong about Drusecca, Lou. Gomez is what Salton wants. Or maybe you're about to suggest we leave room for Badger's work?" He motioned to me, then laughed in a way meant to humiliate me as he slapped me on the back. "Good for you, Badger! A poet. How original."

I smiled and hated myself for doing so.

"I'll get you a copy of my Drusecca analysis immediately," Lou said, standing fully erect, like a skyscraper that surprises everyone by going up fast. "Baxter, I'll be tubing off a copier assignment later today. I want it collated and then stapled on the top left. *Do not* print it back-to-back. I read your memo, and I understand your point, but you need to understand the culture here before you decide to propose your own initiatives. We don't double-side. What you did was suicidal."

Suicidal?

"That memo," Sam said, "that was you?" He laughed.

"He's new, Sam," Lou said, giving him a look.

"And about to be history," Sam concluded.

A trickle of sweat raced down my back.

"It'll be okay," Lou said. "I'll try to fix things. But going forward, try not to do that sort of thing. It comes off a little—"

"—arrogant," Sam supplied. "Has Salton seen it?"

"—then place one copy in Sam's box, one in mine," she said, ignoring Sam, "and distribute the other sixteen copies as indicated. I'll fill out the form just to make sure you remember."

I nodded like a waiter entrusted with the weighty knowledge that the dressing should remain on the side.

COPY REQUEST FORM

Date: November 18, 1982 Time: 6:42 a.m.

Editor name: Higgins

Number of copies: 18 Letter-sized: YES Legal-sized: NO

Double-sided: NO Collated: OBVIOUSLY Stapled: OBVIOUSLY

Shrink to fit: NO Recipients: (She checked eighteen names, including her own.)

Due: ASAP!

"Do yourself a favor in the next few weeks—I mean, if you're still here," she said, handing me the form. "Lay low. Take the time to familiarize yourself with what we do here before you write another memo—or—"

"Under no circumstances should you write another memo," Sam said.

"—or say something you shouldn't."

"Got it," I said, flushing with embarrassment.

"Just make copies," Sam directed, as he and Lou exited. "You know *how*, right?"

27.

Lou was not able to "fix" things. At 8:00 a.m., Dexter summoned me upstairs by pressing some button at his desk that caused a red light to flash like a silent alarm in the center of my room. He'd told me about this alarm my first day. If I were to see it, it meant one of two things: (1) Emergency! Come upstairs to help people evacuate; or (2) Emergency! Come upstairs; you've totally fucked up. Given the absence of tornados or hurricanes, I assumed the latter.

"What's up, Dexter?" I said, trying to hide the worry in my voice. My memo was lying in the middle of his desk.

He looked up at me. "Well, if it isn't Rachel Carson."

"Was there something you needed?"

“Salton wants to see you immediately. I hope you brought your Ecology Now button. You might need it to deflect the bullet to your heart.”

I ignored him and made my way to Salton’s office, passing the poet portraits whose sad faces were full of pity for the dead man walking. Salton’s door was open.

“You wanted to see me, Mr. Peck?”

Salton jerked his head up.

“YOU!” he shouted, slamming his hand on his book and shooting up from his chair like a toy rocket reaching blast-off. “That memo!”

“I’m sorry about that, Mr. Peck,” I said, taking a step back. “I’m sure Peck & Peck has many good reasons for keeping everything one-sided, and I promise you from now on that’s how it will remain.”

“Damn right we have our reasons,” he said, stomping by me as he circled the room. “Don’t need you lecturing us on— What’s the word you used? Deforestation? I don’t even think that’s a word, by the way. What’s your IQ level? You ever been tested?” He changed course, moving back toward me with forceful little steps as if about to rip my head off.

“I just thought it might be a good way to save money while—”

“Money? What do *you* know about money? I don’t recall seeing ‘money expert’ on your résumé. Telling *me* how to save money. I ought to fire you right now.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Peck,” I said, quaking inside. “Truly.” I hated my job, but neither could I afford to lose it.

“And this Joyce person you mentioned. How dare she compare what we do here at Peck & Peck to an overgrown arboreal nuisance that sheds its unwanted parts every fall. Who’s going to rake up all these leaves, Mr. Gray? You? Joyce? *Me?*”

“Of course—I see your point. Again—” But I didn’t. And anyway, Joyce Kilmer was a man.

“I wanted to hire a chimpanzee to do your job,” he confided, leaning in close. “One of those escapees from a research laboratory somewhere. Chimps don’t care about a paycheck. Can’t tell you how disappointed I was when none applied.” He picked up a manuscript and batted it at my chest. “In the future, you will remember not to waste my time sending out memos on paper products about paper products. I’d already told you I hate paper;

ergo, I hate trees. If you want a future here, you better not forget how I feel about this topic."

"I won't," I said emphatically. "And believe me, I understand. I took accounting in college, and I know that sometimes things that look like money savers, aren't. It's called a 'false economy'—like when people fill their cars with cheap gas to save pennies but end up ruining the engine."

Salton's eyes grew wide. I thought for a moment he might hit me.

"You—" he started.

"I'll shut up now," I said, taking yet another step back.

"YOU," he shouted, and then he grabbed the collar of my shirt. "You studied ACCOUNTING?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "I shouldn't have said—"

"Were you any good at it?"

"I did okay."

Salton loomed at my face like a dermatologist.

"That's all, then," he said abruptly. "Have a nice day."

I made my way back to the bomb shelter burdened by the weight of personal humiliation, entering to the clatter of cylinders as they careened down the tubes like spooked cattle. In front of me sat a huge stack of copy assignments red-tagged with urgency. *9:30 a.m. at the LATEST* read one. Why? Was the world set to end at ten? I hated everybody in the building.

Quitting would take mere seconds. There was nothing I wanted more. But like I said, due to my previous boasts to family and friends regarding my role at Peck & Peck, to which I'd added a vivid description of the building's interior and further embellished with a conversation I'd never had with the Poet Laureate, I'd managed to generate the one thing I craved more than anything: respect.

Just last week my poetry-averse father announced that, in honor of me, he'd assigned "Jabberwocky" to his students. "I couldn't believe it, Batter. It led to the most spirited discussion of the never-ending battle between good versus evil I've ever witnessed." Same with my mother; she'd tracked down Mrs. Martin, my elementary school librarian—the one who'd introduced me to *Peck & Peck*—and the now-retired librarian apparently

went nuts. “I always knew your son had special talent. His employer is *the* top dog in the slender world of poetry. They do not make mistakes.”

As for Paul, I called him, prepared to spill the truth and beg for advice, but before I could begin, he said, “Batter, I met Jesse Ed Davis—he played electric guitar for Taj Mahal? He writes Native American Indian poetry, and get this: he’s thinking of putting that poetry to music. *Remember when I told you music makes poetry tolerable?* You do, right? First day we met? Turns out Jesse agrees with me. Anyway, I told him you were an editor at *Peck & Peck* and he practically stopped breathing. Said only geniuses work there. Proud of you, brother.”

I couldn’t even be honest with June. She called me during my eighth horrible week of work and asked me if it was still “amazing.”

“Uh—yes,” I assured her. “But what about you? How goes the underwriting?”

She exhaled. “Batter, it’s underwriting. I’m selling my soul for benefits. But you—you followed your gut and there you are, working at the most famous poetry place ever. You’re my hero. The only person I know who had the *guts* to actually follow his *gut.*”

My fucking gut again.

I thought back to all the nights June and I had spent together—the places we’d gone, the sex we’d had, the talks we’d shared. And yet, no spark at all. We were friends and lovers for the usual reason: neither one of us had met anyone better. But hearing her voice now—the way she said I’d followed my gut, the way she called me a hero—made me wish she’d never gone back to Wisconsin. Maybe I loved her.

“Anyway, Batter,” she said, “I’m calling because I have news. I’m getting married.”

.....

My heart heavy, I turned back to the copy assignments. “*Jesus, Gupta,*” I said, examining the one on top. It was littered with complicated instructions in microscopic handwriting.

Gupta, a senior editor from Kerala in Southern India, was considered the world’s leading authority on *Gilgamesh*, something I’d only discovered because one of the Junior Editors had made a footnoted allusion to his

credentials, citing a paper he'd written at Penn, where he'd been awarded his *second* Ph.D. He was one of the editors I admired most, not for his storied background, but for his lack of ego about that background. He spoke fluent Malayalam, Tamil, Hindi, Sanskrit, English, French, Swedish, Swahili, Arabic and also—because he'd once worked with a deaf colleague—he knew sign language. His only flaw: because he drifted between languages so effortlessly, he assumed everyone else did, too, and sometimes wrote his copy instructions in Sanskrit. Which, now that I'd taken a closer look, he'd done again today.

"I could fucking kill you, Gup!" I said, shoving it back in its tube with a note demanding that instructions be in English. Gupta had a way of making me feel inadequate.

"Kill Gupta?" came a voice out of nowhere. "You could go to jail for that sort of thing."

I jumped, surprised to see a tall man sitting in the shadows. "Jesus!" I said, dropping the tube. "You startled me!"

"Sorry."

"What are you—are you one of the editors?"

"No."

"Are you from the mailroom, then?" I'd still never run into any of the parolees from the mailroom. Although maybe I had. Parolees look no different from the rest of us.

"No," he said.

"Look," I said, my heart rate still uncomfortably high, "I don't mean to be rude, but if you're a poet—"

"—not a poet—"

"—you have to mail your work in like everyone else. We get tons of submissions; dropping in won't help your odds. If anything, it'll kill them."

"You certainly mention killing a lot," the man said. "In any case, I'm not a poet."

"Then why are you here?"

"I'm hiding."

"Hiding?" I said, alarmed. "Well, that's out, too. This is private property and I'm already in some trouble—"

"Oh, I know," he said.

"Excuse me?"

“I read your memo.”

My god. Had *everyone* read it?

“It was just sitting here.” He shrugged, pointing at one of the copiers.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” I said, embarrassed. “That’s private Peck & Peck business.”

“Of course, you’re right. I’m sorry. But don’t worry, your memo wasn’t completely without merit, although I’m not sure Kilmer was the way to sell your idea. He’s a fine poet, but the tree poem is too obvious. You should have gone with prose—Muir, probably. You have to be careful about putting poetry in memos around here. Kiss of death.”

“Okay,” I said, annoyed, “I’m going to have to call security. You can’t just barge in here and read in-house memos. Anyway, you don’t really look like the type of person who needs to hide.”

Which was true. He had an elegant air about him; a serious, intellectual demeanor that shouted substance. He ran his fingers through his gray-streaked hair, his eyes taking in my Talking Heads T-shirt (*Well, how did I get here?* David Byrne asked. I asked myself the same thing a thousand times a day), also standard-issue Levi 501s, as well as hiking boots in case some tectonic plates shifted and a mountain appeared in Manhattan. In stark contrast, he dressed in a kind of democratic simplicity. Coal-colored sports jacket, black T-shirt, well-worn jeans, black belt, black shoes. Paul would have said, “See, Batter? It’s not that hard,” and the Gap would have agreed—for a little over a hundred bucks.

“Care for a cocktail?”

“A cocktail.” It was 8:30 in the morning.

I watched as he extracted a thin thermos from the side pocket of a bulging satchel. The satchel was a lot like him—grayed, worn, significant. He unlatched the main compartment and withdrew two glasses.

“No thanks.”

He poured me a drink. I noticed his fingernails were dirty. Was he the gardener? The topiaries were always being snipped by someone. But that guy always wore a long-sleeved jumpsuit and a baseball cap. Mr. Fujikawa—that was his name. This guy wasn’t Japanese.

“Here you are,” he said, handing me a glass. I set it down.

If I had to describe this man to the police, I would have said he was a cross between a famous art museum director and an aging tycoon. Well,

except for one detail: his small, round, cheap-looking glasses, which were marked with fingerprints and bent in ways that obviously hadn't worked out. That detail gave him a slightly less imposing air—that and his watch—a boring model with a tired face, yellowed, like old sheets badly in need of bleaching. I guessed he was in his fifties.

"I only drink in the morning," he explained as if everyone knew evening drinking was where the real trouble lay.

"Good for you," I said. "But you still need to leave. You can't—"

"I'm not a poet," he reassured me again. "Although a poem *is* why I'm here." He set down his glass to dig for something in his satchel. "Ah—here it is," he said, extracting a piece of paper. He handed it to me. "Read it."

"*Excuse me,*" I said. "You aren't hearing me. I have a lot of work to do."

"It will only take—"

"*Look—*"

"Read it," he said with more force, "it's thirty lines. And then I'll go, I promise."

So I read it. Actually, I only skimmed it. Then I handed it back.

"Okay," I said.

"What did you think?"

"Think?"

"What did you think? Is it any good?"

"I can't judge that."

He scoffed. "Of course you can." He handed it back to me. "This time *read it*," he ordered. And I did, but only because he was the sole person I'd talked to in eight weeks who assumed I *could* read.

The poem, titled "Posture," was about a young soldier. I'd deduced that in my skim, but as I read it again, it awakened in me that old, familiar sense of wonder. This was good work—very good—and not only because the syllabic mathematics were precise in placement, the stresses falling so naturally the lines sang, but because I felt wretched by the end it, as if I, too, were standing on that battlefield, and not, as I really was, in a copy room in Lower Manhattan with a gin and tonic in my hand and in danger of losing only one thing: my job. I looked up to see the man watching my face.

"Still can't judge it?" he asked.

"Did you write this?" I took a sip of my cocktail. I hoped I didn't sound too awe-stricken.

“I told you. I’m not a poet.”

“Who did?”

“I’m not sure,” he said. “Although I have a hunch.”

“If you do find out, you should tell whoever wrote it to send it in,” I said. “It’s very good.”

“It was already rejected.”

That made me feel ill. “Well,” I stammered, “that’s—that’s only because Peck & Peck gets thousands of submissions each month. We can’t publish every good piece. It’s not possible.”

For some reason, my saying this made the elegant man age another ten years. “I disagree,” he said wearily, downing his cocktail in one swallow. “I think it’s Peck & Peck’s duty to publish every good poem. Anything short of that is failure.”

I exhaled. “We had a deal.”

“We did, you’re right,” he said, standing. “Unless you’d like to read another.”

“I wouldn’t.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

Silence. He looked at me expectantly.

“Out,” I said pointing at the door.

“I do hope you’ll be able to put that Kilmer misstep behind you.”

The guy was relentless.

“You *shouldn’t* have read my memo,” I snapped. “That memo was private Peck & Peck business. But for the record, there is nothing wrong with trying to conserve paper. Saves money; saves trees.”

He looked surprised. “Of course, double-sided copies are the right thing to do,” he said as he reached for his satchel. “I completely agree with you. It’s always the little things.” He motioned to my cocktail; I gave it to him. He drank it, then tucked the glasses and thermos back in his satchel with the poem, the uncooperative latch made of—it looked like it was made of letters, forcing a fight—the two parts of it reaching for each other but failing, forever separated by an ampersand.

He opened the door cautiously, then stuck his head out, sweeping the corridor for signs of life. “Coast looks clear,” he announced. And then almost as an afterthought he turned back to me, his stature, general-like. “I

apologize, Batter,” he said, “I never introduced myself.” He stuck out a hand. “Declonius Peck,” he said. “The other half of Peck & Peck.”

28.

I sensed that Declonius Peck’s visit to the copy room was news best left unshared, a feeling confirmed the very next morning as I delivered copies to the Junior Editorial floor. I’d gotten in early again, but with a new motive. I wanted to use those extra minutes to study the covers that lined the second floor. Dexter had mentioned every editor signed each edition.

It took about ten minutes, but I finally found it. Issue 184. DECLONIUS PECK. A signature so expansive and protective, it enveloped the others like a mother hen guarding her chicks.

So he *had* been an employee. A long-term employee by the look of things—over twenty-five years I estimated as I made my way down the hall counting the frames. His signature dominated cover after cover, the large, swooping “D” intersecting with the wild “P,” the start of each name reaching out in either direction like scouts on a mission. But then came Issue 313, and his name vanished, just like that. Gone.

Issue 314, Issue 315, Issue 316—each looked strangely empty without it.

With Declonius’s signature in absentia, it was now far easier to pick out Salton’s cruder, smaller one. It had been there all along, too.

I stopped at the most recent quarterly, noting the names that were now familiar to me—Tang, Hernandez, Slater, Gupta, Higgins—even Dexter’s signature was there. And so, oddly, was something else.

“*Inside! A chance to win!*” screamed a banner across the upper right. Just below blazed a starburst with a testimonial reading, *Couldn’t put it down!*

It was the edition Salton had waved in my face during my interview. At the time I thought it was maybe just one of many layouts—specifically the one they *wouldn’t* keep. But here it was.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” a voice demanded.

I spun around. I knew him, but not his name. Late sixties; tired face. He looked a lot like Yaphet Kotto, you know, the guy who played Mr. Big from *Live and Let Die*? Except this guy was much older. He was wearing a green wool cap, his coal-black skin damp from the rain.

“I was just . . . I’d never really . . . I was just looking at the covers,” I said. “I work downstairs. I’m Batter Gray, the copy guy. I came up to deliver some copies and I got a little sidetracked.”

“I’d heard we’d gotten a new copy person,” the man said. “You’re good. I can’t remember the last time something of mine came back to me on time and according to direction.”

“Oh, well, thank you,” I said, surprised. “I appreciate that.” I waited for him to tell me how stupid my memo was, but he didn’t.

“This is me,” he said, pointing at a signature. “I’m Howard Gadley.”

“Howard Gadley,” I said. “You recently wrote that analysis on the Lowell poem ‘Skunk Hour’—about the underlying theme of moral decay set against the writer’s struggle with his own self-hatred. I was wondering: did you find the looseness of his rhyme somehow intensified the tightness of his—?” I stopped. I didn’t like the way he was looking at me.

“You read my analysis?”

“Well, yes. I mean, I hope that’s okay. I sometimes read when all the machines are going at once . . . I assume that’s . . . Anyway. Yours was interesting.”

“No, it wasn’t,” he said. “It was boring as hell.” He stopped abruptly. “So, what do you think?” he asked, motioning toward the cover.

“I’ve always loved it,” I said. “The egg; the glow. It’s timeless.”

“Ah, so maybe you’re not a fan of our new changes,” he said, pointing to the latest issue. “Sounds like you’re not a fan.”

“No, no,” I lied, “the changes are fine. The egg is still there, but the cover has been—updated. It’s a bit more—more—modern now. Has more of a newsstand feel. More current.”

Howard leaned into the line of covers. “I think the egg is getting written all over, that’s what I think. From a design standpoint, the new direction is quite poor. But from a marketing standpoint, he says it works.”

“Works?”

“Increased circulation. Untapped markets.”

“Well, that’s great, then. Glad to hear it.”

“Yes,” he said. “I guess.”

We stood there quietly.

“I guess I better finish my rounds here,” I said, pointing at my hand trolley.

“Yes,” he agreed. “The place runs on paper. Anyway, it was nice to meet you—what was it? Banner? Please let me know if my copy assignments are ever too much. Or if you have any questions. I’ve worked here a long time.”

“Thanks,” I said. “It’s Batter, by the way. And that’s very nice of you. I will.”

“Batter,” he corrected himself, then turned to begin his ascent to the third floor. “I always take the stairs,” he explained over his shoulder, “good for the heart.”

I hesitated, not wanting to take him up on his offer right away, but something nagged at me. I cleared my throat. “Would you mind, Mr. Gadley—could I ask you one quick question?”

He stopped. “Yes?”

“It’s the egg,” I said, pointing at the covers. “I feel like I should know this by now, but I don’t. Why an egg? What does it signify?”

“What does it signify?” he repeated, his face suddenly interested. “You haven’t seen the Aviary, then?”

“There’s an aviary here?”

“Well, not a real aviary—that wouldn’t be practical. I’m talking about the Editorial Aviary. It’s on the fifth floor—it’s where we hold our editorial meetings. I’ll show it to you if you like. Before things get busy.”

“Really? Thank you, Mr. Gadley,” I said, “I’d love to see it.”

“Howard.”

“Thanks, Howard.”

I pushed my trolley into a recess and followed him up the stairs.

“Let me drop my things by my office,” he said, pausing on the third floor.

I followed him down to the door at the end—his was the big office with the curved door. He opened it, revealing the bank of curved windows looking out on a tall building that was nearly all glass. “I used to have a view of the water,” he said, motioning to the wall of windows that faced him. “Until progress intervened.”

“Progress always comes with consequences.” It was something my father often said. “But sometimes the consequences are so destructive, you have to wonder if it was worth it.”

He looked at me, surprised.

“It’s still beautiful though,” I added quickly. I let my eyes roam the office while he took off his scarf and deposited his briefcase on the floor.

He picked up a dozen messages that lay on his desk and sifted through them. Only one seemed to interest him. He read it twice, then stuffed it in his front pocket. “So,” he said, “quickly now. I have quite a few phone calls to make.”

I followed him to the end of the hall and up two more flights of stairs, his walk brisk in that way some people like to advertise their fitness. Reaching the fifth floor, we walked past Dexter’s empty chair, his overflowing inbox; past the poet portraits, their faces permanently depressed; then past Salton’s (thankfully) closed door. It felt risky, but I had to ask.

“I was wondering, Howard, about the covers. There used to be another signature—a big one. From what I can tell this person worked here for decades. Another Peck. Declonius.”

That was enough to get Howard to stop dead in his tracks. He grabbed my arm and dragged me down the hallway.

“*I would advise you not to speak of this other person in this building,*” he warned fiercely, “*especially so close to Salton’s office*.” He dropped my arm, motioning me with his hand to keep moving. “Declonius Peck was Editor in Chief here—a good man, brilliant, probably a genius. But the quarterly lost quite a bit of money while he was in charge. That happens sometimes with decent people. They’re not good with money.”

“Oh—”

“But luckily, Salton Peck stepped in and we were—” He couldn’t seem to decide how to finish.

“Salton Peck. Declonius Peck. Are they related?”

Howard looked at me with surprise. “*Related?* They’re twins. The third generation of twins to manage Peck & Peck.”

Twins? They didn’t resemble each other at all.

“Fraternal twins,” Howard whispered as if he’d read my mind. “Not really very alike. In reality, completely different. It’s safe to say they share

absolutely nothing in common. Except for the name." And then, sensing that his categorization of Declonius as a "a good man, brilliant, probably a genius," must mean, by default, that Salton was dreadful, stupid, and possibly Satanic, he hastily added, "And by that I mean that Salton is smart about money. Thanks to him, Peck & Peck has never been in better shape financially. He saved this company from . . ." He trailed off. "The point is, we're all grateful for his—"

He didn't finish.

"What was it like to work with Declonius?" I asked. "You must have worked together for decades."

"We did," he said, his voice low. "But look—and I'm not revealing anything that's not already public knowledge, things went badly with Declonius. Not at first; not for a long time. But bad enough that he had to step down."

"Why?"

"Because . . ." Howard sighed, as if loathe to bring it up. "He was arrested and convicted of embezzlement. Felony charges tend to be career enders. It's all very sad, but this is what sometimes happens to good people; they make terrible mistakes. I won't speak ill of Declonius as a person; he was a wonderful friend and editor, but his actions—what he did—it was wrong. It put every last one of us here at risk. He went to prison for five years. He's out now and it's over, but while I once admired who he was, I will never understand who he became. He's not even allowed in this building. Can't come within one hundred yards. Restraining order for life."

I must have paled because Howard put a hand on my shoulder.

"I know it sounds terrible, and it was, but the man did love his work. Maybe a little too much—we all know love can make one do reckless things. Nevertheless, I try not to judge. He was my closest friend." He sounded wistful. "I trust you to understand you shouldn't talk of this. The company suffered great embarrassment. We had to shut our doors for two years. It's not part of the history any of us like to revisit. Case closed."

"I won't say a word. But I'm grateful you told me."

But inside I wasn't grateful. I was worried. When Declonius said he was hiding, he wasn't kidding. A *restraining* order. Weren't those reserved for violent people? And what if Salton found out that his ex-con twin brother

had been serving me cocktails down in the bomb shelter? I'd be fired. I hated my job, but being fired? That would follow me forever.

"Switching gears," I heard Howard say, as we paced down the hallway. "Ever been to the French countryside?"

What was the penalty for harboring a fugitive? I wondered. *Was that aiding? Abetting? Both?*

"I haven't," Howard said. "But every time I walk by here, I feel transported."

"Howard, there's something I need to tell you—"

"We call it the French Resistance," he interrupted, forcing my attention to the left.

I looked up to see something that did not belong indoors. It was an old stone wall, entirely mortarless, undulating its way up and down the oval of the fifth floor, its sturdy beauty protective, as if still trying to keep the sheep in. Within the confines of the wall stood Salton's sworn enemies. Three large trees.

"Why—" I began.

"They're espaliered pears," Howard said. "Once provided fruit for a large monastery." But now they stood leafless and barren, their skinny arms reaching out in either direction like suspects being frisked. Each tree stretched about eight feet across and six feet high—three old friends in a frozen row. Killed in their sleep.

"They're petrified," Howard continued. "Ancient. Brought over from Europe after the war. The monastery didn't survive."

"They look dead, but feel—"

"Alive? It's the lighting. Declonius really knew his lumens. 'Physical poetry'—that's what he called our interior displays. I love this wall. Its rhythm isn't immediately obvious until—" He stopped, then looked up, tilting his head as if listening for something. "Hear it?"

A faint *per*-tee-*dee-dee* came from overhead.

"What is that?"

"Goldfinches, I think. All sorts of birds are attracted to this building," he said. "Probably want their eggs back." He laughed a little, as if he'd made a joke. I smiled and nodded, but I had no idea what he meant.

"And now," he said, as we approached a pair of grand doors, their egg-

shaped knobs burnished by time and turning, the words EDITORIAL AVIARY hand-lettered in a possible Posterama. “This where all the magic happens.”

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Peck & Peck really should have allowed more poets into this room, because only poets could do the Aviary justice.

Three steps in and it was as if the earth had dropped away and I’d been lifted into the stratosphere. I looked up to see a magnificent glass dome floating what looked like fifty feet above me, its sizable weight suspended in space by nothing but geometry. We trust so much of our lives to math, don’t we?

With its absence of angles and corners, the dome ensured an even distribution of force and pressure. No single point carried more of the load than another. I had once read that every dome, like every poem, like every heartbeat, like most things in nature, has a rhythm, but it wasn’t until that moment that I fully understood why the Pecks had integrated two domes into their architectural plans. It was yet another one of the building’s metaphors: a reminder that everyone seated beneath it was an equal—or supposed to be.

This explains why most companies are dome-free.

As I stared up, I noticed a few birds looking down at me. *Who’s in the cage now?*

Howard cleared his throat.

“It feels like a sanctuary,” I said.

Howard nodded. “It does right now,” he said. “Not so much during our meetings, I’m afraid.”

I imagined that on stormy days, when the room darkened with cloud cover or the hail hit hard against the panes, it might sometimes feel like Zeus himself was sitting in on these editorial meetings, passing judgment,

not on petty little things like life and death, but on the tougher questions, like whether “sweater” and “weather” rhymed.

“And this?” I asked, casting my face down to an enormous marble table that sat in permanent splendor in the center of the room. “I’ve never seen a table shaped like this before.”

“It’s Yule marble,” Howard said. “From Marble, Colorado, prized for its luminosity and purity. Looks like a beautiful mess of melted vanilla ice cream, doesn’t it? The irregularity works in our favor. It’s completely natural, of course, but because of these”—he motioned to the little bays and inlets that marked its length like a jagged shoreline—“some of us are slightly blocked from others—a benefit for those who dislike each other. Not that any of us truly dislike each other.” He attempted a laugh followed by a grimace. “But occasionally one needs a visual rest from one’s coworkers, especially after four or five hours.”

I placed my hand on the surface of the table. It was cool to the touch, but not cold, marked by a swirly blend of white, cream, and gray, crisscrossed by hundreds of small veins snaking over the surface. From above, I imagined, the table looked like a pond frozen in winter.

“That’s where Salton sits,” Howard said, pointing at a graceful armchair. “And the twenty-six around the table are for Senior and Associate Editors. This is mine,” he said proudly, patting one near the middle that matched all the others.

“Who sits here?” I asked. There was one other chair—not quite at the table, but near it, and closest to Salton.

“Dexter.”

Figures.

“And all these others?”

Thirteen other chairs with small desk-like projections—the kind you see in elementary schools—ringed the room, each close to the table, but not quite as close as Dexter’s. So much for equality.

“Junior Editors,” Howard said. “Anyway, you asked about the significance of the egg.” He swept his arm around the room.

I’d been so distracted by the dome and the table, I had somehow failed to register that the room was covered in eggs—hundreds of eggs, no, correction—*thousands* of eggs beautifully displayed in velvety shadow boxes like small objets d’art. I’d never seen anything like it. Some were

marbled or mottled, others pointed or rounded, still others dwarf or large; most were punctuated with an array of hues and pigments so surprising, I had to take a step back. I once told you that my special ear allows me to hear the color of words. With a shock I realized—these were those colors.

But with my awe came a sudden, sharp pang of guilt. Despite their beauty, even I knew no one should collect wild bird eggs. It's stealing. Nevertheless, like anyone who has a chance to see something they really shouldn't—car accidents, naked bodies, the crown jewels—I could not turn away.

I studied each line of these oval soldiers. When you think about it, every egg is a calcified fortress, a citadel designed to withstand weight, weather, and wear. We consider them as fragile; they're anything but.

I took a step toward a familiar blue robin's egg. A small hand-lettered notation in a typeface called Academy provided details: color, source, incubation, nesting, feeding, survival. Next to it was a shadow box filled with the tinamou's emerald green eggs, and next to that, the rhea's velvet cream. Then came the chickadee's reddish pink splotch, the falcon's brownish orange, the emu's greenish black, the bluebird's greenish blue, the guinea fowl's age-spot brown, the parrot's pure white—on and on it went. I turned back to the parrot's egg—plain old white? Don't judge a book by its cover, I guess.

Oddly, one shadow box was empty. *Raphus cucullatus,* read the notation. "Extinction is forever." My old friend, the dodo.

"A potent reminder of what we do and why we do it," Howard said, following my gaze before moving to a different shadow box. "Our symbol is a quail egg," he continued, pointing to a box filled with speckled beauties. "They're vitamin-rich; apparently good at protecting against allergies and things. I don't really know how true that is, but the idea is that fragility is—"

"—is strength, camouflaged," I said with a growing understanding. "That's why the egg is synonymous with poetry. The most delicate-looking package isn't delicate at all—it can't be, because it houses the most potent material."

Howard looked at me in surprise. "Not bad, Banner," he said. "In fact, dead-on. Peck & Peck is the eggshell. Protect, then publish, that's us." He stared at the eggs as if one might suddenly disappear. "I'm sure I don't have

to tell you this," he said, his voice weary, "but the arts are under attack. When money's tight—and it always is—the arts are the first to go."

"Always," I agreed. "And it doesn't help that it can be very difficult to make a living in the arts as—"

"A *living*," he interrupted savagely. "A misused word if I've ever heard one. There's often so *little* living in making a living."

His words hit home.

"Obviously we need scientists and engineers and lawyers," he continued. "Obviously, such paths lead to good jobs and more money; no one in their right mind would argue that we should ever cut back on these subjects or positions. But art, music, poetry, photography, design, literature, ceramics, textiles, theater—in a word, beauty—are equally important. Without them, our very humanity dies. We're still birds, Banner, but with clipped wings. We have feathers but no longer fly."

I looked back at the empty dodo egg box.

"Humans thrive on constant renewal," he continued. "We require fresh ideas and original thinking to survive, and yet it sometimes feels like the art and necessity of thinking is becoming passé; that the one-size-fits-most, sitcom-rich, knockoff lifestyle is winning." He sighed. "I confess that some days I find the passivity of the human race overwhelming."

This is the way the world ends, I thought to myself. *This is the way the world ends/This is the way the world ends/Not with a bang but a whimper.* T. S. Eliot knew everything.

"The poets I publish have the nerve, the *audacity*, to face life's struggles," Howard continued, "to wrestle with ugliness, to question prevailing wisdom, to grasp at beauty. And they do it, not by mimicking what's already been done—not by tilling the same ground, not by planting the same crop, not by sowing the same harvest—but by starting fresh. In a world devoid of poets, do you know what you get, Baxter? Another knockoff. Another mouthwash." He glanced down at his watch. "Oh my god. I need to go."

As we walked quickly down the hallway he said, "What brought you to us, anyway? Did you have previous copying experience?" He glanced at me, sensing my hesitancy. "Oh, I see," he continued. "You're one of those. You love poetry—or you think you do. Big E. E. Cummings fan in college—that sort of thing?"

“Yes. I mean. Well, yes, I do. Not just Cummings.” Was he testing me? I started reeling off names: Lin Po, Tony Hoagland, Thom Gunn, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Gwendolyn Brooks, Daniel Halpern, Shuntarō Tanikawa, at least ten more. It was embarrassing, but I didn’t want him to think I was a lightweight. “I know I have a lot to learn, though,” I said. “Especially if I want to become an editor here someday.” I hadn’t known how true that was until I’d said it out loud. Eleven—I’d known at age eleven—the first time I held a *Peck & Peck* in my hands.

Howard’s tolerant smile vanished, his face taking on the look my father always got whenever he had to explain that Vikings never actually wore pointy-horned helmets. “You seem like a nice young man, Banner. Truly. But there’s something you should know.”

We had stopped, the petrified trees behind Howard’s head taking on a slightly aggressive tenor.

“‘Promotion’ is not a word that gets used much here at Peck & Peck,” he said. “It’s just not how the company works.”

“I didn’t mean right away—”

“This is a place to *learn*,” he said with emphasis. “*Learn* everything you can—what we do, how we do it, *why* we do it. Watch; listen; read; observe. Do it, and you’ll receive an education second to none. I understand you have goals, but your goals may not align with the company’s goals. So few young people understand that. There’s nothing wrong with making photocopies. Nothing—”

“It’s just that I—”

“—in fact, at Peck & Peck, photocopying is a very important job,” he said, raising a hand to stop me. “I’m sure at times it will seem that no one here respects it—maybe even *you* don’t respect it—but the truth is, we can’t live without it. The last person who had your job—I should say the last series of people who held your position—I don’t mean the temps, but rather the people like you—would-be editors—they were more interested in getting promoted than in making copies. That’s a mistake. Naturally, we all understand that young people want to get a foot in the door. But I can’t say this emphatically enough, Banner; *you will not get promoted*. Not a chance. *Never.* Don’t take it personally. I’ve been an Associate Editor for over thirty years. Not once have I been awarded a single promotion.”

With this confession, a small sigh escaped his lips.

“But I don’t make a fuss about it,” he continued. “I know my job matters. Your job matters, too. Making copies is an important task—*if* you let it be. You may not be an editor, but you can still contribute.”

“I understand,” I said, although I didn’t mean it. I hoped Howard was wrong. It could be sour grapes talk; he never got promoted, so why should anyone else?

“*Learn*,” he repeated.

“Lou Higgins told me essentially the same thing.”

“Oh good, you’ve met Lou. Yes, Lou.” He rubbed his chin. “And what about Dexter? Have you met him?”

“Yes.” I tried not to sound angry.

“I’m so glad!” he sang. “He probably went out of his way to befriend you.”

I wasn’t sure if Howard was kidding. He didn’t seem good with jokes.

“Truly, truly the nicest young man,” he raved. “And brilliant. Started college at sixteen. Sorbonne-Oxford educated. You probably knew that.”

I didn’t.

“Graduated with all sorts of honors. Speaks fluent French, Mandarin, Japanese—also Flemish if I’m not mistaken. He’s quite modest about it.”

Not a chance.

“I’m betting you and Dexter might—” His watch started playing a strange little ditty that reminded me—not in a good way—of *The Dukes of Hazzard*. “Oh look. I am sorry—I really have to run. My first call is in five minutes. Have to talk another poet down from the ledge.” He tapped his watch. “Poets are filled with self-doubt. It’s a very tough job, being a good poet, but I have to admit, I do get a little tired of propping these people up all the time. If they only had some understanding of what an editor’s job is like, of how much *we* have to put up with, then maybe they’d realize they don’t have the corner on suffering. But pleased to have made your acquaintance, Banner.”

“It’s actually *Batter*,” I said, “And it was a pleasure meeting you, Howard.”

“Remember what I said, Batter,” he said. “*Bat-ter*—did I pronounce it correctly?” He put his hand on my shoulder. “Respect what you do. Take your work seriously and it will become serious work.”

“I will do my best.”

“That’s the ticket.”

Howard set off, his arms propelling him down the hallway in a way designed to keep his arteries open. I watched him go, knowing I should follow. But after the news about Declonius, coupled with my lack of promotional opportunities, not to mention the high esteem in which he held Dexter, I took the elevator. Personally, I didn’t think my heart could take any more.

30.

Handcuffs come in different forms. For some it’s stock options, for others, health plans, for me, the Aviary. Like a sort of architectural antidepressant, it lifted my spirits and filled me with awe. I stopped by at least once a day.

But there were other matters I could not ignore. My finances had never been worse. Without the tips I’d relied on from the Just Okay, I’d had to apply for food stamps, a situation I could not admit to anyone other than the woman behind the counter at Social Services who looked at me in disbelief. “It don’t take a genius to know poetry doesn’t pay, honey.”

So I went back to see Mr. Raley. As much as I wanted to become an editor at Peck & Peck, I wasn’t sure I could afford to. And besides, the job was killing me.

“That bad attitude of yours—it’ll ruin you, Alex,” he said as he filled a tray of saltshakers. “You have a chance at this Peck place and I won’t let you squander it. Sure it’s hard—it’s *supposed* to be hard. The turbulence you’re feeling—that’s normal—that’s what everyone feels when they go after what they want. You’re a poetry person. The sooner you stop fighting that, the better.”

“Well, but the thing is,” I said, “I don’t think I can afford to be a poetry

person. I'm more practical. Like you."

I'd meant it as a compliment, but the way Raley dumped salt all over the tray indicated otherwise. He slammed the salt box on the table, then pressed his finger against my chest.

"Now you listen," he said. "You go right back in there and stick it out. You make the job; the job doesn't make you. Understand? The next time you come back here I don't want to hear this sort of thing. As for practicality, what are you, blind? Restaurants aren't practical."

"But people have to eat—"

"*Alex*—" he warned.

"But I know you could use me, Mr. Raley!"

He gave me a look of disgust. "You want to be *used*?"

"No—you know what I mean. Useful."

"Your problem is, you don't know what you want."

Not exactly groundbreaking news.

"Worse, you're too scared to find out."

Whatever.

"You make the job, the job doesn't make you," he repeated. Then he swept his eyes over my thin body. "You know what you need? Exercise. Might help you in the girlfriend department, too."

I don't know what it is about Mr. Raley, but I tend to follow his advice. The very next day I mapped out a five-mile run because that's what everyone does—five miles. But after the first mile, I threw myself on the steps of the New York Public Library near one of the lions, chest heaving.

"Hey, are you okay?" a concerned voice asked.

I looked up. I think the voice was coming from a human, but I couldn't really see. The sun was hitting my eyes just so.

"Gr-great," I gasped.

"Trying to get back in shape?" she asked.

"Wh—wh—what?" I said, searching for oxygen. "No. I'm—I'm—I'm a run—a—runner." I took a deep breath in. "A—a marathoner. I'm—I'm—training."

"Really?" she said. She sounded surprised. "For which one?"

Which one.

“B-Bos ton.” I think my tongue was swelling.

“No kidding,” she said. “Me, too.”

I squinted, trying to make out her face.

“Sorry,” I said, my voice slowly returning to normal. “That’s why I’m winded. Doing some two hundreds.”

“Do you always mix sprint training with endurance?” she asked.

“Always,” I said. “That’s what got me through the Chicago marathon.”

“You did *Chicago*?” She sounded impressed.

“And L.A.”

God, this was awful. *SHUT UP*.

“The furthest I’ve ever run is nine miles.”

“Nine is a decent start,” I said, casually stretching an arm across my chest like I’ve seen marathoners do. “But you should really aim for a 10K. From there it’s just baby steps to a half marathon.”

The sun dropped behind a cloud, allowing me to glimpse her toned calves. Exact opposite of mine.

“Add in some sprints,” I said. “Changes everything.”

But instead of nodding in awe, she backed away. “Yeah, well, good luck with your—ah—training.”

“Thanks. And listen,” I said as she bounced down the stairs, “if you ever get the chance, run the Honolulu. It’s *AMAZING*!”

I don’t know what had gotten into me.

“By the way,” she called back over her shoulder. “Here’s some advice. Don’t pretend to be something you’re not. Nine miles is more than a 10K.”

Jesus, of course, she was right. I cupped my hand around my ear as if I hadn’t heard, then waved her off in a friendly sort of way that implied I’d catch her next time. But as soon as she was out of sight, I turned to Patience, the lion that guards the South steps.

“That went well,” I said.

Patience stared stonily ahead.

Fun fact. The New York Public Library lions are twins. They started life as Leos, but during the Depression, Mayor La Guardia decided to rename

them Patience and Fortitude. Talk about a classic government move: *Hey, I know. Let's rename the lions! That way no one will notice our complete lack of social assistance during the coming years of abject poverty and starvation.*

I knew all of this because of my dad. Still, I think the new names were an improvement over the shared name of Leo. Who wants to be named after the zodiac anyway? Obviously, the Zodiac Killer did, but that's not much of an endorsement.

Oddly, sitting next to Patience was beginning to make me feel *im*patient. Why did everyone feel the need to weigh in on my life? Howard told me to take my work seriously and "learn"; Mr. Raley told me to make my job instead of letting it "make me." Runner Woman told me to stop being something "I wasn't." And now the lions. "Be patient; have fortitude." *Well, everyone could just fuck off.* Especially given that I was suffering from self-diagnosed clinical depression, a medical condition only slightly different from my parents' description of the Great Depression, the main difference being people in the Great Depression were a lot worse off, a fact that made me feel even more depressed.

By the way," I said to Patience with a sadness that surprised even me. "June's getting married."

Patience didn't seem remotely surprised.

31.

"Excuse me," I said a few minutes later to a librarian. "I could use some help."

Soon I was knee-deep in reading about another pair of twins: the extraordinarily wealthy Peck brothers, Patrius and Argentio, who founded Peck & Peck in 1900 after purchasing a weedy, triangular, seemingly unusable parcel of land in Manhattan. They'd purchased the ill-shaped

parcel, which no one wanted, specifically because it reminded them of poetry, which, according to Patrius, “also no one wanted.”

According to the article, the Peck brothers, rich due to Texan oil deposits, had designed the building themselves, bringing in real architects only at the last minute to make sure it wouldn’t fall down, as well as to add a few details they’d overlooked, like bathrooms. There were some notes about the various construction hurdles they’d faced, mostly involving the triangular lot as well as some inspections they’d failed, but not much else about the early days, other than a column clipped from a newspaper that described their finished building in unflattering terms.

The person who’d written the column—a vengeful architect who’d submitted his poems about springtime blossoms to the publication months earlier and for which he’d received an immediate and firm rejection—described the Aviary as an “overgrown greenhouse where nothing would ever bear fruit,” the offices with their tall French doors and wraparound bookcases as “outsized details that befit the egos within,” the marble staircase as “heartlessly cold, like the editors themselves,” and the alphabetic topiaries as “a waste of plants.”

His article, which was entitled “Eggheads Move to Manhattan,” featured a photograph of Argentio Peck, a shadow box of eggs tucked beneath either arm, heading down Houston Street. It went on to say that the Pecks’ “excessive love affair with protein,” and their fixation on the “so-called power” of the quail’s egg, which, “as far as this writer knows, requires more than seven to make a decent-sized omelet,” was reflective of their taste in poetry: “High in fat and nearly always runny.”

The author went on to point out that not only was the building extravagant but so were their staffing needs. The Pecks hired thirty-nine editors, most with advanced degrees but a few without, each one hailing from a different corner of the world, each a supposed expert in “something.” When questioned about why a publication that published just four times a year and was only ever one hundred pages long—or less—needed so many editors, especially when the nation’s top publications, like *The Atlantic Monthly*, managed to publish every month, with editorial staffs a fraction of the size, the poetry brothers were quoted as saying, “Because we like to argue.”

That assertion was borne out in an interview published a month later in

The New York Journal entitled “The Brothers Grim: They Don’t Like Your Rhyme for a Reason.”

“Ninety-nine point five percent of all poetry is boring,” stated Patrius Peck, one of the two Editors in Chief of *Peck & Peck*. “That’s why people don’t read it. But good poetry is like a thin, sharp blade that stabs the reader awake. Our job is to find that half percent. That’s why my brother and I depend on thirty-nine other editors. Why thirty-nine? Because that’s how many it takes to convince us we’re wrong. I don’t write poetry, nor can I claim any formal education in it. I just know good work when I see it. And I hardly ever see it.”

And farther down, beneath a photo of Argentio, his arm slung around his “good friend” Rudyard Kipling, it read:

“No one chooses to become a poetry editor. It’s not sensible like medicine, nor honorable like farming. But my brother and I seemed destined for it; it’s all we were good at. I would have preferred to be a baseball player, but I didn’t have the arm.”

Despite Patrius’s original claim that no one wanted poetry, it began to seem that many did. It’s possible that readers were attracted by the small glowing egg or maybe were simply curious about what went on inside the odd building. But more likely it was because of the Peck brothers’ boast: that inside their pages was work so rare—so *un*boring—it had taken forty-one people to find it. In fact, finding the quarterly itself took real effort.

That was because *Peck & Peck* did not accept advertising of any kind, nor was it advertised anywhere. The Peck brothers refused to sponsor bookstore readings, nor would they lend their names for testimonials on a certain poet’s behalf. Very few stores and newsstands carried *Peck & Peck*; it was absent from most bookstore shelves. When asked for interviews, the Peck brothers usually said no. And they always refused to answer questions regarding the egg and “what it meant.”

But the quarterly did sell—by subscription only—a little, and for the most unlikely, most studiously unpoetic reason ever: wild parties.

First known as the City Directory Parties, they were renamed the Phone Book Parties (after telephones became ubiquitous) because that’s how the

guest list was selected: at random, from the phone book. One brother would flip the book open to an arbitrary page, the other would stab at a name. Then they'd do it again. It didn't take long before the Phone Book Parties became a minor New York City legend, in part because, with guest lists limited to one hundred, they were among the hardest-to-get invites in the city. But really because of what happened there.

The parties were thrown exactly four times a year on Thursday nights. The guest lists included a mix of everyday people—plumbers, cabdrivers, housewives, dentists, lawyers, out-of-work actors—all brought together, despite the appalling lack of celebrity or promise of an open bar, to celebrate, as Patrius once put it, "the absolute miracle of having found enough good work in our mountainous slush pile to comprise yet another issue."

It was at these parties that one could see hotel maids happily chatting with doctors, bankers swapping stories with welders, grocers giving advice to college deans—each enjoying the equal footing that came without pretense, and all because they'd been lucky enough to receive the highly coveted, carefully calligraphed invitation from Peck & Peck instructing: "Come as you are. Just don't *not* come."

There was never any phone number, or way to RSVP, nor did there need to be. For those fortunate enough to receive an invitation, it wouldn't have mattered if they were out of town on business, in the middle of childbirth, or at their own mother's wake—they came. Once their guests were within the hallowed halls of Peck & Peck, the brothers poured limitless amounts of champagne down their throats, encouraged them to roam freely throughout the astonishing building, invited them to ask unrestricted questions and, best of all, granted them access to the egg-filled Aviary, where they spent a few drunken hours listening to the slurred readings of newfound poets who never failed, as Patrius once claimed, to stab them awake.

That, in a nutshell, is how the brothers gained new readership: by showing normal, everyday people what poetry was *really* all about. How it could make them feel; what it could make them think; and why it could change their lives—not just for one night, but for every night thereafter.

“My colleague mentioned that you’re researching *Peck & Peck*,” a gray-haired librarian whispered to me. “So I brought you a few more articles. How’s it going?”

“Good. I just finished reading about their Phone Book Parties. I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“They were really something,” she said. “That’s why I had to come over—because I actually went to one. Forty years ago, in 1942.”

I looked up at her astonished.

“They’d canceled the parties during the Depression,” she said, “but when the war started, the Pecks brought them back. Said people needed poetry more than ever; that ugliness had to be fought, not just on the battlefield, but in our hearts.”

“The Pecks had a way with words. What was the party like?”

“Wild,” she said. “Unexpected. When I got there, a baseball game was in progress. One of the Pecks—I think his name was Cusp—was pitching, and his twin brother, Rye, was swinging a bat with one arm while instructing everyone to drink up with the other. Some of the guests were in the outfield—men in suits, women in dresses—hanging over the railings on all five floors, hoping to catch a fly ball. It was strange and joyous and fun—what we needed after years of despair.” She paused, her face bright with the memory. “But for me, the evening really started when a man named Wallace Stevens backed me into a corner.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Wallace Stevens.”

“Yes.”

“Wallace Stevens. The poet.”

“I didn’t know he was a poet.”

“Wallace Stevens. Who won the Pulitzer.”

“*Yes*,” she repeated. “But he told me he worked for an insurance company.”

“He did,” I said. “In Hartford.” I was a big Stevens fan.

“I’d been completely entranced by those letter mobiles—you know the ones on the third floor?—not paying attention to anything else, and I accidentally bumped into him and said sorry, and he said sorry, and then because I didn’t know what else to say I asked him if he liked poetry, and he said, ‘Sometimes,’ and I told him I didn’t read much of it, and he told me that was probably wise. And then out of the blue, he wrapped both arms

around me and pushed me into a corner." She flushed. "It was shocking," she continued. "I was twenty years old, and he was at least sixty—maybe older. But then I heard him yell to the lobby below, 'Hey, watch it, Peck!' and realized he'd saved me from being beaned by a baseball. 'Cusp Peck has no arm—runs in the family,' Stevens informed me. But then with his arm *still* around me, he asked if I was married, and I told him it was none of his business, and then he asked me if I believed in love at first sight, and I told him, *No, definitely not*. At this point I was literally peeling his arm off my waist—you have to realize; we'd all been drinking. At any rate, I made it very clear that I was not interested."

"And—?"

"Well," she said breathlessly, "then he put his face very close to mine and leaned in and told me that love at first sight really did exist and that I should pay better attention—that he, himself, was married to a goddess—the absolute love of his life—and that he'd fallen in love with her the first time he saw her, but his family hadn't approved of her blue-collar beginnings and didn't come to their wedding, and because of it, he'd never spoken to them again but it didn't matter because she was all that had ever mattered. 'Never take love at first sight for granted,' he warned me, 'and don't ever let anyone tell you who to love.' And then he reached past three other people and pointed at a nice-looking young man—a Polish soldier who'd been wounded in the war—and said, 'This fella's been staring at you for over an hour.'"

"Are you kidding me?" I leaned back in my chair, stunned. "Seriously? What did you do?"

She held out her left hand. "Married him," she beamed. "The fella, I mean."

Then she placed a short stack of articles down next to the others. "I need to get back to the desk. Hope this helps."

The librarian was right. According to the articles, Cusp and Rye were the next set of twins to take over the reins of Peck & Peck, in 1925, believing, as their father and uncle had, that most poetry was awful, and it was their job—really, their duty—to mine the submissions piles until they unearthed

the one-half-of-one-percent worth committing to publication. “Or *less*,” they’d warned. During the Depression the Peck brothers announced submissions had increased tenfold. “People tend to write more when they’re depressed,” they explained. “Unfortunately.”

In the few photos that accompanied these articles, the twins were hunched in brotherly community over their desks, reading with such concentration it looked as if they hadn’t moved in days. Based on the quarterly’s success, maybe they hadn’t. The work they found managed to explain the difficult, reveal the sorrow, relate the joy, and make readers laugh—all with astounding economy. For the next thirty years, Cusp and Rye, with the help of their thirty-nine editors, plucked countless unknowns—including Wallace Stevens—from their large submission piles, and as a result, turned them into well-knowns.

I picked up the first article again—the one with Cusp heralding the arrival of his own pair of sons. “Twins, of course!” he was quoted as saying as he looked down at the small bundles, one of whom appeared to be in mid-scream, his face contorted in fury, his tiny hands balled into fists.

Guess who.

Oddly, besides that first photo of Salton, I found just two others. One was of Declonius and Salton as adults—in their twenties—Declonius in uniform, Salton in a fancy suit. Between them stood, according to the caption, their former Scout leader, a vaguely familiar, buoyant-looking man named Smith, his bulky arm muscles straining to bring the two boys together. The headline read: WAR HERO ATTRIBUTES VALOR TO SCOUT TRAINING—AND POETRY. The article went on to say that Declonius Peck—the young man in uniform—and his twin brother, Salton—the one in the fancy suit—were next in line to take over the dual Editor-in-Chief positions at Peck & Peck.

But despite this announcement, which implied the brothers would be sharing the reins, every article that followed only ever mentioned Declonius.

“Declonius Peck is a modern-day legend,” one article said. “A shining example of how to lead,” said another. His war hero record was brought up repeatedly; how the courage he’d shown on the battlefield could only

benefit Peck & Peck's argumentative editorial table. And apparently, it did, too, because under his guidance, the quarterly grew steadily in both fame and content. The guy had so many good qualities, I started to lose count: generous nature, steady patience, handsome mien, innate kindness, an ear like no other. Plus, his gracious hosting of the Phone Book Parties, which, according to one article, he'd refused to scale back despite the inflation that gripped the country in 1974, made him even more likable. "When times are tough," he was quoted as saying, "reading poetry is vital—in fact, it's the way back to solvency. I'm not an economist, but I'm pretty sure about this."

Likewise, poets heralded him with incredible regularity. "He's my best friend," at least nineteen major poets claimed. "He refused to let me quit," said dozens of others. "Declonius Peck is probably the only editor alive who cheerfully accepts long-distance collect calls in the middle of the night from drunkards informing him that they hate writing and are giving it up forever," said another, who later became Britain's Poet Laureate.

I set the stack aside for a moment, not sure what to think. Where was Salton?

Surprisingly, for such a man about town, there was no mention of Declonius's personal life other than one small clipping: a marriage announcement that appeared in the local April 1952 Births–Deaths–Marriages column and stated only that he and a Billie York, a nurse, had been married by a justice of the peace in front of two witnesses. Salton's absence was noted with a small inset photo and the words "Declonius Peck's multimillionaire financial wizard twin was not in attendance."

Multimillionaire financial wizard twin?

I sat back in my chair, exhausted.

"You might find this interesting," the librarian said, coming up behind me. "It explains part of Peck & Peck's interior."

She handed me a microfiche which contained the shipping log from a steam-turbine-powered ship called the USS *Liberty*—a transport document from 1945 strewn with the captain's personal notes regarding the items that filled his cargo holds, including, unbelievably, those petrified espaliered pear trees—the very ones that stood bare and erect against the walls on the fifth floor of Peck & Peck.

Apparently Declonius told the captain he'd rescued them from a razed monastery in France and hauled them halfway across Europe—he didn't say

how—putting them on the USS *Liberty* bound for New York. Since he had no money, he negotiated their transit using the only two things he had left—an old copy of *Peck & Peck* and a medal he'd received for gallantry in action. The Silver Star.

About this transaction, the captain wrote:

> *Not wanting to refuse a request from such a heroic young man, I reluctantly took the quarterly but returned the medal. "Smart choice," the young man told me. "The words in there are worth more than this little piece of metal any day." I pretended to agree although I didn't, promising him instead that his dead trees would be unloaded in New York City Harbor in just three weeks to a Mr. Cusp Peck. After he left, I discovered his publication was filled with poetry. I can't stand poetry, so I threw it overboard. When his father came to claim the dead cargo weeks later, he worriedly asked after his son from whom he hadn't heard in months. Was he all right? he asked. I thought the dead trees were proof enough that his son wasn't 'all right'; nevertheless, I said he was fine. I did not mention the poetry quarterly. There's only so much heartache a parent can bear.*

"This is the last lot, I promise," the librarian said, reappearing with yet another stack. "It's mostly about, well, you know. The sad times."

She meant 1978, the same year Barry Manilow's "Copacabana" blasted from radios, innocent people in Jonestown drank their Kool-Aid and died, Garfield the Cat was syndicated. But at Peck & Peck, it was the sensationalist news of Declonius and his misdeeds that tortured readers like stale air from a broken air conditioner.

POETIC JUSTICE, screamed one headline above a photograph of lead-headed Declonius being taking down the steps of Peck & Peck in handcuffs. EDITOR EDITS OWN BOOKS FOR SELF-PROFIT, declared another.

According to these articles, Declonius Peck—a man beloved by all—had actually been draining the company of money for years: reducing salaries, avoiding bills, skating the property tax, running up credit card debt, mishandling the pension fund—all in the name of personal profit. He was

found guilty of fraud and embezzlement—*and* resisting arrest (Howard hadn't mentioned that one)—and was sentenced to ten years in prison.

It was still so hard to believe. The Silver Star hero? The man whom Howard had called a probable genius? The only editor who'd agreed with me when it came to double-sided copying?

Apparently, a few others didn't believe it either. Several poets wrote articles in his defense, and at least twenty editors threatened to quit in protest. In general, though, after a few weeks, all of these protests subsided. You know how it is. There's a certain kind of grief associated with thinking you really knew someone, and then finding out you never did.

Once Declonius was convicted, everything—both the accusatory headlines and the poetic support—died out completely. People who had loved him were embarrassed to have done so, and those who'd never met him were glad they'd been spared the contact.

The quarterly closed. The money was never recovered.

I stood up and began to gather the materials back into a neat stack to return to the front desk.

"One more," the librarian said. "Unless you're Pecked out."

"No," I said, even though I was. I didn't want to read another word.

"Why all the interest, if you don't mind my asking."

"I work there," I said.

"*Really,*" she said, surprised. "Well, in that case, you're already familiar with this one." She held out a clipping.

—SALTON PECK RESCUES FAMOUS QUARTERLY, the headline shouted. It was from 1980. In the photo, Salton sits behind his desk, an angry look on his face. To his right stand four editors—Howard, Gupta, Lou, and Tang. To his left is Dexter, his usual smirky face oddly sad, his arms folded protectively across his chest. "Editorial jobs remain safe," the subhead claimed.

But there was something about the photograph—the way the editors stood. They didn't look safe at all.

32.

It was Howard who told me Peck & Peck was still organized the way it had always been: thirty-nine editors divided into a hierarchy of three tiers—thirteen Junior Editors, thirteen Associate Editors, thirteen Senior Editors. But under Salton's leadership, their responsibilities had been tweaked to "reflect the aggressiveness of a moneymaking enterprise."

At the bottom of the heap were the Junior Editors, whose responsibility it was to sift through the flood of poetry that poured out of the mailroom and into their offices every week. In the past, poets had submitted their work through all sorts of channels—including a few who'd thumbtacked their poems to the front door—but now Salton insisted everything had to be mailed—a rule he deliberately put in place to keep "the lazy, the cheap, and the thumbtackers out." The details of his new submission rules were repeated on the phone over one hundred times a day. No, you could not drop by and leave your poem with the security guard. No, you could not fax a poem. No, you could not call and read a poem over the phone. Recordings were out. No, you could not try to send a file on a disk from something called a Lisa. No, you could not send more than one poem at a time. No, you could not explain what your poem meant or what made you write it.

Your poem, if you wanted it to be considered, had to be mailed, unfolded, in a nine-by-twelve-inch brown manila envelope with a short, *notarized* cover letter swearing you didn't plagiarize it. And no, there was absolutely no point in wasting postage on an SASE envelope because your poem was not being returned. Further, you were not allowed to submit your poem to any other journal, quarterly, magazine, or newsletter until hearing back from Peck & Peck. Getting a reply took up to six months.

As for the replies themselves, they were short and to the point: you either received a postcard with the word **NO** set in an unmistakable we-absolutely-hated-it 158-point Bauhaus Extra Black Bold, or a **YES** printed in the same font, but smaller, with a tiny note saying a check for twenty-five-dollars and a copy of the quarterly would show up in their mailbox. No date promised.

Once the submission protocol was satisfied, the Junior Editors began what they called “baseline culling,” instantly tossing anything on scented paper; anything written in only lowercase letters; anything that included a mention of self-publishing; anything that came from cities whose names, in Salton’s opinion, contained too many letters; anything from Orange County, several parts of Florida, and Barstow—no reason given—and especially anything that, in the cover letter, mentioned how the writer was “suddenly moved” to write. Further, poems that mentioned kittens, puppies, cooking, sand candles, babies, sunrises, rainbows, running, beaches, cancer, or the word “namaste” were also tossed. Anything written on parchment—tossed. Anything using the word “methinks,” tossed. Anything indicating it had been written by too young a person (crayons, Magic Markers) or too old a person (spidery handwriting, retirement home return address) tossed. This reduced the clog by about sixty-five percent. The remaining thirty-five percent—upwards of six hundred poems a week—was then dumped on the desks of the people one floor up—the Associate Editors.

The thirteen Associate Editors were charged with dividing the remaining poems into a warren of subcategories based on structure: odes, iambic meters, quatrains, haikus, couplets, rising meters, strophes, free verse, anapests, dirges, et cetera, eliminating any extra cancer or rainbow poems that might have missed the first burn pile, as well as any that, at first glance, made them even slightly nauseous. The Associate Editors were also charged with recognizing top names and established talents—which wasn’t hard to do: these poems came from their agents, usually with threatening letters suggesting that if Peck & Peck didn’t start recognizing so-and-so’s talent soon, so-and-so would go elsewhere. To these poems the editors attached little red flags, often including background information on the poet, as well as their own stab at literary analysis, such as linking a set of poems to Ovid, politics, or current culture. That got the mess down to three hundred poems.

The poems were then turned over to the appropriate Senior Editor, each a certified expert in some specific area of poetry: waka, phonesthetics, concrete, speculative, aubade—the list was long. The Senior Editors skimmed each remaining poem, choosing between one and five to consider for possible publication. These poems were then slotted into the final five remaining categories:

- Already Famous Poets Salton Knows and Has No Intention of Publishing
- Already Famous Poets Salton Knows and Has Published Before and Might Publish Again Depending on His Mood at the Time
- Unknown Poets We Could Make Famous if We Wanted To
- Celebrity Wannabe Poets
- Poets with Good Wine Cellars

And that's when the real stress started. Publication week, the last week leading up to the quarterly's release to the printer, was a little slice of publishing hell. As Salton stomped his feet and rejected what the editors were proposing, a certain kind of last-chance urgency gushed through the hallways like a flash flood.

It wasn't just the fear that the quarterly might be published with blank pages, it was also the fear that each editor had failed in one of three ways: Failed to recognize quality. Failed to find relevance. Failed to identify universality. These failures sent the Senior Editors back to the Associate Editors' desks, and when nothing turned up there, back to the Junior Editors' pre-incineration trash bins, creating such a stir of hopeless hysteria that editors of all ranks could be seen on their hands and knees, looking for some overlooked nugget of poetic wisdom that met all the standard criteria, plus appealed to whatever kick they sensed Salton was on that week. In the final days leading up to publication, you would have thought lives were at stake—that the mandate wasn't to publish a poetry quarterly but to cure cancer, fix the national debt, and resolve the Mideast crisis once and for all—by eight p.m. at the latest.

Sadly, for me this type of atmosphere was beginning to feel completely acceptable and (I hate to admit this) even energizing. That's right: I'd managed to last a few months. Partly because Mr. Raley refused to give me my job back, partly because I couldn't bear the idea of being unable to visit the Aviary, and partly because Howard was right—I did want my job, no matter how lowly, to matter. I desperately needed to be part of something important and, luckily for me, in this environment of constant, random emergency, I could fool myself into believing I was. Nothing—*nothing*—would be published that hadn't passed through my hands and my machines several times.

Plus, as the clearinghouse for all written material in *Peck & Peck*, including all memos, handwritten notes on other people's memos, all poems, all analyses, and all arguments for and against one poem or another, the editors, perhaps unwittingly, had given me a bird's-eye view of the battlefield—of who liked whom; of what genre was trying to usurp another; of alliances, skirmishes, retreats, surprise attacks, jealousy, lies, brownnosing. I knew, for instance, that two of the Associate Editors were collecting evidence to get one of the Senior Editors fired. I also knew that three Junior Editors were heavily involved in a fantasy football league; that Sam Slater was sleeping with both Lou Higgins *and* a Junior Editor named Mira Vito; that Tang had a daughter with multiple sclerosis and huge insurance issues; that Salton had mild hemophilia; that Hernandez had tried and failed to get a job at *The Kenyon Review*; that Gupta missed Goa; that Howard missed his daughter; and that nearly everyone, although it wasn't stated, implied, referred to, or committed to paper in any way, missed—of all people—the persona non grata, Declonius.

Further, the more I read the analyses of each poem, the more I began to understand these pieces weren't written for the edification of the other editors; they were written for Salton. Who, despite being a Peck, and therefore believed to be genetically gifted at recognizing outstanding work, seemed to know next to nothing about poetry. Or, correction, *nothing*. Which explained his bluster. Because even successful millionaires can't afford the shame of appearing deficient. Especially when compared to a superstar twin brother.

Still, Salton wasn't always successful at hiding his ignorance. In memos I'd copied for him just this week, he'd misidentified a villanelle as free verse, insisted a Billy Collins was a Tom Collins but with more gin, and amended the company dress code to state that sijos—a form of Korean poetry—could no longer be worn in the office. Worse, he rejected a poem by the extremely talented Carol Ann Duffy, asserting that he was not about to publish work by "that mom on *The Brady Bunch*. How dare Carol pretend to be a parent who loved all of her children equally?" he wrote. "DOES NOT HAPPEN."

The editors tiptoed around his deficits, deftly outlining the history and technicalities of poetry in order to promote new poets they'd discovered. Which, just as Howard had promised, gave me an education second to none.

Despite Salton's rigid rules, most of the editors were still working ridiculously hard to unearth that half percent—practically killing themselves to convince Salton of the poetry they knew *more* than made the grade. But before they presented a poem in the Aviary, they had to package it in a way meant to appeal to Salton's whims.

Unfortunately, that packaging didn't always work and, as a result, work that belonged in *Peck & Peck* was tossed. And by that, I mean incinerated.

Which is why what I did seemed harmless enough. Whenever I encountered an excellent poem that seemed destined for the incinerator, I made an extra copy for myself. Just for my own enjoyment. And then I took it home. No big deal, right?

Wrong.

No poems are allowed out of this building.
If a poem is found on your person OUTSIDE THE DOORS OF PECK & PECK, it will result in your *immediate* dismissal.

This notice could be found on the back of every bathroom stall, propped next to every coffeemaker, and posted right beside the front-door exit.

I asked Howard about the rule, certain he would shrug his shoulders in a way that indicated it was a typical Salton overreaction and no one took it seriously. But instead, his voice turned grave. "In spite of its beauty and grace, the world of poetry publishing is cutthroat, Batter," he told me. "Other editors at competing quarterlies will stop at nothing to get a preview of what we're about to publish. I'd never carry a poem under consideration with me—not on the subway or anywhere else. The chances of being robbed—maybe even assaulted? Sky high."

I nodded like I understood, but what I really understood was that after thirty years in the industry without a single promotion, even Howard needed to convince himself that his work was a matter of life and death.

It was just two days before Issue 323 was to be put to bed, publishing-speak for getting it to the printer. A few empty pages still hung in the balance; the mood around the office was not good. I arrived early; at 6:30 a.m., now standard for me. When the security guard let me in, the smell of double espressos hit me like shrapnel.

"Been here all night, Andy?" I asked him, my own coffee cup in hand. When I'd started at Peck & Peck, I made it a point to learn Andy's name right away. It's always been my opinion that people on the bottom should stick together, although it was obvious Andy didn't share this opinion. Or maybe he didn't know he was on the bottom.

"Of course I've been here all night," he said. "Most of us have. You get people under this much stress, they crack. Rejection makes people do desperate things—you can quote me on that—you can take that to the bank. Literally."

"I think you mean *pressure* makes people do desperate things," I said, regretting it instantly. Why had I felt the need to correct him? He looked offended.

"That's what I said," he bit back. "*Pressure*." He stuffed his hands into his back pockets, obviously mad, then whipped them back out, unintentionally freeing his wallet. It fell to the floor, releasing an American Express card and several photos.

"*Dammit*," Andy said.

"I'll get them," I said, trying to save him the pain of bending down. As I gathered his things, I glanced at the photos.

"Wow," I said. "*Who's this*?" In the photo, a much younger Andy was pulling a beautiful woman close.

He snatched the photo from me. "That's Daisy." I expected him to tell me to mind my own business, but instead he held the photo out so I could see it. He cleared his throat the way one does when trying not to get too emotional, then mumbled, "loved her with all my heart."

By his tone, I assumed Daisy was no longer living. My mother had once told me a wallet was the key to a person's inner life. Who we are, where we live, whom we love; the wallet knows all. Poor Andy; his wallet couldn't keep its mouth shut. I turned my attention to another photo. That, too,

contained a younger Andy, his arm slung around the shoulder of a familiar face. “And who’s this?”

“Cusp Peck,” Andy said.

“You *knew* Cusp Peck?”

“We were best friends. Grew up together. Went to school together. Fell in love together—not with each other. I used to babysit his boys.”

“You babysat for *Salton and Declonius*?”

Andy looked at me like I was stupid. “Think men can’t babysit?”

“No—it’s just hard to imagine Salton as a—”

I felt a sharp stab in my back. “Are you *really* just getting here*?*” said Mira Vito, a Junior Editor, the one besides Lou who was sleeping with Sam Slater. “You realize we only have two days left, don’t you?”

“I do.”

“I sent you a job last night—have you run it? I sent it around midnight.” Mira was thirtyish, with small wire-rimmed glasses and a tidy mass of curly brown hair that shook like an earthquake whenever she moved her head. I didn’t know which specific job she meant, all of her reports were the same—pedantic putdowns of others’ poetic attempts. Just looking at her—her pointy nose, her pushy stance—I knew she was the kid back in grade school who practically levitated from her chair until the teacher called on her. I wondered if Mira knew about the no-promotion rule.

“Remind me again—it was?”

“A poem about a rogue wave. Ring a bell? It didn’t make the first cut because rogue waves are way too close to beaches, content-wise. We don’t accept beach poems. But one of the Associates disagrees, and because of it, I had to spend four hours on my hands and knees yesterday trying to find the fucking thing.” She held out her hands as proof, but they looked fine to me. “Fucking Gadley. I have no idea how he knew the rogue wave poem was in my office, but I can tell you one thing; I’m not telling him I found it. Salton’s never going to approve it anyway, not with the analysis I wrote. You’d think Gadley would take a hint.”

“A hint?”

“You’re not an editor,” she confided maliciously, “so you wouldn’t know, but none of Gadley’s picks ever gets in. We publish—what—maybe thirty poems per quarterly? On average, maybe one hundred and twenty a year? Last time one of his got in was at least two years ago. *Hello!*” she

said, knocking on the side of her head. “Anyone home?” I guessed she was imitating Howard’s head, but when her knuckles hit her own skull, I heard an echo.

“I’ll check on it for you, first thing,” I lied, not liking the way she spoke about Howard. I’d overheard him on the phone yesterday during one of my copy distribution runs. *You really do have special talent*, he’d reassured someone on the other end, *and I very much believe in you. Very much so. You must hang in there. Giving up is not an option. Quitting is not an option.* I assumed the poet to whom he spoke was either sobbing or sitting next to a bottle of dangerous pills. Probably both.

“Anyway,” Mira said, “I shouldn’t even be telling you this. Not that it matters since you probably won’t be here much longer anyway—you guys expire faster than milk.” She cocked her head. “Which is just sad; I mean, I finally learn someone’s name and then, poof, gone. I don’t understand it, Barry; it isn’t a hard job, is it?”

“Mira, I need a word with you,” a voice behind us said. Lou Higgins.

“Yes, Lou,” Mira said, suddenly all business, her index finger pushing her glasses tight up against her face. “What can I do for you?”

Now that she had Mira’s undivided attention, Lou ignored her. “Batter,” she said, turning to me, “thanks for getting that copy assignment done so quickly yesterday. That was such a help.”

“Oh. Of course. You’re welcome.”

“You’re doing a great job down there. It’s a relief to have someone we can count on. By the way, I just ran into Dexter. He’s looking for you.”

Lou shifted her cumbersome leather shoulder bag, its contents probably encompassing most of the Estée Lauder line. I could smell her perfume, light and girlish, clinging to her white angora sweater. It was paired with a bright yellow linen skirt—a summer look in the dead of winter and in refreshing contrast to Mira’s expensive but dull standard-issue intellectual gray wool turtleneck and black slacks. I knew about this stuff from my Gap training, the importance of a sudden pop of color. Although in all honesty, Lou’s skirt didn’t qualify as sudden.

“I should get to it,” I said, understanding that their silence was my dismissal.

“Don’t forget,” Mira warned. “*ASAP*.” And then, turning back to Lou, she said, “Do you know about this? This rogue wave business? Howard

again.”

“No,” Lou said in a lower voice. “This is about a *different* editor.”

As much as I wanted to ask Andy about his babysitting gig and eavesdrop on the rest of Lou’s terse conversation, I had to get to the copy room to drop off my bag before facing Dexter. But the moment I entered, I knew someone had been there. The copier lid was open and on it sat a cocktail glass filled to the brim. A nearby napkin read: *Friday, 8 pm?* That was followed by an address, phone number, and a very large “D.” It was the same D I’d seen dominating the quarterlies for nearly twenty-five years.

I stared at the napkin for a few seconds, Howard’s words replaying in my head. *He’s not even allowed in this building. Can’t come within one hundred yards. Restraining order for life.*

I downed the cocktail.

“Nice of you to make an appearance, asshole,” Dexter said a few minutes later as I lurched into his office. “Hope we haven’t inconvenienced you.”

Despite Howard’s firm belief that Dexter and I would become fast friends, it hadn’t happened. Our encounters had only grown increasingly vitriolic.

“It’s publication week,” he snapped, as my brain was trying to inform me that the cocktail might not have been a good idea, “and the real employees will not be sleeping for the next forty-eight hours. Salton’s called a Crisis Meeting. Everybody is to report to the Aviary in”—and here he paused to check his watch—“exactly twenty-four minutes.” He handed me a huge stack of copying. The note on top read: CRISIS.

During my tenure I’d learned that Salton made up meeting categories to express his various levels of outrage. See Me meetings, Detention meetings, You Make Me Want to Kill Something meetings, How to Write a Cover Letter for Your Upcoming Job Search meetings. But a Crisis Meeting? New territory.

“You haven’t been here long enough to experience a Crisis Meeting,”

Dexter was saying, “but just so you know, someone usually has a stroke. Now here, take this; forty-one copies. Collate. Staple. Deliver.”

“Ya coulda have just sent this through the tube. Woulda been faster.”

Dexter gave me a funny look. “What’s wrong with you?”

I shrugged. That was all the gin would allow.

“Now listen carefully. I want one of those at every chair in exactly”—he checked his watch again—“twenty-three minutes. *Make it look nice*. Salton’s on edge. Don’t fuck this up.”

I barely had enough time to run the job, much less distribute it in the Aviary, given the amount of alcohol I’d just downed, but before I could protest, Salton’s voice came booming over the intercom.

“DEXTER. *DAMMIT.*”

Dexter ran one way, I lurched the other, reaching the bomb shelter in an ever-increasing inebriated haze. I stuffed stacks of paper in the copier drawers, then fed the job in page by page before moving to another copier, fully intending to run Mira’s job while the first one collated. But instead I copied the poem she hated—the one about the rogue wave. Howard liked it, I liked Howard, Mira was mean, I hated Mira. Behold the power of gin.

Eighteen minutes and a cup of coffee later, I loaded the still-warm copies into the dumbwaiter, crawled in beside them, and hoisted myself upstairs. Once on the fifth floor, I zoomed past the dead trees to the Aviary, dispersing the load to the various chairs like a card dealer. A few of the editors started to file in, most of them rumpled-looking—not just their clothes but their faces—sagged by stress, cold coffee in hand, stacks of papers tucked under floppy arms. No one said anything, not to me, not to each other. Above, the dome revealed stormy skies.

The rest of the editors were coming in more rapidly now, filling the Aviary with common office noises—moving chairs, opening briefcases, clicking pens. Mira entered, quickly sifting through the various copies to find her analysis. Not there. She snapped her fingers at me, then hissed my name, but I ignored her, turning to Howard, who’d just arrived, a look of defeat on his face. I handed him forty-one copies of his rogue wave poem. He looked confused, glancing up at Mira, who glowered back at him from across the table, her tiny curls shaking like angry aspens. Then he looked down at the stack again, raising his eyebrows half an inch. He glanced up at me. I nodded.

“CRISIS!” Salton shouted as he strode into the room, his coffee cup sloshing a muddy-looking mix onto the marble floor. “‘Crisis’ means be here now. If you’re not here now—well, GET OUT.”

I quickly backed out of the room, but just as I was about to shut the doors, I heard Salton shout, “And where the hell do you think you’re going? YOU! Copy boy! You get in here right now!”

I stopped in the doorway. *Me?* I pointed silently at myself.

“NO! SOME OTHER COPY BOY!” Salton shouted from the head of the table. And then he threw his hands up in the air. “*Of course, you*, you tree fascist. This is a Crisis Meeting. Attendance is REQUIRED.”

I stepped back in. As all the chairs were taken, I attempted to fade into a recess.

“What in the *hell* are you doing?” Salton shouted, leaping up from his chair, his knees making clicking noises as he plowed his way toward me.

“I’m happy to stand,” I managed. “There aren’t any free chairs.”

Salton sighed in disgust, and, for a moment, I swear he considered kicking me. “All right then,” he said. “But if you continue to disrupt this meeting as you already have, I’ll—”

He whirled back to the table, angry, grabbed someone else’s copy of Dexter’s job, removed the staple with his teeth, and spit it out. Then he pitched the now unsecured pages across the table’s surface and grabbed the one closest to him. “Right. So. Which one of you idiots thought we should consider this irritating ode monstrosity? Who writes odes anymore? No one.”

And so the Crisis Meeting began. For the next three hours, I watched as one editor after another was dissected like a frog’s kidney in the hands of a disturbed ninth grader.

“What’s your name again?” Salton said, snapping his fingers at Sam Slater.

Sam had worked at Peck & Peck for two years—Salton had hired him himself. He started to open his mouth to speak, but Salton shut him down.

“It’s just that I wanted to double-check the name before I reduce your paycheck to something that better reflects the crap you shove in my face

week after week.” Salton picked up Sam’s analysis. “You’re advocating for Drusecca? *Really?* She’s a third-rate Sylvia Plath and Sylvia Plath was third rate to begin with.”

Sam shot Lou a hard look across the table. I’d been there when she convinced him that Salton would love Drusecca’s dissonance. Had she misled him on purpose?

Lou looked back at Sam, innocently.

Yes, on purpose.

“Dexter, dock Sam’s pay,” Salton shouted, “and someone else give me something—s*omething* of value. Please, people! What? Are we going to publish the first edition of *Peck & Peck* with ten blank pages? Why do I have to do it all?”

“I’d like to propose Pax Withers,” Tang said quietly, picking up her analysis. “She’s new,” she continued. “Out of Philadelphia. This particular piece focuses on arachnids, a metaphor for—”

Salton didn’t seem to be listening. He patted his shirt and shorts pockets as if looking for a lighter. “Go *on*, Tang,” he shouted impatiently. “I’m multitasking.” We all watched as he finally found what he was looking for —a small book of matches emblazoned with an ad for a personal injury lawyer. He lit one and set Sam’s analysis on fire.

“—a metaphor for,” she repeated “for the, uh, industrial complex.”

“Goddammit, I read the Withers work, Tang,” Salton said as he held the burning report close to Sam’s ear. “Stop telling me what I already know. But the spider thing is obviously weird. Who does that? Why?”

“Agreed,” Mira said. “Weird. Why?”

“Not helpful, Mira,” Salton snapped as the report bloomed with flame. “And, Dexter, what the hell are you doing? Take this,” he said impatiently as the paper blazed in earnest. “And Tang, news flash: people hate spiders. Now who’s got something for me? Why don’t you people talk? What about you, Lou?”

“Yes, I have something,” Lou said as the rest of us watched Dexter grab the blazing report and drop it in a trash can. “And I think you’ll like this one. The author is dead. Sumangalamata. She lived in—”

“You think I need a history lesson on Sumangalamata? From you?” Salton seethed. But I knew he’d gotten one already, thanks to a short cogent

piece Lou had written about her and sent to Salton three days ago. “Which poem of hers are you proposing?”

“‘A Woman Well Set Free.’ I thought it made a lot of sense to publish it in the upcoming edition because of the recent reports of women’s rights in the Mideast—”

“I see,” said Salton. “So now we’re publishing a political journal? Is that it?”

Sam Slater smiled at Lou’s distress.

“No. It’s just that I thought, well, she’s long dead, so we wouldn’t have to pay her. But we’d still get full points for being topical.”

Salton put his hands on his hips and walked up and down the length of the table. “Maybe, maybe.” He grunted.

Lou looked over at Sam. *Take that*.

“Wait a minute,” Salton said, pausing in front of Sam’s chair again. “Your name. It’s Sam. Sam Slater. You were the fool who thought we should publish that other idiot last quarter. The William Carlos Williams impersonator—”

“It wasn’t an impersonator, Salton. It *was* William Carlos Williams. And I wasn’t saying we should publish him—he’s deceased—I was saying that William Carlos Williams—”

“—IS A MAN SO LAZY,” Salton shouted, “THAT HE TOOK HIS LAST NAME AS HIS FIRST. What kind of creativity can we expect out of someone like that? Jesus, people, so far we’ve got a dead woman poet—I’m not exactly sure how someone dead managed to get her poems in the mail, but let’s give her points for that—and then we have the creepy spider thing from Tang, and now Sam Slater thinks we should publish lazy people who also happen to be dead. What is this? Our dead-lazy-eight-legged edition?”

A ringing phone interrupted Salton’s tirade.

“Salton,” Dexter said, covering the mouthpiece, “I think you’ll want to take this.”

“We’re in the middle of a Crisis Meeting, Dexter.”

“It’s Xing Xing Yao.”

Xing Xing Yao was a twenty-five-year-old starlet who’d recently been

heralded by a major tabloid as “The Sexiest Woman Alive.” According to the article, not only was Xing Xing both sexy and alive, she’d also just discovered she was a poet.

“Right you are, Dex,” Salton said, grabbing the phone.

“Xingy,” he said in a soothing voice, “can’t talk about your work right now. But yes—quite good. A few tweaks, perhaps. No, no, of course I have no intention of changing the meaning, but you must understand that beaches and rainbows have no place in poetry. No. None. No. I guarantee it. It’s a simple change. I’ll just substitute ‘beeches’—double ‘e’—for ‘beaches’—right—and delete the rainbow reference altogether. Done. Yes, well, that’s what editors do, sweetheart. And I’m looking forward to seeing a copy of *Peck & Peck* on the nightstand of your bedroom in your new movie. What’s that? Yes. On the nightstand. No. A close-up. On the nightstand. No—*the nightstand.* No. You tell the director— What? Well, I am not interested in whether he thinks it’s already too crowded with the Bible and the pills and the bourbon—we agreed. Right. I see. Well, it’s my editorial recommendation that you lose the Bible—that thing has been done to death. You put *Peck & Peck* on the nightstand. No nightstand, no deal.”

Salton handed the phone back to Dexter and scanned the faces of his editors, who looked appalled. “Come on, people!” he said, clapping his hands together. “Where’s the quality? Why do I have to do everything myself? By the way, which one of you slack-jawed stuffed animals let this Xing Xing Yao poem crap through even though it *explicitly* mentions beaches and rainbows? Which one of you?”

From against the far wall, a Junior Editor named Hassan Aziz cautiously raised his hand. “It is just that I thought—” he began.

“I’m not especially interested in your thoughts, Hassan,” Salton snapped, “but I *am* grateful that someone here finally happened to notice that with a few minor edits, we could turn Xing Xing’s beaches into bucks. We’re talking product placement, people. Put a copy of *Peck & Peck* on the nightstand in a Xing Xing Yao movie and guess what happens: increased circulation. Xing Xing’s poetry will not only inspire others to read poetry, it will convince them it’s sexy to do so. Opens up a whole new market for us.”

“But her work is awful,” Tang complained. “She’s practically illiterate.”

“Well,” said Salton, “aren’t we high and mighty, Tang. You champion work that describes the life and times of the brown recluse while turning up

your educated nose at a poem that actually touches hearts."

"But she spelled 'love' 'luv,'" Lou argued. She'd just discovered Xing Xing's poem in the packet I'd left at every chair. "Really, Salton, I think we have to draw the line—"

"So the woman doesn't own a dictionary! Is that a crime? And anyway, maybe she meant to be contemporary. Or idiomatic. You know what I mean."

"It's not just that she can't spell, Salton," Tang continued. "You're always saying too many people think they can write. By publishing Xing Xing Yao, don't you think we're going to attract even more—"

"What's your problem?" Salton demanded. "Are you really questioning my taste? Do you really think you have my ear? Were you the one who brought this quarterly back to life? This quarterly is a success because of me; because *I* am better than anyone at identifying quality and nurturing emerging poets. And if I say Xing Xing is a damn good poet with, fine, maybe a *little* spelling problem, then I expect *this* team"—and here Salton thrust his index finger forward, pointing at everyone in the room including me—"to jump in with dictionaries and help poor Xing Xing out. Now, are we finished with Xing Xing? Can we move on and see if there isn't perhaps one other piece we might find in today's schlock pile that might be worthy of publishing?"

"I have something," Howard ventured.

"Howard!" Salton laughed in a mocking way. "Howard, of course you do. Of course you have a very thin friend out there in Poet Land who wrote something and is begging you to help them get it published. Let's hear it, Howie!"

Howard quietly divided the pile I'd given him into three parts, passing one stack to the left, one to the right, and one to the back row of Junior Editors. I watched as Mira got her copy. She looked at it, surprised, then angry, turning it over twice to make sure it wasn't her imagination. The rogue wave poem. She looked straight at me, her eyes communicating the obvious: *You're dead, asshole*.

"I'd like to read this out loud," Howard said.

"I'd like to read this out loud," Salton aped in a child's voice. "Well, no, Howard, I don't think so. I mean, thanks for the offer, but everybody here

can read already. I know this because whenever I have to hire someone, I check the reading thing first off."

"We talked about this piece a few weeks ago, Howard," Hernandez, a senior editor, said gently. "And I really do admire it, but I think we determined that it clashes with our new rules—I mean, philosophy."

"That's what I said," Mira pointed out from her junior desk behind the big table. "Rogue waves happen on beaches, ergo no-go."

"But Xing Xing's poem—" Howard started.

"Xing Xing's work is fixable, Howard," Salton steamed. "Is this? No. Can't take the beach out of the wave. Good call, Mira." Salton clapped. "Glad to see someone knows their natural disasters."

Mira turned to the Junior Editor next to her and murmured something, ending with a derisive laugh. I was sure it was about Howard, who'd slumped forward, his gray head sagging under the weight of humiliation. The editor next to him moved to the left in an attempt to add a few inches between him and failure.

"*Actually,*" I heard someone say from the back of the Aviary, "a rogue wave occurs in the middle of an ocean, not on a beach. It's a spontaneous event arising from a particular combination of high winds and strong currents, which together merge to form a monster wave. They can get really big—up to one hundred feet high—more than twice the height of this room."

Every head in the Aviary turned toward the back, their faces frozen in disbelief.

Oh my god. What was I doing? Had I just spoken?

I looked over at Salton, who looked back at me, his face a fury of incredulity. He leaned out across the table, placing his hands firmly on top like a sprinter before a race.

"Sorry," I said quickly, "I just wanted to correct the misimpression that this is a beach poem. I'd also like to add that rogue waves aren't confined to oceans. They can also occur on lakes. In fact, many believe it was a rogue wave that sunk the SS *Edmund Fitzgerald* in Lake Superior in 1975."

I don't know what had happened to me. It was like I'd lost my mind.

"That's really quite enough, Copy Boy," Dexter said angrily, rising from his chair. "You need to go *right* now."

But Salton held up his hand to stop Dexter's advance, standing with such

force, his chair nearly tipped over. “WRONG!” he shouted. “You—Copy Person Man—you don’t know anything about the *Fitzgerald*. The ship sank because of the gales of November. That’s what the song says.”

“You’re referring to the Gordon Lightfoot song,” I said, nodding. “‘The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald.’ And you’re right; Lightfoot does mention the ‘gales of November.’ But that’s not what happened. It was a rogue wave that took the *Fitzgerald* that day—that’s what scientists believe—a rogue wave that rose from the depths like a giant whale and swallowed the *Edmund Fitzgerald* whole.”

“No!’ Salton shot back.

“*Yes*,” I asserted. “There were other ships out there—that’s how we—”

“Of course, I know other ships were out there!” shouted Salton. “Everybody knows that; *it’s in the song*! Which is also why we know it *wasn’t* a rogue wave—because none of these other ships saw one. And don’t you dare try to bring scientists into this. I *hate* scientists. If Lightfoot says it was the gales of November, it was. I will not sit here and listen to you tell me Gordon Lightfoot is a liar. How dare you!”

I would have never picked Salton for a Gordon Lightfoot fan.

“You’re right; the conditions *were* bad that day,” I agreed, advancing toward the middle of the room, certain the combination of gin and coffee would cost me my job. “Every ship reported it. But, Salton, the SS *Arthur M. Anderson* was sailing *with* the *Fitzgerald*. And the fact that the *Anderson* —” I glanced down at Howard, who looked back at me, stunned.

“WRONG!” shouted Salton. “YOU’RE WRONG!”

“The *Fitzgerald* was only seventeen miles offshore,” I continued, not because it was a good idea, but because I knew this story: my father had told me all about it. “It wasn’t far from the *Anderson*. But the two freighters lost visual contact due to a storm. Both ships radioed shore for help, but their calls of distress weren’t taken seriously because onshore the weather was dead calm.”

I paused, letting the room imagine those people in the lakeside town receiving a message that made absolutely no sense. *A storm? What storm?*

“‘*We’re holding our own*,’ McSorley, the captain of the *Fitzgerald*, shouted to the *Anderson*’s captain over the radio. Except they weren’t.”

“Oh Jesus,” Dexter whined. “This is ridicul—”

“You have to understand how a rogue wave works,” I said, cutting him

off. “It gathers its strength from the wind, then grabs the watery floor and climbs straight up out of the depths to hurtle itself straight back down, its power released like thousands of shards of glass. The men on the *Fitzgerald* must have sensed something just before the wave took them—they must have felt a sucking sensation—a sharp pull down into a bottomless abyss. But one look up and they would have known. One look and they would have seen the terrible monster rising above them.”

I glanced at Lou’s face, its normally healthy pallor ashen.

“A rogue wave,” I continued in a grave voice, raising both hands into the air, “blots out the sky. There’s no sun, no moon, no clouds, no stars. It’s a total eclipse of dark gray water—a trillion-pound death sentence marked for immediate delivery.” Then I brought my hands down, hard and fast, smacking a Junior Editor’s desktop. A few people jumped.

“Twenty-nine men died,” Salton said quietly. “Their bodies were never recovered.”

“That’s right.”

“But wait just a second here,” Salton shot back. “Your story doesn’t add up. The *Anderson* survived and it was *right there*.”

“Some argue that point, Salton,” I acknowledged, “but that’s only because they’re not aware of the relatively small area in which a rogue wave operates. It can easily take one ship and leave the other untouched. No,” I said with certainty, “there’s only one explanation for why the *Fitzgerald* was there one second and gone the next. It was a rogue, all right. The captain of the *Fitzgerald* knew. Captain McSorley must have seen it rise just before he and his men became its victims. *Don’t let nobody up on deck!* someone screamed, a message that was heard on the radio by the puzzled men onshore, just seventeen miles away. *Don’t let nobody up on deck!* Then nothing. Only silence.”

The room was still. No one moved or spoke.

“Did you know,” Salton said, quietly, “that when that ship was first christened, it took three tries just to break the champagne bottle? Refused to break. Bad omen right there.”

“And when it was first launched,” I added, “it hit the pier.”

“It hit the pier,” he agreed. “I’d heard that.”

This was followed by more silence, including my own, thank god.

Salton picked up the rogue wave poem. I glanced at Howard. His coffee

was untouched.

“It’s in,” Salton said suddenly, waving the sheet of paper in his hand. “The rogue poem, the dead woman one, Tang’s spider thing, and Xing Xing’s mess. Dexter, you pay these last four poets—except don’t pay Xing Xing the full amount because she didn’t write the whole thing. That makes ten pages right there. We’re full. Done. Complete. Dexter, get these off to the typesetter immediately. I’ll check the galleys myself first thing tomorrow morning and we’ll put this baby to bed. As far as the rest of you are concerned, that’s a wrap. Issue 323 is final.”

Salton shifted a few sheets of paper around the table as if finished, but the thirty-nine editors sat without moving.

“What the hell?” he said, looking up. “Don’t you people have better things to do? Get out of here.” And then, as if taking his own advice, he stormed from the room, Howard’s rogue poem clutched in his right hand. From deep inside his chest, I heard the rumbles of Gordon Lightfoot, the sad notes drifting down the hallway and past the dead trees.

34.

As I was leaving the building that evening, Andy stopped me.

“I heard about what you did today,” he said. “Defended a poet; stood up for quality. Good for you.”

“Oh,” I said, surprised. “Well, thanks.” I guessed our previous conversation about his photos had made us a little less distant. More colleague-like. “So, you’ve read that poem—about the rogue wave?” I didn’t mention the gin that had inspired my defense.

“Yeah.” He shrugged. “I keep my finger on the pulse here, part of my job. I gotta be aware of when good stuff gets rejected because you never know how a poet might deal with it. Most will hang their heads and drink, but others might come in and shoot up the place.”

“*What?*”

“Poets are sensitive. Ticking time bombs, rejection-wise. Good thing we get submissions from all over the world; less chance of someone from Tuvalu traveling all the way to New York City to kill us all.”

“Wait. Are you actually saying—”

“Yeah. We’ve had some trouble.”

“Batter,” Howard said, coming up behind me. “A few of us were wondering if you might like to join us for a drink. There’s a bar just down the street.”

“Well, yes. Of course, thank you,” I said, surprised. As Howard turned to flag down an editor, I swiveled back to Andy. “Join us?”

“I wasn’t invited,” he said. “I’m never invited.”

“I invited you, Andy.”

He shook his head. “Not the same. You be careful. These people will break your heart. Trying to warn you, that’s all.”

Ten minutes later I was perched on the end of a booth with Tang, Gupta, Howard, Lou, and Hernandez, trying to figure out what made these editors so interesting. Each was passionate about poetry, each had an ear, each was prepared to argue a specific poem’s worth down to the last comma, each was independent-minded. In the end, I realized that like the poets they published, they, too were originals.

Even the server seemed a little in awe of them. Their regular drink orders appeared within minutes of their seating, all of which were downed as if the five of them had spent a week in the desert. They ordered another round—I was still on my first beer—and when those came, made a toast, celebrating what Howard called my “act of foolish, but welcome, rogue wave bravery.”

From there the discussion moved to another poem—one I’d already copied for my personal home collection. I was glad I had. It had been incinerated four days later.

“The only real problem I can find in the piece is in the third line,” Gupta was saying, “the strophic rhythm is off. It’s where the writer broke through the fourth wall,” he said, a comment that caused Lou to quote some other poem—eight lines from memory—to demonstrate how another poet had

approached the same problem in a different way, which led Tang to assert that Lou's example was interesting, but changing the first poem's architecture would weaken its frame and lead to a collapse in its nineteenth line, which led to Hernandez saying, third and nineteenth lines aside, the message was brilliant because the structure was intentionally flawed, (he called it a "Persian flaw"), which led everyone to stop short, as if realizing they'd been missing the poet's point all along. "Oh," Gupta said, slapping his forehead. "It is all clear now; I feel so stupid. We must publish this." And with that, Lou reached across the table, grabbed a small pile of straws, and, covering the ends, extended them in a closed fist. "Let's go," she said.

Tang drew the short one. "*Dammit*," she said. "Come on, you guys; I wrote four papers for Salton already this month. He hasn't read one of them."

As they argued, I sat there confused. Why were they devoting all this effort to a poem that had already been incinerated? Had they forgotten? So I cautiously reminded them that the work had already gone up in smoke—Salton had nixed it. The five of them looked startled, then depressed. As the others retreated into silence, Lou gathered the straws and threw them across the room.

It was not until the third round of drinks that I was able to cajole them into telling me what—or rather who—had brought them to Peck & Peck in the first place.

Gupta went first, saying he'd been teaching poetics at a university in Goa when a tall man with smudgy eyeglasses wandered in off the street and, seemingly captivated by the lecture, came every day thereafter, doing all the coursework and participating in the class discussions even though he wasn't enrolled in the class, or the school for that matter. "You really shouldn't be here," Gupta told the man. "It's not right." And the man, pointing at the nearly empty classroom said, "I could say the same about you."

Hernandez said he was in the process of being ousted from a Shakespeare in the Park production in L.A. for repeatedly shouting, "It's not *Mer-CURIO*, you idiots, it's Mer-CUTIO, and by the way, your chorus is absolutely massacring the sonnets," when, despite a few boos in Hernandez's direction, someone else stood up and said Hernandez was right, the entire troupe should be arrested for crimes against poetry and that

it was damn lucky Shakespeare was already dead because otherwise they'd be on the hook for his murder, too. As the two men were escorted out, Hernandez thanked the man, who said, "You have a gift for editorial combat. Ever heard of *Peck & Peck*?"

Tang said she was sitting in a hospital waiting area when a man approached her and asked if the book in her hands might be the *Kokin Wakashū*. She said yes, and then he asked if she wouldn't mind explaining some of it to him. No, she said, she was exhausted; her child was in surgery; she had no idea how she'd survive the next few hours. "I'm sorry," he said, "I'm only here because my wife works here. It's a sad place sometimes." Then he gently asked if she might explain just one small thing. Four hours later, as the surgeon came around the corner, she heard herself say, "But there's still some dispute as to whether these 1,111 poems represent the complete set." In reply, the man said, "My company is looking for a Japanese poetry expert. We offer excellent health insurance."

Lou said she was working in a bookstore in Enid, Oklahoma, when a customer asked her to recommend something she could give to someone who'd lost everything. The customer wanted something concrete—a self-help book, a guide, something written by a famous psychologist or a celebrity—someone who could show her friend how to pick up the pieces, start over, regain her center. Lou nodded. "I have just the thing," she said and, with a quick apology to another waiting customer, dashed to the back of the store, returning with a slim book containing a poem by Adrienne Rich. "It's called 'Diving into the Wreck,'" she said. And the woman, looking dubious, read the poem, then bought the book. Lou turned to the waiting customer and said, "Can I help you find something?" And he said, "You just did."

Howard Gadley was a twenty-five-year-old copywriter wedged up against the window in the very last row of coach on a packed flight from Cameroon to New York City. Depressed, he sent up a silent prayer that the man next to him be mute, a request that went unanswered when the man stuck his hand out and asked what had brought Howard to Cameroon. *Family,* Howard said, keeping his answer short and terse. What did he do in New York City. *Advertising*. For what kind of product? *Vacuum cleaners*. Did he live in the city? *Brooklyn.* And on and on until Howard had the good sense to reach down and retrieve a book that would silence the man once

and for all. It was Ovid. Howard had earned a master's in Classics from NYU, a stupid choice; there were no jobs for Classics and/or Ovid experts. "Ovid," the chatty man said. "Feel free to disagree, but I believe Ovid's way of mixing hexameter with myth makes his rhetoric still relevant in today's society. What do you think?" For the next three hours they discussed *Metamorphoses*, ending in agreement that a life devoid of passion was unbearable. "So," the man said. "Ever heard of *Peck & Peck*?"

"Wow," I said. "That was all Declonius Peck? He sounds incredible." I didn't mention I'd met him.

"*Sounded*," Hernandez said shortly. "*Sounded* incredible. Past tense."

The table went silent again.

"Can I ask something?" I said. "Why is Salton in charge? He doesn't seem to know anything about poetry. Most days he seems to actively hate it. And that new cover with the blurbs? It's so—"

"We don't talk about the cover," Hernandez said.

"As for the other, my money's on sibling rivalry," Lou added. "One twin's a legend; the other isn't. It's your basic Romulus-and-Remus-Apollo-and-Artemis-Cain-and-Abel situation."

"But Cain will retire," Tang said. "He's said as much. Maybe in five years or so."

"And then one of you might take over?"

"No," Lou said. "The company has to be run by a Peck—preferably twins. It's in the bylaws. Mira will take over."

"Mira? But she's only a Junior Editor."

"And Salton's daughter."

"*She's Salton's daughter?* But that's nepotism!"

They all looked at me as if I were insane. "The name of the company is Peck & Peck," Howard said, pointing out the obvious, "not Gupta & Gadley & Tang & Higgins & Hernandez & Peck."

"But her last name is Vito!"

"She's married," Lou said quietly, as if she, too, could not fathom how someone as awful as Mira had managed to succeed at the one thing she herself had not. "And to her credit, she wants to prove she can make Editor in Chief on her own merits. That's why she never calls Salton 'Dad.' She keeps it professional."

"*Professional*," Hernandez scoffed.

"*Merits*." Tang sighed.

"But she isn't a real poetry editor," I argued. "She doesn't have an ear."

No one disputed this. But my reminder of her future role as their boss made everyone even more despondent and they gathered their things in preparation to leave.

"Something has to be done," I said, still high from the difference I'd made in the meeting. "We can't just accept a bylaw!"

But the only response I got was a sympathetic pat on the back, letting me know my youthful naïveté was starting to annoy everyone.

35.

After the impromptu bar gathering, things got better for me at Peck & Peck. Nearly all the other editors acknowledged my presence, and a few said "thanks" when I dropped their copies on their desks. But when Howard asked me to lunch, I felt like I'd turned a real corner.

We left one day around one p.m., and even though the restaurant was already packed, they instantly made room for Howard, seating us at a small table set with a fresh white tablecloth and a small vase filled with tiny roses. We stayed for two hours, ordered steak in the middle of the day, discussed quatrains and free verse, talked ideas. Howard bolstered my ego by asking me how I knew so much about poetry for someone so young. I told him the truth: that I didn't seem to be interested in anything else.

"It's just the opposite, Batter," he said. "When you're interested in poetry, you're interested in everything."

When the check came, I pulled out my wallet, but Howard let me know he'd be expensing it.

"I read that Lightfoot song, by the way," he said. "Didn't realize it was a ballad. I thought this Lightfoot fellow did a good job. Although he changed some facts to make the piece work."

“Right. The ship was bound for Detroit, not Cleveland.”

“Exactly. Now as editors you and I can—”

I felt a bolt go through me. He’d called me an editor.

“—see why he needed to substitute Cleveland for Detroit. But I imagine he was taken to task by the state of Michigan for that one. Still, his decision upheld the need for rhythmic stability. I once tried to explain this very thing to my daughter, but she wasn’t interested. Told me that by explaining how the song worked, I ruined the whole thing.”

“I didn’t know you had a daughter.”

“A free spirit,” he said, studying the tablecloth. “We were very close when she was growing up, but you know how it is; one day there’s an argument and the wrong words get flung and your child goes away.” He picked up his napkin and pretended to cough. His eyes looked watery. “She doesn’t have phone service; lives out in the middle of nowhere in a tepee with a man called Moonstar. I rarely hear from her. But I’m sure it’s not intentional. Very hard to phone from there. A long trip into town.”

I hadn’t called home in three weeks, and I lived *in* town.

“I’m sure she misses you,” I said, but I wasn’t sure at all. I decided I didn’t like Howard’s daughter. How busy could she be, living in a tepee? What was she doing with all her time anyway? Tanning hides? She should call home. Her father was the nicest guy.

Howard busied himself with the credit card receipt.

“Excuse me,” a voice near my elbow said. “Howard Gadley?”

A youngish man stood before us, maybe Puerto Rican, his head closely shaved, his veins standing out like raised tributaries on his arms. He was holding a sheet of paper.

“How can I help?” Howard said in a comforting way, already appearing to know what he wanted.

“My name is Eduardo Jones. I’m a”—he thrust the paper in Howard’s general direction—“a poet. And I was just wondering if you might—if you would have time to—”

Howard did not accept the man’s offering. “Eduardo,” he said in the kindest way. “I’d love to, honestly, I would. But we have rules at Peck & Peck, and one of them is no on-the-street solicitations. Do me a favor; stick it in an envelope; pop a stamp on it; send it in. I’ll tell one of the Junior Editors to be on the lookout. They’ll bring it to me once it’s gone through

the Peck & Peck rigamarole. I can't promise you I'll like what I read, but I can promise you this: I *will* read it."

"I've sent my work in before, Mr. Gadley," Eduardo Jones said. "Already got the postcard with the big **NO** on the front. I just wanted to ask —"

Howard sighed. "Let me apologize for *Peck & Peck*'s rejection notices. They were designed by the second set of Peck brothers—a reaction to a particularly dark period following the stock market crash of 'twenty-nine. According to the logs, Peck & Peck received an ungodly number of poems dedicated to the potato. The editors snapped and the notices were born. I know the rejections aren't very kind, but even I have to admit there are some days I want to open my office window and shout *Jesus Christ, put the pen down, people!*"

My jaw dropped.

"I'm not a hack," Eduardo said quietly.

"I'm sure you're not."

"And I know all about you, Mr. Gadley. I have the greatest respect. The poets you've discovered—"

"Thank you," Howard said, cutting him off. "Sincerely. But please—send it in. Make sure your name is crystal clear in that return address area. I'll notify the Junior Editors to keep a lookout. I will read your piece, and I will get back to you personally either way."

"Thank you," Eduardo said, relieved. Then he turned to me and stuck out his hand. "Eduardo Jones."

"Batter Gray," I replied, sticking out mine, embarrassed by the small red paper cuts that lined the sides of my fingers. Did he notice?

"Batter's our copy editor," Howard said. "Very talented."

Copy editor.

"Copy editor," Eduardo said, making a mental note. And then he tilted his head to the side slightly. "Wait. Batter Gray?"

"Yes," I said, worried, knowing he was about to remember me as the cashier who refused his jeans return at the Gap.

"So you're a poet, too?"

Howard looked at me in surprise. None of the *Peck & Peck* editors wrote; it was a point of pride for some reason.

"I— Uh."

“I think I just read your piece. There can’t be two people named Batter Gray, right? Not poets, I mean.”

I stared at him blankly.

“The bus, man. That was you, right?”

The Poetry in Buses Contest people had finally made good on their threat. My stupid poem was up and careening around the city on lines M2, M7, and M11.

It had taken me six rides to finally locate it, but when I did, I experienced the overwhelming emotion many writers feel when they first stumble upon their work in print. Revulsion.

My poem was awful. The punctuation, the word choice, the sad attempt at alliteration—everything was so obvious, so amateur. And there it was, with my name no less, wedged between a poem about ducks written by a nine-year old girl named Portia, and another poem about death written by—I think—the Grim Reaper.

Portia’s was better than mine. A lot better.

I sat directly across from the damn thing, riding around the city, watching as people got on and got off, having a minor heart attack every time someone started to read my poem. I couldn’t decide which was worse: watching people quit reading or watching them read the whole way through, followed by a bored shake of the head. I’ve told you that I “know” poetry, but apparently a lot of other people do, too. The only bright spot was when three huge, scary-looking teens got on and took it upon themselves to improve my poem with a large drawing of a penis and a slew of swear words. Eternally grateful, I handed over the cash in my wallet before they’d even had a chance to demand it.

By the way: in case you’re thinking most riders would simply ignore the poems, they couldn’t. This was because the bus people had decided to set the poems in a type size usually reserved for flash flood warnings. Our names were displayed directly beneath our “work” in the most monstrous bold Futura italic. No wonder Eduardo Jones remembered my name—it was the size of a cattle car. And the kerning. On that basis alone, my mother probably would have called the police.

Speaking of my mother, after that lunch with Howard, I phoned home. I apologized for not calling before (*We understand, Son,* my father said. *Your mother and I know you're busy.*) But I could tell my mother didn't understand. She'd left five messages in three weeks, and the only thing I'd done was to leave two short messages on their phone machine when I knew they'd both be at work, saying I would call back again "soon." Which I never did.

With this call, though, I played up my successful trajectory: my dining with important editors, my sought-after opinion, my part in the last edition of *Peck & Peck*, which, according to Salton, had sold more copies than any other issue. I also mentioned that a copy of *Peck & Peck* would soon be featured in a major motion picture starring Xing Xing Yao, and that I'd been in the meeting when all of this was worked out with Xing Xing herself (*Who's Xing Xing?* my mother whispered in the background to my father. *Is he seeing someone?*).

I saved the best for last. "Oh, and plus, my work is being featured in a citywide campaign to bring poetry to the people"—I'd made that phrase up on the spot—"poetry to the people"—"it's being publicly displayed on buses all over Manhattan and the other boroughs. To encourage people to read more poetry."

"Oh, Batter!" my mother breathed on the extension. "What wonderful news. We're happy for you. I'd love to see it. Maybe we should visit. What do you think, John? You and I go to New York City. His work is on a bus."

"Well," my father started. "Of course I'd love to—what you've done sounds— But I'm not sure how we could afford the trip right now. You know that, Rainey," he said gently. "You know we're a little behind the eight ball."

The phone filled with silence.

"Maybe you could send us the poem, though," he said. "Put it in a letter."

"Sure thing, Dad," I said, relieved.

.....

The truth was, I did not want my parents to visit. They couldn't afford the airfare, and I couldn't afford having to watch them read my awful work on

a bus, their faces frozen in an attempt to find something to like about it, my mother silently shaking her head at the point size while my dad was being robbed at gunpoint.

"Anyway, that's why I haven't called," I lied. "Because I've been so busy with the bus campaign and the Xing Xing Yao deal, among other things. But I promise I will be better. From here on out you'll hear from me at least once a week."

"You call when you can, bud," my father said. "We know how it gets."

Which is what Howard said about his daughter. I felt a little worse.

My mother cleared her throat. "One question, Batter. I feel so foolish not having asked this before. But what is your job title exactly?"

"I work in the—uh—the copy—" I started hesitantly. "I'm the Copy . . . Editor," I limped, borrowing Howard's lie.

"Copy Editor!" my mother breathed. "Well, *that* certainly sounds important. How many copy editors does *Peck & Peck* employ?"

"I'm it."

"Really!" my mother said.

"So proud!" my father chimed in.

"Don't be!" I wanted to say but didn't. But how could I? My pretend success made them so happy.

"I have to run now," I said. "But I'll call again soon."

After I'd hung up, I thought about Howard's daughter and how between the two of us, I was still the better one. At least I wasn't off in some tepee smoking dope and wearing gauzy clothing and having unprotected sex with people named Moonstar. In fact, I wasn't having sex at all.

36.

After lunch, Howard went straight down to the Junior Editors and, as promised, asked each of them—including Mira—to keep an eye out for

anything from an Eduardo Jones.

Mira immediately questioned Howard's interest: *Why? Who says? What's this about?* She reminded Howard that the Junior Editors were under enormous stress and asking them to do one more thing proved he had no idea *what* they did. Then she pointed to a mountain of that day's submissions. "This is because of the last edition," she said pointedly, "the one featuring Xing Xing's Yao's poem." As if Howard was personally responsible for allowing its inclusion, a rash decision that had resulted in thousands of Xing Xing Yao fans realizing that if Xing Xing was a poet, they probably were, too.

"We're up to our ears in rejection notices," she said. "Several of us are suffering from repetitive stress injuries from hand-addressing all those damn NOs. Look at this," she said, pointing at her splinted wrist. "I should be getting combat pay."

But as weeks went by and still nothing materialized from Eduardo Jones, she shifted the blame from the Junior Editors to me.

"By the way, Hassan, one of the Juniors, did find that submission," she told Howard while pretending not to notice I was within earshot. "And per protocol, he sent it to the copy room marked for Associate Editor distribution. If you didn't get it, blame the copy guy; everyone knows he's stoned half the time. Not surprising given his wardrobe of Grateful Dead T-shirts. I can't understand why we keep him on."

Some of the editors warmed to these negative stories about me, "the copy guy," because that's how people are: always ready to believe the worst. I know because I'm one of them. But it wasn't until Lou Higgins called me into her office that I realized how much damage Mira had done.

"Batter," she said, "I had to present today in the Aviary and the work you copied for me was all wrong. Not only did you insert the wrong poem, but my analysis was completely out of order."

"That's not possible."

"Well, it was," she said. "And this isn't the first time. I'm concerned. There's been some talk. Are you getting high at work?"

"Of course not, Lou!" I said emphatically. "On my salary?" Which perhaps wasn't the smartest thing to say—like I *would* if I ever got a raise. "But," I confessed, "I am having a few issues with Mira." I thought the Sam Slater exchange I'd heard between Lou and Mira some months ago, plus her

reveal about how Mira would one day be everyone's hateful boss, might elicit some sympathy.

"Mira?" She frowned. "In what way?"

"I think she's sabotaging me. Fooling with the contents of other editors' pneumatic tubes before they reach me. What you just described. Inserting the wrong poems. Taking pages out. Turning pages upside down—that sort of thing."

"Batter," she said in a voice laden with dismay. "That's a very serious accusation."

Oh, Jesus. So, Lou was one of the few people on earth who *didn't* perk up at unsubstantiated rumors about awful people. And wasn't that just my luck. She was disappointed in *me*? Well, I was disappointed in *her.* Besides, what I told her wasn't unsubstantiated. I just didn't have the evidence to back it up.

Even Tang gave me a warning. "Strive to do better work," she said. "You really don't want to get on Mira's bad side." This was just after I'd pointed out how cleverly a different poem by Pax Withers had incorporated the spider's tetrapod gait: when two pairs of legs go up, another pair comes down, resulting in a skittery 4-2-3-1, 2-3-1-4, 3-1-4-2, 1-4-2-3 cadence that not only sounded like a spider but looked like one. I turned the page sideways.

"Look," I said, pointing out how the positions of the letters resembled a spider zipping across the page.

"Concrete poetry," she said, amazed. "I can't believe I missed that." Yet another thing I liked about Tang. She was always willing to concede she didn't know it all even though her impressive credentials (two master's degrees, one Ph.D., plus a teaching stint at Brown) seemed to indicate she did. But when it came to Mira, even Tang deferred.

"She's one of those people who still tries to work her SAT scores into every conversation," she said. She was right. Even *I* knew Mira's SAT scores. "But that's just because she's young. She hasn't had to deal with adult problems yet—mortgages, kids, life."

"She doesn't have a mortgage," I said. "And they don't want kids. Also, she married rich."

"My god, Batter," she said, her face filled with concern. "How on earth would you know all *that*?"

How wouldn’t I know? Mira had sent her tax forms down for copying. I have no idea why this was, but everyone seemed to think a cover sheet kept the papers behind it invisible.

“I’m just saying Mira is not stupid,” she said in a short voice. “She *will* be Editor in Chief. It’s up to you to figure out how to fit in.” Then she held up a copy job I’d completed for her just that morning. “This was totally messed up, by the way.”

After that chat, I returned to the copy room completely demoralized. Instead of starting in on work, I picked up a poem I’d set aside earlier, reread it, and then, maybe because I just didn’t care about anything anymore, I, once again, broke the rule. I made a copy to take home. It’s not like we were dealing in state secrets. Who cared? The answer came a second later.

“What the *hell* do you think you’re doing?” a voice accused from the corner.

37.

“You *realize* you’re not allowed to take work out of this building,” Declonius said, rising out of the shadows to snatch the poem from my hand. “It’s posted on every floor; it’s a rule we’ve had in place forever. It’s tantamount to stealing, Batter. Whatever you do, *don’t* do that.”

“I—I wasn’t!”

He pointed at my messenger bag. “Are there any others in there?”

“No.”

“Don’t lie. This is serious.”

“I’m not lying!” Which was, in fact, a lie.

“Look,” he said. “I realize poetry doesn’t seem to require the same level of protection as the formula for nuclear fission, but just like bank tellers don’t fill their pockets with cash at the end of the day and pharmacists don’t

take the laudanum home, we leave work in the office. It is not ours. It belongs to the writer. And one of the most important duties of a publisher is to protect their work. We do not steal, nor do we put ourselves in a position to be stolen from."

"I'm not a thief," I said irritably, covering my bike bag with my coat. "And why would I take poetry home anyway? I'm busy. I have a very active social life."

He raised his eyebrows in obvious disbelief.

"Anyway, you're the one who's not allowed to be here," I said sharply. "I *know* about your restraining order."

"Oh that," he said, waving his hand as if it was just a minor blip on his bottomless rap sheet.

"If you don't leave, I'll call security."

He didn't even look up. "Security?" he said. "So they put in a phone down here?"

"I didn't mean 'call' as on the telephone," I said, embarrassed. He was right; I didn't have a phone—still the only person in the entire building without one. "I mean I'll go get the security guard myself. He's a tough guy, too. You don't want to mess with him."

Now Declonius looked up, puzzled. "Batter, if you tell Andy I'm down here, that could hurt him. His job is to keep me out—part of his job, anyway. And what if he did come down here? He'd have to leave the lobby unprotected. That place would fill up with poets in five minutes. And for what purpose? I would have left by then. I certainly wouldn't stick around and get Andy in trouble. He's a good man."

This infuriated me. He wouldn't want to get Andy in trouble—but me? No problem.

"Look," Declonius implored. "I just want to talk. I'm taking a huge risk by coming to see you, but the risk is mine, not yours, and I'm only doing it because it's necessary. I know a bit about you, Batter—for instance, I know you have an ear for poetry. An extraordinary ear."

Declonius had correctly gauged my weakness for compliments.

"I'm sure you've heard a lot of things about me," he continued. "But I would ask that you consider the source."

Hadn't I just wished the same thing for myself?

"Right, well, my source is the New York Public Library," I said.

He threw up his hands as if questioning my common sense. “The public record doesn’t tell the whole story. You need some history**;** you need to understand how what happened didn’t *really* happen.”

“If you’re referring to how you drained the company of money, that actually *did* happen. You went to jail. I’m sorry to put it like that, but those are the facts.”

“You’ve been accused of wrongdoing, Batter,” he said wearily. “Are you guilty?”

I thought about Mira’s assertions. *He’s stoned half the time. Not surprising given his wardrobe of Grateful Dead T-shirts.*

For the record, I only have *one* Grateful Dead T-shirt.

“Being convicted doesn’t mean anything,” he continued. “Prison is full of innocent people.” He went to the window. “If you won’t talk to me here, then come to my loft. I’d left you the address before, but here it is again.” He made a quick note and handed it to me. “We can talk there. Openly. Legally.”

“No. I don’t want to get involved in any of this. I don’t even know what ‘it’ is.”

“Of course you do. This place is being run by my brother, and eventually it will be run by my niece, and that spells mediocrity, not just for *Peck & Peck* but for poetry itself. The editors are giving in. That Xing Xing poem in the last edition is a sign of things to come.”

“You’re being dramatic.”

“*I’m* being dramatic?” He picked up an analysis written by one of the Associate Editors. “This piece mentions Barstow,” he read out loud. “Therefore, it is unacceptable. Now *that’s* dramatic.”

“I understand the new submissions rules are different from when you were here,” I said carefully, “and I agree the rules seem—idiosyncratic.”

“Idiosyncratic? They’re outrageous.”

“Maybe. But *Peck & Peck* is in the black again. I’m sure it’s hard for you to accept your brother’s success—”

“My brother’s *success*?” Declonius roared. “He knows *nothing* about poetry.” He rubbed the back of his neck, then hesitated. “Want a drink? I could use one.” He opened his satchel and extracted the same slim thermos and two glasses he’d brought the last time. “I realize I’ve bucked up against the grand Peck tradition,” he said, filling both. “It’s my genetic destiny to

run the quarterly with my brother, just as my father did, and his father did. But there is no genetic marker for meter or metaphor. Poetry, like anything else, requires practice and commitment. That should be obvious to anyone even remotely conversant with biology." He lifted his glass and, with a nod, invited me to do the same.

I took a sip, then three more.

"Salton never took to poetry," Declonius continued. "He never liked it, maybe for good reason. My father was rough on him. I can't remember a single time when they weren't in violent disagreement about something. So why would Salton attempt to excel at something our father adored? Why would anyone?"

"Why was your dad so rough on him?"

"I don't know. Salton has always been Salton—obnoxious. But he was also the better student and businessman. I once overheard him say that poetry made him feel stupid. No surprise: poetry makes *a lot* of people feel stupid, but stupid isn't a feeling Salton can accept. If he can't quantitively measure something's value, then it's worthless. Unfortunately for him, the arts reject that type of assessment; instead, they demand we ask *who* we are; *why* we are; *what* we are. People like Salton see no reason to ask those questions. Ever notice how colleges offer classes called Physics for Poets but never offer Poetry for Physicists? An ongoing prejudice that reinforces the idea that the arts are frivolous. That's how Salton sees poetry. Foolish. Expendable." He drained his drink. "By the way, I've long wanted to ask you: how did you develop your ear? Were your parents big poetry readers?"

"No. They discouraged it."

"Ah—discouragement. The *other* form of encouragement. Tell someone they can't do something, and they'll do anything to prove you wrong."

"They may have succeeded. I'm not a poet."

He looked at me in surprise. "No," he said, "of course not; I'm not a poet either. Your job isn't to make the wine, Batter, your job is to taste it and tell us if it's any good—study the tannins, examine the residue, reject the bitter, block the artificial. That's why Peck & Peck is built on exceptional editors—and not just one or two, but thirty-nine. Poetry isn't a commodity, it's a community. It's the entire world brought together by a common spine ready for cracking. It's the egg, Batter. Don't you see? Poetry editors are curators.

Educators. Custodians. They're rare. Practically an endangered species. That's why I'm here. Because you're one of us. And I need your help."

I was one of them.

"What kind of help?"

"The revolutionary kind," he said with force.

My body flushed with heat.

"We need to rally the troops," he said. "Remind the editors why they're here—what their responsibility is, not just to *Peck & Peck*, but to humanity. With just two words we can tell them what to do."

"What two words?"

"*Come. Home.* It's the poem that fronts every edition of *Peck & Peck*. *Come. Home.* They'll know it."

"Well, yes," I said hesitantly, "because it's in every quarterly."

"Yes, but they've stopped seeing it. Stopped taking the message to heart."

"The message being—"

"Be true to yourself!" Declonius said impatiently. "Home, Batter. It's another word for the heart, the soul, one's reason to live. The two words insist the editors stop giving in; they demand the editors fight back. *Come. Home.* The poem's been discussed a thousand times at Peck & Peck. During the Vietnam war, it was our battle cry. By publishing the incendiary words of Robert Bly, Denise Levertov, W. S. Merwin, and Adrienne Rich, we ignited a revolution; by amplifying the voices of Galway Kinnell, Yusef Komunyakka, Phạm Tiến Duật, and Thích Nhất Hạnh we defied a corrupt administration; by printing the words of James Dickey, W. D. Ehrhart, and Bruce Weigl, we fueled the resistance; by spreading the poems of Xuan Quynh, Allen Ginsberg, and Kevin Bowen, we educated a populace. Believe me when I say these editors know *exactly* what 'Come. Home.' means. *Read it, Batter!*"

I was stunned. Some of the poets he'd mentioned were the ones I'd read that day sitting next to Mrs. Martin in my elementary school library. Declonius had educated *me*. Within seconds, I was galvanized. I would join his army. I would help the editors fight back.

He rose and handed me slip of paper with an address. "We need to plan. Anytime, day or night." Then he was gone.

38.

I'm not sure how familiar you are with the crime statistics of New York City in the early 1980s, but it's with some pride that I report city residents were doing their best to break all the records. In 1981, the Big Apple announced its most crime-ridden year to date; a record 637,451 reported felonies. 1982 was trying hard to beat that.

In future years, people would talk about this era in almost affectionate terms, as if the garbage and grime and nonstop muggings supplied the city with an are-you-tough-enough mentality that took a certain amount of personal grit to survive. Like many others, I found the challenge irresistible. I'd grown up not in poverty but in boredom: the relentlessly sunny Yuba City, the ever-picturesque New England. People like me craved the edge because, frankly, we didn't know any better—because up till then, whether or not we were willing to admit it, we'd been lucky enough to avoid it.

In other words, there were at least 637,45*2* felonies in 1982. But like so many others, I never reported mine.

After Declonius's speech, I felt emboldened. I strode down Canal Street en route to the N train, joining my fellow citizens as we pushed through the turnstiles like cattle trying to reach the dry hay. I reached back, securing my bike messenger bag against the small of my back as the filth rose around me like a dirty comforter. New York was the most vibrant, unpredictable, unexpected place I'd ever lived. And it was so dirty.

As if to underscore those traits, just after I'd cleared the turnstiles, something strange happened. A mean, sharp thud hammered my right side. A quick glance down revealed a small gun leveled at my ribs. I couldn't believe it. A gun. The gun insisted that I keep making my way through the packed crowd. Instinctively, I turned toward the gun owner, only to be stopped by a much fiercer I-mean-business jab. I didn't see its owner, I could only feel him—him and his jab, which guided me weak-kneed

through the dense crowd, my heart racing, my brain unable to fully process what was happening. He nudged and nudged and nudged me until we reached the end of the platform where, still from behind, he moved his weapon directly to my lower spine. I heard him grunt softly to an accomplice, who quickly lifted my wallet from my back pocket while yet another grabbed my wrist and yanked it behind my back, appraising, then rejecting my Swatch watch with an audible scoff, the entire miserable experience orchestrated out of my sight line but in full view of my fellow New Yorkers, all of whom I was sure were only pretending to read the newspaper. Could you blame them? These muggers were obviously pros, huge hulking monsters who'd stop at nothing.

When the subway screamed onto the platform, a sea of people rushed toward the doors as my attackers finished the job, seizing my messenger bag with one clean jerk before shoving me, face first, onto the platform. I never even saw their faces.

The train pulled out. I lay, sick, trembling, hands at the back of my neck, legs splayed out in the survive-a-bear-attack position. I was positive things could not get worse than this. I was wrong.

"Hey. You all right, buddy?" someone asked about thirty seconds later. A foot tapped me.

"I—I—was mugged."

"You sure were," he agreed in a friendly sort of way.

"Hh—hh—how—how many were there?"

A few others joined the group.

"I'd guess ten, maybe eleven," the first guy said to someone else as he extended a hand to help me get up.

"Ten or *elev*en?" I was lucky to be alive.

"Maybe twelve," that person said.

Twelve!!

"No, no more than ten. Which makes it even worse."

"Sad," a woman said, shaking her head. "What's the world coming to?"

"Ten. That kills me," said another. "Mine can't even load the dishwasher."

"Mugged by fourth graders," the first guy said as he pulled me to my feet. "*Ouch.*"

39.

I got home an hour later with the only things I had left: the rejected Swatch watch and the key to my apartment, the latter of which I'd gotten in the habit of stuffing in the little Velcro pouch on the side of one of my ridiculous running shoes. So, hurrah, one point for me.

As I unlocked the door, the fear I'd been holding back spilled in a fast-moving stream of tears that made me gasp in shame. Mugged by children. Worse, I'd lost my wallet, which meant I'd lost my driver's license, which meant I'd be spending some quality time at the worst place on earth: the DMV.

I threw myself on the sofa. Tears came like a flash flood. Declonius's rousing speech evaporated into thin air.

I'm no stranger to depression. Is anyone? But at that moment it felt like depression had taken careful inventory of my life and, finding it free of accomplishment, purpose, love, meaning, and common sense, had announced its intention to stay. Even worse, it was my birthday. Hello, twenty-five. In that moment, the only person I wanted to see was the one I knew would never show up. Because he'd been dead as long as I'd been alive. Happy birthday, Brother.

Across the room, the phone machine blinked, but my body had entered some sort of state of paralysis, and I couldn't move. Hours went by. The blinks continued. At some point, someone shoved mail under my door, which included a reminder that my rent was overdue. STUDIO: LAST NOTICE it read in gigantic seventy-two-point Frutiger.

Studio. Please. A word that should be reserved for romantic garrets where beautiful things are created by talented artists in the middle of the night. This place was not that. Instead, my building had been designed by a cheap architect, built by a criminal contractor, and rented out by a real estate shark—three coconspirators in the make-a-quick-buck business world that I'd probably join myself if I could find a way.

I cast an eye at the ceiling. Why hadn't I gone into finance? Or medicine? Or computers? Although, computers. Come on. I only knew one

guy who actually had—a guy from my freshman hall who'd moved to Seattle in 1979, right after college, all excited because he'd gotten a boring job coding at a company called Microsoft. At least I hadn't done *that.*

I wanted to call Paul. He'd make the being-robbed-by-fourth-graders thing seem like an unavoidable part of the social fabric—relate it to Marx or Hume or the GNP—explaining the social injustices that had led to it all like it was the most natural outcome in the world, could have happened to anyone. But I was too embarrassed to do it.

I picked up a baseball and threw it hard, hoping the force would somehow rid me of at least a gram of my self-loathing, but instead the ball hit the answering machine's play button like a dart hitting a bull's-eye, and within seconds my mother's voice filled the room.

Batter, it's Mom. (Silence.) Just calling to say happy birthday. (Silence.) Sending you a hug. (Silence.) I hope you have a great day. (Shaky voice.) I love you. This day always makes me very— (Silence). Well. Call, okay? I'll be here. BEEP.

Hey, Batter, Paul. Happy fucking birthday. What's happening, brother? I need to talk to you about something. It's personal. It's important. Call me. BEEP.

Hello, Batter. (Pause. Small cough.) It meant a lot to me to talk with you today. I hope to see you soon. But first let me apologize for the subway incident. I hope the kids weren't too rough on you. (Pause. Exhale.) I just didn't see another way to stop you. You cannot—I repeat—you cannot take work out of the building. (Pause. Clears throat.) I have your bag and its contents. Please come get them. We'll talk about the future. You have my address.

Declonius Peck.

I didn't return his call. I didn't return any of them.

40.

Early the next morning I forced myself back on the subway, returning to Peck & Peck for one purpose only. To quit. Declonius had inspired me, then robbed me. The editors had embraced me, then believed the worst of me. Salton only ever scared me. I would never become an editor. Despite Declonius's assertion that the arts didn't measure quantitatively, I *had* been measured—and rejected. Andy was right; rejection could make a person crack.

I wrote my resignation letter, stuck it in my pocket, then took the elevator to the fifth floor. My plan was to visit the Aviary one last time. But as I put my hand on the knob, a voice boomed out from one floor below.

"Goddammit, Batter. You hold it *right there*, buddy."

Andy came huffing up the stairs, his belt heavy with keys. "Do not MOVE," he panted, reaching my elbow in a sweat. "You are in *big* trouble, Batter," he said, grabbing my arm. "*As I think you know, by the way*. What were you thinking? To let HIM in? Do you have any idea how much trouble we're in?" He looked scared.

"Andy, let go of me. I don't have time for this, I'm—"

"Does Salton know? If Salton knows, we're both dead."

"It's not my *fault*," I said, my anger rising. "I told him to leave. He came into the copy room, and I told him he couldn't be there. Then he left."

"*He was in your copy room?*" Andy said, astonished. "He told me he's been hiding in the lobby the whole time. This is worse than I thought. And he's refusing to leave unless he speaks with you or Gadley, and Gadley's out of town!"

"Wait. Are you saying he's here *again*? Like, right now?"

"JESUS FUCKING CHRIST, BATTER," Andy whispered so angrily bits of spit flew from his mouth. "Did you just use the word 'AGAIN'? You mean he's slipped in here *before*? I'm going to fucking kill you!" He gripped my arm and steered me to the elevator, refusing to allow me to say anything until the doors opened and we were in the lobby. Then he dragged me over to one of the alcoves.

"All right," he said to the figure standing at the window. "Two minutes; after that I call the police."

A man, tall and thin, his close-cropped hair revealing the irregularities of his skull, turned to face me.

“Eduardo Jones!” I was so relieved, I had to stop myself from hugging him.

“Batter,” he said stiffly.

Andy looked at me in surprise. “You’re *glad* to see him? He’s a poet.”

“Howard’s been expecting his work; it must have gotten lost. We’ve had no way to contact him. Howard will be happy.”

Now it was Eduardo’s turn to look surprised.

“I could give a rat’s ass about Mr. Gadley’s happiness,” Andy said, his neck turning red. “You and Gadley may know Mr. Jones, but I don’t. I don’t let *anyone* in for more than a few minutes. That’s my rule—and in the bomb shelter no less. You and Gadley encouraging him—”

“They didn’t encourage me,” Eduardo shot back. “And I wasn’t in any bomb shelter. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Are you calling me a liar?” Andy said. “Batter just *told* me you were there.”

“I’ll take him outside,” I said to Andy, shepherding Eduardo out the door. But to Eduardo I said, “Poets aren’t usually allowed inside. Sorry. I have to know, though: did you send something or not?”

“*Of course I did*.”

“I suspected as much. Its disappearance is being blamed on me. I’m sure it’s been incinerated by now.”

He paled. “*What?*”

“Don’t take it personally. We burn everything.”

“I don’t understand. What copy room? What bomb shelter? What do you mean you burn everything?”

I spread my arms wide and exhaled loudly, exhausted by the amount of drama I’d suffered in the last twenty-four hours. “Listen, Eduardo, when Howard told you I was the copy editor, he was just being kind. I run the copy room at Peck & Peck. That’s all I do. I make copies. Anything not accepted for publication gets burned by parolees in the mailroom.”

He looked back at me, his eyes wide with fear.

“I have neither the time nor the patience to explain any of it, and even if I did, you wouldn’t believe me. That’s why I’m quitting. Soon. But before I do, let me try to fix this. Give me a copy of your work and I’ll make sure Howard sees it.”

“Quitting?”

“Yes. And as long as I’m in a confessional mode, you should know I’m also not a poet. Did you read the duck poem—the one next to mine on the bus? It was a lot better.”

He didn’t disagree.

“Give me something. We’re out of time.”

“I don’t have anything on me.”

“Send it to me.”

He rolled his eyes.

“I need *something*, Eduardo. If your piece got into *Peck & Peck*—not promising, but if it did—that might send a message to whoever engineered the disappearance of your work.”

“I’m not interested in being part of your company drama. I want my work published on its own merit—that’s all.”

“You’re really going to be *that* picky?” I said, exasperated.

“I’m reading tonight. A lot of people will be there, so even if you hate my stuff, you might hear something you like. Bring Gadley. He’ll hear new voices.”

“Howard’s out of town,” I said. “But I’ll come.” It was the last thing I wanted to do.

He scribbled an address on a slip of paper. “Starts at ten.”

“Thanks,” I said, accepting the address. “For the second chance.”

“You really are an amateur,” he said. “I’m supposed to be thanking you for the second chance.”

“It’s Peck & Peck,” I said. “Chances here are never good.”

41.

At 9:59 p.m., I found myself standing outside a dive bar, drunks at my feet, studying the address Eduardo Jones had provided. This couldn’t be right. The place was called Party Town.

“Coming in?” someone called as she held the door open to help two patrons fall out.

“Ah—no. I’m sorry. I was looking for a coffeehouse—or maybe a bookstore.” I rechecked the slip of paper, then the number above the door.

“You’re not here for the poetry thing, then?” she asked.

I looked up, surprised.

“Follow me,” she said.

We wove through the labyrinth of the packed tavern. “WE’RE LOW ON TABLES,” she shouted. The noise was at airport runway level.

“I’LL JUST SIT AT THE BAR, THEN,” I shouted back. But every barstool was occupied.

“HAFTA SHARE A TABLE. ONLY CHOICE.”

“SOUNDS FINE,” I yelled back, not meaning it.

What kind of poetry reading was this, anyway? I hated it already. I followed the hostess deep into the recesses of the tavern, my fingers stuck in my ears. The place was huge. Up front was a makeshift stage with a microphone, a stool, and a small spotlight. A guitar lay on the floor. Oh great. Some people were going to *sing* their poems.

“CAN HE SIT HERE?” the hostess yelled at a young woman sorting through some sheets of paper. She pointed at an empty chair. As if on cue, the music stopped.

“Sure,” the young woman said, not looking up.

“You performing tonight?” the hostess asked her.

“Yeah,” she said. “I should probably head back there.” Then she looked up at me. “Save my place?” she asked.

Okay, look, I know this is going to sound like a major exaggeration, especially coming from someone who hasn’t ever been in love—true love, I mean—but she was *perfect.* Honestly. Exactly my type—as if I’d submitted my specs to the perfect woman manufacturing plant and my order had just come in.

“Was that a yes?” the perfect woman asked.

I didn’t respond. I’d stopped breathing.

She turned her attention back to her sheets of paper, giving me time to

stare. Long, thin arms. Yellowish hair pulled back into a hasty ponytail. Small scar above right eyebrow. Pierced ears. Gray eyes. Maybe blush on the cheeks but could have been natural; it was hot in there. Jeans with hole beginning to form in one knee. Running shoes—same Velcro pocket I had. Oh god. Was she a runner?

She glanced up at me again. I attempted a smile, but it came out like a gape. I still hadn't said anything.

"I'm reading tonight," she said.

I attempted a nod.

"Real nervous," she added. "Never done it before."

I nodded again, my mind filled with the librarian's story and Wallace Stevens and the young fella and love at first sight.

She stood up, tugging briefly at her Levi's. She wore a thin white T-shirt emblazoned with the name of the band Little Feat. I *love* Little Feat.

"Wish me luck," she said, walking away.

"Luck," I managed hoarsely.

The bar waitress came by.

"A beer as soon as humanly possible," I said.

I glanced at the empty chair beside me, grateful to see the yellow-haired woman had left her sweater. I would guard it with my life.

Up front, a man came out onstage. "Hey, everybody," he said, motioning for quiet. "We've got a lot of performers tonight—some new, some old—so please, let's give 'em our attention and respect. And remember—no booing. You boo, you're out. Also, tip your waitpeople generously. I mean it. You don't tip, don't bother coming back. We never forget a face."

Good thing I'd stopped by the bank earlier that day to report my stolen credit card. They'd even given me cash when I asked for it, fifty bucks, which they graciously added to my already in-arrears account. Aren't banks the best?

"All right," the man said, "let's get going."

A fierce-looking woman with hair cut short on only one side emerged from stage left. She was clutching a sheaf of papers, and even from way

back where I sat, I could see her hand was trembling. She tapped the microphone. “T-t-testing 1-2-3,” she said tentatively.

“It’s good to go, Shonda,” the guy who had been onstage just moments ago called to her from the front row. “I already tested it.”

“Ah . . . no,” she said, embarrassed, “ . . . that’s how my poem starts out. It’s called ‘Testing 1-2-3.’”

There was a small smattering of laughter. The host turned around and glared at everyone. In the front row, a few people with clipboards made notes.

And that’s when it hit me. This wasn’t a poetry reading—not by a long shot. This was a *poetry slam*.

The young woman started again, her Testing 1-2-3 poem gaining momentum as she moved her upper limbs to and fro. “Testing 1-2-3” covered the Big Three in current slam poetry themes: eating disorders, bad relationships, terrible jobs. Oh, and drugs and/or alcohol abuse. So, really, the Big Four. And that was the problem. The poem was not only painfully unimaginative but obvious to the point of trite. Nevertheless, some of her word choices were good, and right up until she hit the microphone with her elbow, her performance was fine. In my head, I gave her a three-point-five out of ten.

Well, a three.

The next two readers were better. I gave them both fives. But when one of the judges gave them zeros, two people in the front—presumably the poet’s relatives—booed.

“Do that again and you’re out,” the emcee of the show said, pointing at the offenders.

I signaled the waitress over. This is the other major problem with slams. They require a lot of alcohol, and I was on a budget.

She brought me another beer. Then, as time and poets dragged by, one more. During that time, about fifty people had tried to sit in Perfect Woman’s chair, but they were no match for me. Three beers in and I’m happy to report that Perfect Woman and I had two beautiful children. There was loose talk about a third.

The waitress appeared at my side.

"One more."

She looked at me with disgust and said, "Aren't you ever going to order something for your girlfriend?" She pointed at the sweater.

So she saw it, too. Our future.

The waitress tapped her pen hard against her thigh.

"Okay, two beers. No. Wait." What would Paul do? "Make hers a . . . a . . . white wine."

The waitress nodded her approval.

.....

"Batter, remember the first night we met?" the yellow-haired woman might say thirty years later. "You sat at my table. I was about to perform in a poetry slam—*a poetry slam*—I can't even believe I did those things back then. And you were so nice—you ordered a glass of wine for me even though you didn't know me."

She would be saying this to me somewhere in Vienna. No, Prague. We would be sharing a bottle of wine and celebrating our incredibly successful and happy lives together. Maybe we *lived* in Prague. No. Learning Czech would take forever. It was definitely just a vacation. We had kids. Grown, doing well. The point was, she still had the yellow hair, although now it was mixed with gray. Apparently, we'd had a really happy life together.

"Hello, I'm Wren," came a nervous voice from the stage. "And my poem is called 'Syringe.'"

Oh my god, it was *her*.

I sat up, holding my body rigid as if not to disturb the universe. Her wine had just appeared.

"Sharp blue," she started, her voice instantly adopting the unnatural rise and fall of poetic intonation I cannot abide. She moved about the stage, reciting her work, her words careful to implant the underlying meaning of the word "syringe."

It was fairly awful. I willfully ignored it.

Yellow-haired perfect woman, now known as Wren—I loved the name already—was of medium height with a kind of simple athleticism that made me think that maybe she'd run track—or no—climbed rock faces—her hair

still half-knotted into a rubber band, the other half spilling out, shiny and erratic, like a sparkler. On her right wrist, she wore a silver bracelet, and on her left hand—on the finger adjacent to her little finger—I always forget what that one's called—she wore a ring. I sat back, excited. I squinted my eyes to get a feeling for the ring—to begin to understand what she liked in terms of jewelry.

Wait a minute. The ring.

The hand.

The finger.

Perfect woman was married.

Married.

I took a huge swallow of beer. I looked again. How could I be so stupid? The finger with the ring on it—it's called the ring finger. *Ring* finger. I slumped in my chair. Married at her age. *How could she?*

I took another huge swallow of beer, not a good idea, because either this second swallow really was too big or I hadn't really finished swallowing the previous one—whichever one it was, I choked; I mean, really choked. The choking led to coughing, which led to people turning around in their seats to tell me to have a little respect, which led to Wren onstage asking if someone could help the asshole who was ruining her performance, which led to the waitress coming over and thumping me on the back so hard it took my breath away. Which made me stop coughing.

I thanked the waitress and nodded apologies and attempted to return my full but disappointed attention to Wren, grateful for the inky darkness.

So Wren was married. *Fine*. I respected her choice even if she was way too young and had also managed to marry the wrong person. Anyway, she wasn't really my type. I tend not to be attracted to women who wear a lot of jewelry, and while she didn't really wear a lot of jewelry, she did have some, and some jewelry sometimes leads to more jewelry, and more jewelry almost always leads to too much. I stared at her bracelet, which from where I sat, was practically microscopic. It looked nice framed by the tiny golden hairs that probably grew on her thin, strong arm.

Her thin, strong *left* arm.

Left.

Wait. That meant the ring was on the *right* hand.

I sat up tall, willing her to notice the guy at her table who was still there,

who had ordered her a white wine, and who was listening to every word she read without caring whether it was good, bad, misplaced, or mispronounced.

Wren's poem hit only one of the Big Four—drug abuse—at least that was what I assumed it was about given the syringe imagery, but I wasn't really sure because I'd missed so much of it. The coughing fit.

When it was over, I may have overdone the applause. The couple at the table next to mine stopped clapping way before I did. But the judges gave her a six and I was proud—she'd beat out quite a few people. Although I heard someone say said she'd gotten "pity points" because of the "disturbance."

Before I knew it, she was sliding into the seat next to me.

"Would you mind," she whispered to me angrily as another poet took the stage, "pointing out the asshole who decided to cough up a lung during my performance?"

I nodded, mad on her behalf, and pointed in the general direction of some people who were leaving.

In the meantime, a new poet had taken the stage, but nerves had gotten the better of him and he'd self-medicated his way to bravery. No one could understand a word he was saying.

"Poor guy," she whispered.

I felt electrified just sitting next to her. "Publicperformanceishard," I managed. "Althoughyouweregreat." It all came out in a rush. In fact, I might have said, "Publicperformanceislard."

"I sucked," she whispered matter-of-factly. "I'm not a poet, I just thought I'd try. I'm on an Eleanor Roosevelt kick—the every-day-do-one-thing-that-scares-you, challenge. I just started it.

"What did you do yesterday?" I said, completely in awe.

"Nothing," she admitted.

She was literally perfect.

"But there's a guy coming up soon who *is* great," she said, glancing at the stage. "By the way, thanks for the wine."

"Shoo," I said.

I silently practiced the conversation starters I planned to use as soon as I regained my composure. *By the way, my name is Batter. And despite what you say, I very much admired your poem. No really, I thought the syringe*

concept was very—uh— Coincidentally, I work for Peck & Peck—the major poetry quarterly?

"So what do you do?" I finally managed as we waited for the next poet.

"I'm in nursing school."

Syringe.

"But I work at the convention center on the side," she added. "Doing registrations—stuff like that. To pay for school."

"So are you pursuing a certain type of nursing? Surgical or—"

"I haven't decided yet."

"I bet nursing school is really hard."

"It is."

"I bet your parents are proud."

She looked at me sideways.

"I was pre-law for a while in college," I offered.

"Was?"

I shrugged. "It wasn't for me."

Why was I saying this? Shut up!

"What is for you?" she asked.

You, I wanted to say, *YOU*. But instead, I shrugged and said, "No idea."

Jesus. Put a sock in it!

"I don't know what I want to do either," she confessed.

"But you're in nursing school."

She took a small sip of her wine. "Yeah, but mostly because at some point you have to pick something. You have to say, Okay, *this*, even if you're not sure. So you choose nursing or law or banking or whatever to keep up with your friends and please your parents and you hope that, eventually, it will please you, too."

"I know what you mean," I said. "But I did something much worse; I actually pursued something I love only to discover it's the third circle of hell."

Also a poor response because now she'd probably ask me what I did and because I seemed to be on some honesty kick, I would say, *Me? Oh, I make copies. No, photocopies. Before that? I folded T-shirts at Gap and waited tables at the Just Okay. You've heard of it? Oh, right, that food poisoning incident. So they ended up at your hospital? Small world. Yes, actually, I do have a college degree. Why do you ask?*

“I’m sorry,” she said, “It’s so loud in here. What did you say?”

“We contain multitudes,” I said, misquoting Whitman.

“My mom was a nurse,” she whispered as the stage lights dimmed. “But —” She stopped abruptly. “I think this is him. That poet I told you about.” She leaned forward, eager. The rest of the audience also seemed to have been expecting him, because applause broke out like a forest fire.

As the poet crossed the dark stage, his head bent like a rock star, he held one hand up in mock humility—*please, please, hold your applause*. Unlike the others, he dressed in effortless style: tailored trousers, burnished leather shoes, a white button-down shirt, crisp and operation-room clean, billowing about his athletic frame, implying the presence of a strong, tanned, probably hairless chest. As he walked, his gait reminded me of a well-bred racehorse being led to the starting gate.

He leaned into the microphone. “This one’s for Wren,” he said as the spotlight found his face. “My better half. With all my love.”

It was Dexter.

42.

“Honey, have you ever heard the phrase ‘the weight of expectation’?” my mother asked as we shopped for Valentine’s Day cards. I had to get a bunch for my fifth-grade classroom. “It’s when you want something so badly, it consumes you. Although alternatively it can mean that you went to an Ivy League school but never amounted to anything so for the rest of your life you have to avoid reunions and only ever send fake updates to the alumni news.”

I threw a twenty-pack Addams Family Valentine’s box in the cart. The front read YOU’RE ITT FOR ME.

“Which is too bad,” my mother continued, “because success comes at different times for different people. You’d think Ivy Leaguers would be

smart enough to know this. But no, many of them are so burdened by the weight of expectation, they believe that unless success happens for them overnight, it won't happen at all. So, some of them end up doing something illegal, usually in finance or politics. In the unlikely event they get caught, they go to jail. Minimum security. Then they get out early for good behavior, their so-called debt to society 'paid,' even though their crime resulted in innocent people losing their life savings. Meaning their debt was only paid metaphorically."

"Are you getting Dad a card?"

"I was thinking I might use one of yours," my mother said, examining a quote from Morticia: NORMAL IS AN ALLUSION. "I love this typeface. Do you need all twenty? Is that a typo? I'll fix it." She pulled out a Rapidograph and changed ALLUSION to ILLUSION.

"I need 'em all," I said, adding a Bewitched box to the mix. The top card featured Samantha Stevens kissing Darrin. LOVE IS MAGIC, it read, which I figured must be true because there is no way Samantha would have ever fallen for him otherwise.

"Back in high school, my weight of expectation was love," she confessed. "I had a crush on someone, and I had high hopes that on Valentine's Day, his mutual, hidden love for me would be expressed by the delivery of a long-stemmed rose to my desk. Secret Admirer Roses, that's what they were called. Every Valentine's Day the school was flooded with them."

"Wow," I said, surprised. "High school actually sounds kind of fun, Mom."

She looked at me as if I'd lost my mind. "Batter, where do you get your ideas? Television? Because high school is not fun. Anyway, the point is, the roses were long-stemmed; they couldn't fit in a locker, so if you got one, you had to carry it from class to class. Let everyone know how popular you were."

"How many roses did you get?"

She looked at me, discomfited, then moved the shopping cart down the aisle, her neck turning the color of disappointment. I watched her sort through other boxes of Valentines in silence, her scapulae moving quickly,

like small wings under her blouse. “I’m sorry you didn’t get a rose, Mom,” I finally said.

She turned to me, puzzled. “What makes you think I didn’t get a rose?”

“Well, because—”

“I never said I didn’t get a rose.”

“*Mom*.”

“Rejection is part of life,” she said. “The sooner you learn that the better.”

“*But*—”

“Rejection can hurt, but it’s not fatal. You will get rejected, honey; there’s no way around it. A few will even tell you rejection is actually good for you—that it makes you stronger—although that bit of wisdom usually comes from the people *doing* the rejecting. More typically, rejection goes one of two ways. First way: you get rejected, you get mad, you seek revenge, you get revenge, then you *expect* to feel immensely satisfied—and yet you don’t. Second way: you get rejected, but instead of getting mad, you use the rejection to *modify* your original expectation. Notice I didn’t say lower it—I said *modify* it. Which is what happened in my case: my original expectation was that I would get one rose from one boy. Didn’t happen. But my *modified* expectation was that I would get two dozen roses from an animal illegally entering school grounds. Which is exactly what happened.”

“Uh—what?”

“Batter, your namesake. He brought me two dozen pink roses—professionally wrapped in florist paper, exactly like what you would see in the movies—to my homeroom.”

“Wow!”

“You bet, wow. The class went nuts.”

“So what happened next?” I asked eagerly.

She cocked her head to the side. “Well, what do you think happened, Batter?” She sounded slightly annoyed. “What *always* happens, that’s what.”

“Did the school newspaper interview you and Batter? Did they take your picture? Did everyone want to pet him?”

“Batter. *What did I just say?*” She looked at me in amazement. “I just said that what *always* happens happened *next*. This is high school, remember? Expect the worst.” She grabbed a bag of M&M’s and tossed

them in the cart. “My homeroom teacher announced that my dog had obviously stolen a very pricey bouquet of roses. Now, I’ll admit that these roses were clearly expensive, and certainly Batter didn’t tend to carry a lot of cash—but stealing? What proof did she have? Plus, there was the fact that the flowers came without a card. This spawned some discussion as to whether they were really intended for me. Which was ridiculous. Obviously, they were intended for me—Batter was my dog. And since when is a dog supposed to be able to write a card? What is *with* people? Dogs are smart, but must they prove it by being able to write in cursive, too? Anyway, the police were called.”

“No!”

“Yes. But they didn’t come right away—not until fifth period—claimed they were busy with local murders. In the meantime, I had to turn my bouquet over to the office. So stupid. My dog brings me two dozen fresh roses on Valentine’s Day, and *I* get sent to the office?”

“But didn’t everyone know about Batter?” I persisted. “He did all those things—he gave money to poor kids! He kept the mayor from getting strep!”

She looked off in the distance.

“Mom?” I said, worried. She stuffed her hands in the pockets of her windbreaker. I could see the bulges of her knuckles through the thin yellow fabric. “Mom—what happened?”

“The principal told the police I’d taught Batter to steal. Like anyone could train a dog to swipe two dozen pink roses from a florist, then deliver them to a homeroom. Does that even sound remotely reasonable?” She released her hands from her pockets. “Anyway, the police gave me my flowers back and told the principal not to bother them with this sort of stuff again. But by that time, it was too late. School had already let out for the day.”

“Well,” I said relieved. “At least you got them back—”

“But it wasn’t the same, honey. Because it’s not really about the flowers. It’s about other people noticing you’re special enough to get flowers.”

“How did Batter get the flowers anyway? I mean if he didn’t carry cash or anything.”

“Sweetie,” she said in a disappointed voice. “I think you know it is *very* impolite to ask about the origin of a gift, including where it came from or

how much it cost. Asking for details is wrong."

"But how could a dog—"

"Your father got me earrings for my birthday just last month. Did you hear me say, 'John, you didn't steal these, did you?' No. I trust your father bought them by teaching people about the past. He's a historian for god's sake. They *do* get paid. Some."

"But—"

"The point is, Batter, your namesake was unafraid."

I saw in my head how Batter must have entered that classroom, his small mouth gripping the thorny roses, his tongue almost certainly bloodied, his slight jaw sagging under the weight of it all, the whole thing topped off by his famous limp. It made me think about the whole saving-the-day thing; how doing the brave thing and doing the right thing were usually the same. But why was doing the right thing so hard?

"Honey," my mother said. "Carry the bag."

But I didn't move; I couldn't. My mind was too busy grappling with a family legacy I wasn't sure I wanted. My father saved the past, my mother saved a typo, Batter saved Valentine's Day.

What would I save?

43.

Dexter leaned into the microphone as if he were about to say something earth-shattering, but instead he just stood there, a half smile on his lips, prompting people to clap for him before he'd even done anything. What an asshole.

"Let's do this," he finally said, his voice husky.

"Jesus Christ," I said under my breath. "Come *on*." But Wren didn't seem to hear. She leaned forward in her seat, rapt.

My first instinct was to leave, but my chair leg was wedged between

Wren’s and the table next to ours. I felt like a trapped animal. Was I really going to have to sit through this? I exhaled loudly, causing the people at the table next to me to give me a look. So yes, I had to sit through it. I had to sit and listen to this stupid jerk and his stupid performance, his tailored pants and white shirt and golden hair misleading the audience into thinking he was something special when he was not. I knew exactly who he was: a bully, a cad, an—an—overdressed, pompous, Salton-bootlicker sycophant, who, on top of these obvious defects, was also dating my WIFE.

Pacing the stage, his voice free of his usual whine, Dexter started out slowly and quietly, but soon—and I hate to say this—expertly wrenched us from the crowded and noisy tavern to a completely different place—a Vietnamese foxhole, where, huddled in fetal position, a lone soldier sat, his fingernails clogged with dirt and gunpowder, his helmet askew. He was young and frightened, brought to this place by bad luck: a low draft number.

It suddenly occurred to me—I’d read this piece before. Hadn’t I?

The soldier looked at the long-dead soldier next to him, asking him how it works—how death comes—but the man wouldn’t meet his eye. They’d been together for twenty-one hours now—one hour for each of the soldier’s twenty-one years, and even though he was still young, he felt old and tired and used up. He thought about sand passing through an hourglass, the way the hourglass’s thin neck forced each grain into a thin line like soldiers marching in formation, everyone doing exactly what they were told, each speck starting its neat, steady, inevitable descent to the end. An hourglass. The soldier shook his head. How trite. In truth, the hourglass was nothing more than an overinflated egg timer, and war, a childish response to an inability to share. He would not let either of them decide when he was done. The soldier shifted his position, then stood up.

And it came: the single click, the fast whistle, the sting of heat. The force of the bullet shattered his skull, sending the young man back, his eyes lapping shut on the cold chest of the dead man, followed by the expectation of blood. But there wasn’t blood. Only sand. Sand, sand, and more sand; sand for fifty years, for sixty years; sand for a life that had meant to be lived, for decades of marriage and children; for sun at the lake; for walks

with his lover; for times with his friends. All of it there. None of it used. All a waste.

I'm paraphrasing here—his poem was, unfortunately, *a lot* better—and you could tell because the words swept through the room like an oxygenated blaze, the heat driving people back against their seats.

When he finished, his cheeks flushed, his forehead glistening, Dexter bowed his head and the room exploded with applause. I slapped my hands together halfheartedly like a tired seal.

"See what I mean?" Wren said. There were actual *tears* in the corners of her eyes. "Wasn't he something?"

"Oh, he's something," I agreed as I stood up, knocking my chair into the knee of the guy next to me, who yelped in pain.

"Stay," she said. "He's going to come over after he's done backstage. I'll introduce you."

"I really can't."

"I just thought we—" she said hesitantly.

"It's late."

"Well, uh, okay. Thanks for the wine—that was really—I hope—I mean—"

She was interrupted by the crowd shouting, "Ten! Ten! Ten!" Dexter's score.

I nodded, my eyes downcast, then pushed my way out of the bar as quickly as I could, weaving between tables like a rat confused by a maze. Where was the fucking exit? I glanced up and ran directly into Eduardo Jones.

"Batter!" he cried. "Where are you off to? I'm about to go backstage. I'm sorry—didn't know I'd be last. What'd you think of that last guy? Good, right? He blew me away."

"I thought he was shit," I said sharply. "Sorry to miss your performance, but I have to be at work early tomorrow." In my mind it was to turn in my resignation. "I have to go *right now.*"

"But tomorrow's Saturday."

"Well, I *work* Saturdays, Eduardo."

“You okay?” Eduardo asked looking at me sideways. “You seem a little drunk. Can I call you a cab?”

“I’m fine,” I said. “Do you have a copy of your work or not? I can’t stay.”

“Just this one,” he said, holding out a piece of paper. “It’s the one I’m performing tonight. I memorized it so, here—take it.”

From a distance I could see Dexter join Wren at the table. She stood up; he hugged her tight.

“Thanks,” I said grimly, folding the poem in half.

Without another word, I pushed my way through the door. Dickinson once wrote that hope is a thing with feathers. If that’s true, despair must be a pair of concrete shoes. I know because I wore mine home.

44.

Miserable over Wren, consumed by hatred for Dexter, and betrayed by Declonius, I I spent the entire weekend looking for a new job. I applied to fourteen restaurants, three clothing retailers, two copy shops, and one pet store. But every time I handed over another application, the person at the receiving end would inform me they didn’t have any openings. “We’ll keep you on file,” they’d say.

Liars.

Speaking of liars, I also went to one other place: Declonius’s apartment —to get my messenger bag and wallet back, but also to retrieve the poems he’d mugged me for—the place he said we could “really talk,” the one location he could “always” be found, and guess what. He wasn’t there.

For that, I’d waited until Monday morning, just before work—approximately sixty-eight hours after his last visit to the bomb shelter. I arrived at 6:15 a.m. I thought it made a point: I would come, but on my own terms and schedule.

He lived in Tribeca on a tired-looking street full of signs bent in half like sandwiches folded over. The stop sign, the street sign—they were all folded shut. It looked like the kind of prank I would have pulled with my junior high friends—a world-class hey-guys-I've-got-a-great-idea!' sort of thing, which would later have to be undone by some poor maintenance guy with a bad back and a nonexistent city pension. I couldn't believe this was where the once-important Declonius Peck lived.

I entered his building—it was unlocked—checked the mailboxes for his apartment number—fourth floor—ran all the way up there—there was no elevator—and located a buzzer displaying a small D. PECK. I pushed it nineteen times.

There was no answer. I counted to twenty, allowing the great man time to rouse from his bed, put on a robe, and answer. Still nothing. I pushed it twenty-six more times. Nothing. I yelled his name. Nothing. Then I knocked, using the enormous swan-shaped knocker that protruded from the middle of his door, throttling it by the neck. Bam. Bam. Bam.

Where the hell could he be at 6:15 a.m.? *Any time, day or night,* he'd said.

"Mr. Peck," I said, pounding the swan against the door. "Declonius Peck!"

"Who's up there?" someone called from one floor below. "Why are you making all that noise? What do you want?"

I looked down over the railing. "I'm sorry," I said. "I'm looking for Mr. Peck. Have you seen him?"

"You a probation officer?" asked a scrawny woman in a bathrobe.

"No."

"What are you here for then? Why don't you leave the poor man alone?"

"I'm here to pick something up."

"Oh," she said, looking at me curiously. "Oh. Well, I was expecting someone older. I thought he said you'd be by around nine. Hold on."

She disappeared into her apartment and came out a minute later holding a manila envelope. "I'm not coming all the way up there," she said. "If you want it, come get it."

"Coming right now," I said, pounding down the stairs past dirty walls and peeling paint.

“You don’t look like the right guy,” she said a few moments later, as I stood in front of her. She held the envelope back.

“I’m the right guy,” I said, thinking even if my stolen poems weren’t in that envelope whatever it was that *was* in there would give me some leverage with Declonius. *Two* could play the blackmail game.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I thought you’d be older.”

“How many people drop by Mr. Peck’s apartment this early in the morning looking for an envelope?” I asked her. “*Of course* I’m the guy.”

“You’d be surprised,” she said, tapping the envelope. “I just don’t know. Like I said, I thought you’d be older.” She drew her bathrobe around her tight, like armor.

“Was there a messenger bag by the way? He told me to get that, too.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Maybe you’re not the guy.”

“I am.”

She frowned. “Tell me what’s in here,” she said, putting the envelope behind her back. “If you know what’s inside, you can have it.”

I took a wild guess.

“Poetry.”

I waited to open the envelope until I was on the bus and, sure enough, there they were, eight poems—exactly the number that I’d stuffed in my bag that day.

There was only one problem.

They weren’t the poems I’d copied. Worse, each of these had been written by a kid named Portia Greene.

Yeah, *that* Portia. The one from the bus.

I got off the bus and stopped for coffee, taking well over an hour to read through Portia’s work. Jesus. The kid was a genius. Depressed, I stuffed the poems back in the envelope and made for Peck & Peck, my insides thrashing with anger and jealousy. But as I neared the front door, I slammed into the company gardener. He was blocking the sidewalk as he gazed up at the topiaries above him. *What is with people?*

“Hey,” I said, pushing past him, “you mind?”

The man took a step back and mumbled an apology, his cap close, his

neck encased in mesh, his hands stuffed into the pockets of his heavily soiled jumpsuit. How irritatingly servile. He reminded me of me.

“Don’t care for your tone,” Andy said as I reached for the door.

“Not today, Andy,” I said. “Do *not* mess with me today.”

“The man’s got an important job,” Andy said. “The topiaries require a lot of care. People come from all over the place to see what they spell out, so you treat him with respect.”

I rolled my eyes. Sure; fine; whatever; of course he was right. The Peck & Peck topiaries were a big deal and I loved them, but today I didn’t want to love anything about Peck & Peck, especially *not* poetry carved into shrubs.

Wait. I should explain. I know I’ve told you that each topiary represented an individual letter, but I’m not sure I fully explained that each was set tight against others to spell a word, which in turn formed a phrase, which in turn, formed, as it wrapped around the building—I’m not kidding—a poem. The poems were always recognizable—Shakespeare, Rita Dove, Whitman, Du Bois; that sort of thing—and were readable from across the street. A new poem appeared every three months. The latest was by Longfellow, “The Arrow and the Song.” It starts, *I shot an arrow into the air,/It fell to earth, I knew not where.* A gentle reminder that what we do and say has consequences. Shoot wisely.

“Mr. Fujikawa has been trimming those bushes for thirty years,” Andy was saying, “and I will not have you—”

“*I get it, Andy,*” I said with such force, he took a step back. As I turned away from him, I noticed a poet trying to slip into the foyer. “And you,” I said. “Get the hell out!”

“Well!” crowed a voice from behind me. “Look who’s finally getting the hang of things!” Sam Slater slapped me hard on the back as we entered the building together.

“Stop it, Sam,” Lou said sternly; she was right behind him. “And, Batter, what was that? We don’t speak to poets that way.”

“It’s like Sam said”—I scowled—“maybe I’m just getting the hang of things.”

Lou looked at me, surprised. “Poets are fragile, desperate people,” she admonished. “We treat them accordingly. Do you understand?”

“Bunch of criminals,” Andy commented. “Half of them end up in jail.”

“Poets who stand up for other people’s rights are not criminals, Andy,” Lou snapped at him. “They’re heroes. Breytenbach, the antiapartheid poet, who we’ve *published*, by the way, was just finally released from a South African prison after—”

But before she could finish, a voice rained down from above us.

“*NOW HEAR THIS,*” Salton bellowed as he hung over the fifth-floor railing. “I want every last one of your FAT ASSES in your FAT ASS seats in the Aviary in five minutes—do you people hear me down there? Aviary—five FAT ASS minutes, I mean it.”

“Oh *shit,*” Sam said, his face suddenly pale. “Seriously? A Fat Ass Meeting? We haven’t had one of those in over a year. My doctor put me on blood thinners after the last one.”

“I heard a rumor over the weekend,” Lou whispered. “Someone took poetry out of the building and was mugged on the way home. Worse: the work is still at large.”

“It’s no rumor,” Andy said with authority. “I got the information from a reliable source. I told Salton, who told Tang.”

I looked at Andy, dumbfounded. My god—it was *me*.

“*I can’t believe this!*” Sam said. “Who would be *stupid* enough to—”

“Not clear on the actual who yet,” Andy said, sucking in his stomach. “But being an ex-cop, I have my sources. I’ll dig it all out after—”

The rest of his claim was lost in the growing melee. From every corner of the building, doors flew open, books slammed shut, coffee cups spilled, and a general hysteria gripped the editorial staff as they tumbled out of their offices and pushed toward the Aviary like cows in a stampede. Lou grabbed my arm, sweeping me along in the panic.

“It’s a Fat Ass Alert,” I heard Hassan, one of the Junior Editors, shout as he pounded on a bathroom door. “You’re going to have to hold it.”

“I’m not doing this without Valium,” I heard someone else plead to a coworker. “Please—name your Fat Ass price.”

“I *understand* you’ve got a fever of 102,” someone else cried into his phone, “but you’d better get your Fat Ass in here.”

The last time I’d seen pandemonium like this was in elementary school when the fire alarm demanded we kids stop dinking around and pay attention to the visible flames erupting from the teachers’ lounge, instantly motivating us to skip the oft-rehearsed single-file idea in favor of an all-out

battle to reach the lawn. At Peck & Peck, the floors were a chaos of editors, pushing and shoving like salmon fighting their way upstream.

“What’s this one about?” I heard a worried Junior Editor ask an Associate as they moved in a steady flow up the staircase.

“It’s only a rumor, but I heard some poems got out,” the Associate Editor said in a tense voice as he pushed his way forward.

It was *exactly* what Lou and Andy had said. I felt my blood stop circulating. My plan had been to quit today—but wouldn’t quitting make me look like the guilty party? Which, by the way, I was. Maybe I wasn’t supposed to attend this meeting. Did I even qualify as a Fat Ass?

“Hurry it up, hurry it up,” Salton said impatiently, standing outside the Aviary, making a shooing motion. “Get in there and sit the hell down—let’s go, people! I don’t have all day.”

I hesitated on the brink of the door.

“What the HELL is your problem?” he shouted at me, “get in there and sit the HELL down!”

“I don’t have a chair. But I’ll stand. I’m fine with standing.”

“Goddammit!” he shouted, “Dexter! *Dexter!*”

Dexter appeared almost instantly.

“Beater needs a chair,” he said. “Go get one; hurry it up.”

“But he’s not an—”

“I said get his Fat Ass a chair! And I suggest you do it before I give him yours!”

Dexter left, then returned seconds later with a folding chair tucked under his arm. He threw it in my general direction, then jogged to his place behind Salton. I thought about how he’d stood in front of that microphone two nights earlier—so self-assured, so powerful—and now here he was—a skittery little mouse, just like the rest of us.

“Everybody here?” Salton shouted, slamming the door. A few of the eggs rattled. “You better be here, that’s all I can say. If you’re not here now, you’re not coming. I mean it.”

I unfolded my chair and slipped into it.

“Three questions!” Salton shouted as he made his way to the head of the table, swinging his arms like a swimmer warming up before a race. Dust motes caught in shafts of light scattered like prisoners during an escape.

“Three questions!” he shouted again, jutting three fingers into the air.

“First question. WHY DOES PECK & PECK PUBLISH A POETRY QUARTERLY?”

Around the room, editors exchanged glances.

“NO GUESSES?” Salton demanded, tapping his fingers on the table. “No one?” he softened. “Come on now, people. I won’t bite. Tang? How about you?”

“Because it’s our mission to publish the voices of tomorrow,” Tang said nervously.

“Wrong, Tang. Not even close,” Salton answered amicably.

“Because we are the *only* publication that recognizes good work,” Mira said. “*Most* of the time.” She looked at Howard, her eyes narrowing.

“Completely missed the mark with that one, Mira,” Salton lightly scolded.

“Because we believe in the power of poetry to change lives,” Lou ventured.

“Wrongo, Lou, but don’t worry; I’m still giving you points for that outfit.”

“Because poetry is an art form and we are not only the advocates but the protectors of that art form,” Dexter contributed.

Salton turned to look at him, incredulity spreading across his face.

“What?”

“It’s part of our mission statement,” Dexter explained.

“Oh please,” Salton said, “don’t make me laugh.” He turned back to the rest of the room. “You people are beginning to worry me. Honestly. For all your Ph.D.s and whatnot, you’re a bunch of world-class idiots.” He put his hands on his hips. “Why does Peck & Peck publish a poetry quarterly?” he asked again. And when no one else attempted a guess, he slammed his fist on the table. “GODDAMMIT, PEOPLE! IT’S TO MAKE MONEY, THAT’S WHY! We’re in business here, people. Business! This isn’t a *hobby*!”

Around the room, editors shifted uncomfortably in their seats.

“Now,” he started again, his voice trying to regain its calm. “I know what you’re all thinking. You’re thinking, but who in their right mind would publish poetry in order to make money? Well, that’s a very good question. And here’s the answer: NO ONE. With the obvious exception of my birdbrain relatives who started this company. But outside of those idiots,

why is poetry publishing simply *not* a good business idea? Why is it something no one would *ever* choose to lay a financial bet on?" His voice was growing shrill again. "This is question number two, people," he threatened, "and I want answers! Come on now! If you don't answer, I'll take action."

"Because poetry is really a niche—"

"NO!"

"Because current demographics suggest that—"

"NO!"

"Because educational standards are—"

"NO!"

"Because poetry is difficult to translate—"

"NO! Goddammit, no, NO, NO!"

Salton's veins popped out on his neck. I sat back in my chair, certain I could hear the rising tide of my own blood pressure. "Goddammit!" he shouted. "Come on! If I don't hear the right answer soon, I swear I will—"

"Because poetry is boring," came a voice from the back.

Like a wet blanket thrown on a fire, a deathly hiss descended on the Aviary. All heads swiveled to look at the traitor who'd spoken these blasphemous words.

What had come *over* me? I needed to stay out of the Aviary—it was the only place I consistently told the truth.

Salton slammed his hand on the table again and made a beeline for the back of the room. "YOU," he shouted, grabbing my wrist. "YOU, RIGHT NOW." He jerked me out of my seat and yanked me down the length of the room like a marionette in the mouth of a wild dog. At the head of the table, he dropped his grip.

"Say it again. I *dare* you to say that again."

"I'm sorry, Salton. I—didn't mean—"

"SAY IT AGAIN."

"Poetry is boring," I repeated.

"POETRY IS BORING," Salton shouted.

The word "boring" echoed around the chamber.

"Not all of it," I added quickly. "Our job is—"

"Take my advice, Beater; don't dilute your answer," he warned. "Shorter is better. Especially"—and here he paused, looking around the room with

eagerness—"because DING DING DING!!! *Poetry is boring* is the correct answer!" He clapped me on the back. "We've got a winner here, folks!" he said. "Atta boy, Beater." And then, struck by a new idea, he turned to Dexter. "Get up."

"Of course, Salton," Dexter said, rising from his seat. "What can I get for you?"

"Just your chair, Dex, thanks."

Dexter rose quickly, moving it closer to Salton.

"Sit here, Beater," Salton said, gesturing at the chair. "You sit next to me. Dex, you go sit in the back. Hurry it up."

Dexter looked as if he'd been punched in the stomach. His neck flushed crimson, and he hesitated, as if awaiting the laugh that would clearly indicate Salton had only been joking.

"*NOW,*" Salton shouted.

I hated Dexter—make no mistake. But watching him walk to the back of the room with his head down was sad, like watching a kid strike out in the bottom of the ninth. I looked at Howard, who was looking at me, his eyes filled with fury. "*Boring?*" he mouthed.

"So," Salton was saying happily, "now that we've solved the mystery of *why* we publish a poetry quarterly—to make money—and *why* this might be considered a poor business risk—because poetry is boring—here's number three on the hit parade." He jabbed his finger at random people around the table. "*How* do we make money publishing this crap? Anyone?" He looked at me and smiled. "I know *you* know the answer, Beater, but don't tell. Let's see if any of the High and Mighty can come up with it."

"We could publish poetry that's more fun," someone offered.

"Good!" Salton said, "on the right track, but not the actual answer."

"We could publish limericks?" a Junior Editor ventured.

"Jesus! Absolutely not!" Salton shouted.

"We publish song lyrics?" a Senior Editor tried.

"NO."

"We become the exclusive providers of Xing Xing Yao poetry. We publish a new poem of hers every quarterly," said a sarcastic voice. It belonged to Gupta. He, too, looked at me with hatred.

Salton brightened. "That's not the solution I had in mind, but I like it, Gupta. I like it very much. Good thinking. Kudos to Gupta. Anyone else?

Come on, people!”

“We concentrate on product placement. We make sure a copy of *Peck & Peck* is in every movie, regardless of content or applicability.”

“NICE!” shouted Salton.

“We charge more.”

“Now we’re cooking!”

“We publish an issue of poetry written solely by Playboy bunnies or Chippendale dancers.”

“Fantastico!”

“We stop giving a library discount.”

“Way ahead of you there, Hernandez,” Salton said, catching his breath. “I canceled every library contract we had as soon as I took over. They want a copy, they can goddamn well pay full price for it. Goes for schools and hospitals, too.” He stood up and tapped the table. “Anyone else? I’m still waiting for the Big Idea. Come on, people? Isn’t it obvious?”

“We expand our reach,” someone else said. “We make sure a copy of *Peck & Peck* is in every funeral home. People always read poetry at funerals.”

“Absolutely true,” Salton said. “What better time to read something that makes absolutely no sense than at a funeral? That’s a good idea—it’s not THE idea, of course, but it’s a good one. Are you writing these all down, Dex?” he shouted to the other end of the room. “Write ’em down.”

I was sitting so close to Salton now, I could see stains of sweat curling around his armpits.

Salton threw himself into his chair and shuffled a few papers in front of him. “Well, Beater,” he said, over his shoulder as if disinterested, “you might as well tell them. Tell them how we make money publishing boring crap. I know you’re the only one who knows this because you’re the only one in this entire room with real-world experience. Besides me, of course. Beater used to work retail,” he informed the others. “Retail, restaurant; menial labor. He’s been in the trenches, unlike the rest of you lily-livered purebreds. No cushy internships; no Daddy-knows-someone jobs; no pretentious degrees—just plain old real-life serve-the-slop, clean-up-the-vomit work. And because of it, Beater knows what drives people into stores—he knows what tool we’ve been too condescending to consider using.”

Every face was fixed on mine. I saw Lou tuck a stray curl back under a

bobby pin; I saw Tang take a breath and hold it. I looked at Howard, his eyes clearly communicating a hope that I wouldn't speak. Hernandez—he actually mouthed these words at me: SHUT UP. But the problem was, I *did* know the answer: the answer was to publish great work. Like the kind I'd inadvertently let leave the building in the hands of a felon. Which, if revealed, was the end of me.

"Ads," I said instead.

Salton slapped me hard on the back.

"ADS," he shouted vigorously. He beamed at me. "I *knew* you'd know, Beater." Turning back to the others, he shouted, "Ads, ta-da, ta-da! We *sell* the space we've been wasting on boring poetry crap. Not all of it, of course—we'll still need some boring fill to make it look intellectual. But we sell off the rest of the acreage!" He looked around the room, his excitement registering as a bubbly line of sweat on his upper brow. "We'll start small; turn twenty percent of our space over to ads. Then expand from there."

I sat in my chair, relieved, my back still stinging from the slap. So this meeting *wasn't* about the poems Declonius had taken from me. I smiled—purely out of relief—but when I looked up, Howard was staring at me in disgust.

"What kind of ads?" someone asked uncertainly. "We've never run ads before."

"What *kind* of ads?" Salton blustered. "Well, isn't it obvious? Asshole ads for asshole intellectuals! Mensa, British boarding schools, expensive watches, vacations in Europe—that sort of thing. Our demographic intel reveals that a bunch of snobs buy our quarterly, so let's go after the snob market. Charge sky-high prices because snobs like to pay more. They think paying more means whatever they're buying is better," he explained.

"Salton," Tang said, "we've already gotten a lot of negative feedback from readers on those cover blurbs—the contest verbiage, the fake testimonials—but advertising? It goes against everything *Peck & Peck* has ever stood for."

"Negative feedback?" Salton snapped. "Ever since I slapped that crap on the front, sales have increased."

"But perhaps the increased sales were more about the content—we're giving people what they want to read—" Lou hesitated, then choked, probably thinking of some of Salton's recent picks. "So if there's less room

for such, uh, new voices in future issues, isn't that putting our recent success at risk?"

"Lou-Lou!" Salton barked. "I'm very happy that you brought this up—our recent success, I mean. As a small token of my gratitude, I will try to forgive your moment of sheer stupidity where you incorrectly proposed that people buy a copy of *Peck & Peck* because they, quote, 'want to read it.' Good god. People don't buy *Peck & Peck* to read it; they buy it to display it! Show how cultured they are. You know what I mean."

He glanced around the room to see if anyone was going to challenge him, then turned his attention to a gray satchel that lay near his feet. I'd seen that satchel before—or rather, its twin. Declonius had one exactly like it, the two "P"s on the clasps facing each other as if at odds, forever separated by the ampersand. Salton opened it and dug in with both hands.

"Where's my thing?" he muttered. "Where the hell is— Ah! Found it." He extricated a good-size document—at least forty pages. Sitting behind Salton I could see that each page was handwritten—a name at the top, with numbers and small drawings filling columns below.

"*SUCCESS!*" he said, addressing the editors in a booming voice, "is measured in *DOLLARS.* Please raise your hand if you're not clear on this general economic principle." He looked around the room, daring anyone to disagree. "Which is why I will *NOT* lend my name to an enterprise that is less than entirely successful," he continued, slapping the document against his hand. "Nor will I have people on STAFF who stand in the way of that success." He looked directly at Howard, who looked away.

"Is there anyone in this room who does not understand the concept of ENTIRELY successful?" he demanded.

Silence.

"While I'm at it, is there anyone in this room familiar with the adage 'Success breeds success?'"

Wasn't it *Familiarity breeds contempt*? Either way, no one was saying.

"*You better be, people,*" Salton warned with barely contained rage, "because it is that *very* adage that brings me to the *last* critical item on today's agenda. And I promise you, lowlifes, it's a big one. A barnburner."

Everyone looked at the fat document, fearing the worst.

"There's something in this pile for each of you," he menaced, tapping the thick document. "Something that should really fix your wagons."

I watched as Gupta extracted a handkerchief from his pocket and held it to his lips.

"This *something*," Salton continued, picking up the pile and fanning the pages, "is based partly on the success of the last two issues, as well as your sworn commitment to our new ad campaign." He glared at each of the editors. "This something starts with an 'R.' Who wants to guess?"

Around the room, I imagined R words forming in people's minds. Ridicule. Rejection. Revenge. Regret.

"*Anyone?*" Salton shrieked.

From above, a cloud moved across the sky, blocking the sunlight like a blanket tossed over a flame. The room darkened. Someone made a small choking sound.

Salton rose, his face registering childlike disappointment. He slapped the table in frustration, then shook the thick pile of papers like a weapon. "I called this Fat Ass Meeting because I think your Fat Asses need more cushioning. Thanks to a combination of cover blurbs and Xing Xing Yao's substandard celeb poetry, we're selling copies. With Beater's future ad ideas, we'll sell even more. Are you all completely dense?" He hefted the stack at the sky. "R is for Raises, kids!" He put two fingers in his mouth and whistled. "Come and get 'em!"

45.

Money is magic.

Beater Gray, read my sheet of paper scrawled in Salton's small, intense handwriting. *Thirty-nine percent raise, effective immediately. For being a bit less of an idiot than the other thirty-nine so-called editorial idiots*.

Beneath that was another figure that far exceeded my current monthly take-home pay. *Additional spot bonus,* it read next to a little drawing of the SS *Edmund Fitzgerald*. *Happy Sailing!*

The room was silent as everyone examined their raises, the air filled with equal amounts of shock, surprise, and satisfaction. Eyebrows raised as numbers were read, reread, double-checked, and triple-checked, reflecting the astonishment that only an unexpected windfall can bring. Editors looked at each other, their eyes wide with delight, each dying to share their personal windfalls—but stopping themselves, first out of propriety, and then—licking around the room like a forest fire just getting started—resentment.

Wait, you could hear them thinking, their smiles fading like old photos. *Everybody got a raise? Well, that's not fair. Not everyone deserves a raise.*

Within minutes, the joy in getting a raise was compromised. If joy was to survive, it was contingent on one thing and one thing only: that someone else—hopefully an enemy—had gotten less. Or better, nothing at all.

Before Salton left the room, he made it clear that after reviewing their individual good news, everyone was to place their sheets back in the file folder he'd tossed to the center of the table. Then I was to take the folder downstairs, make a copy while avoiding a glance at anyone's personal raise information, then immediately return these copies, plus the originals, to Salton himself.

"This is an ASAP job," he said to me as he was leaving. "Which means I wanted it ten minutes ago."

I watched as the folder slowly made its way around the table, each of the editors guarding their secret from the neighboring snoop while doing their very best to spy themselves. At the end, Lou handed the now-full folder to me, her face a mixture of bliss and misery.

I left the Aviary feeling every eye on my back.

I'm sure there's a study about this somewhere—about people who look at what they've been expressly told *not* to look at, versus those who *try* not to look, but fail almost immediately. I'm not sure there's a third category—those who don't look, ever. I'm a category two guy.

Lou's sheet was on top. A quick skim informed me she'd been awarded a twenty-five percent raise, plus a large bonus. At the bottom of her sheet, Salton had written, "Dinner?" and next to that had drawn something—a penis with some sort of disease, or a sausage with boils, or, well, it could

have been a sick dachshund. I shuddered thinking of Lou eating dinner with Salton—shiny, friendly Lou with squat, yellow-toothed Salton.

I pressed start, the feeder giving me exactly enough time to read each page's minimal content. Howard: seven percent and a small bonus. Tang: ten percent and a small bonus. Hernandez: seventeen percent and quite a large bonus—almost as big as Lou's. Sam Slater: three percent and no bonus. His figures were accompanied by a note saying that his raise was contingent on his intelligence test, the results of which were due in on Friday. Gupta: sixteen percent and a substantial bonus. Dexter: one percent, no bonus, plus this note: *You're on probation, Benny Arnold. Any more moves like the last one and you'll get what you deserve*.

I had no idea to what moves Salton referred, but whatever they were, it was clear he meant business. A small drawing of a blindfolded man being shot by a firing squad at dawn accompanied his threat. For the second time that morning I almost felt sorry for Dexter; out of all of us, no one worked harder to please Salton. But my empathy vanished the second I pictured his swagger onstage at the poetry slam, his confident lean into the microphone, his sickening words of love to Wren. The firing squad. Do not miss.

I finished the job quickly, putting both the originals and the new copies in the folder. As I made my way back upstairs, I paused to think of how badly my day had begun and how much better it had become. I'd gotten the biggest raise by far—an indication that Salton thought I really was doing a good job. Had I misjudged him?

Yes, he was a difficult person and maybe didn't have an ear, but was he the Peck who'd had me mugged? Or who'd repeatedly defied a restraining order, putting my job in jeopardy? Or claimed he was "always there" to talk when he wasn't? No. In fact, it was Salton who had told everyone he admired my real-world experience; who informed them that I, alone, had the right answers; who'd trusted me with company secrets like these raises (which, based on the fact that I had just reviewed everyone's personal information, maybe he shouldn't have done). And speaking of these raises, weren't they proof the company was doing better than ever?

Of course, there still was the issue of the work I'd been mugged for. But

now that I had Portia's work to bargain with, maybe Declonius would simply do a trade and that would be that.

As I climbed into the dumbwaiter, I remembered Howard had said that if I took my work seriously it would become serious work—but had that really happened? And Mr. Raley had told me to make my job instead of letting it make me. But had I? And the lions—Patience and Fortitude—was I now a patient person? Or was I just lucky? As for fortitude, what about all those jobs I'd applied for over the weekend? If I'd actually gotten one of them, I wouldn't have bothered to come into work today.

46.

Once upstairs, I followed Salton's instructions and went directly to his office, ignoring the chastened Dexter, who was busy ignoring me back.

"Salton," I called, knocking.

The door swung open instantly. "Get in here," he demanded, pulling me in as he slammed the door shut. "Sit down," he said, pointing to a chair. "You don't want anything, do you? Coffee? Tea?"

"No, I'm—"

"Stop it. I wasn't really offering. Wanted to talk with you about your work. I've heard some bad things. Lotta mistakes. New memo out. "You seen this?" He thrust it at me.

ATTN: All Peck & Peck Employees

FR: The Committee for Optimal Employee Performance

RE: Guy in Copy Room

Editors: Just a follow-up regarding the number of negative experiences so many of you have reported regarding the guy in the copy room. This memo serves to remind you that the Committee for Optimal Employee Performance takes your complaints seriously. Our investigation into his work is under way; subsequent recommendations are to follow. In the meantime, should you have new incidents to

report, do not hesitate to contact committee members Mira Vito and Dexter York, anytime, day or night.

"Yes," I told Salton. "I made the copies. I distributed it."

"That's what I thought," he said. "Couldn't believe it. I said to myself, *Is that guy in the copy room* denser *than* dense*?* Who copies and distributes job-ending memos about themselves?"

"Salton, I—"

"Thought about having your IQ tested," he interrupted sharply. "Do that all the time. Getting Slater's results back this week. But then I thought, *No. I'm not spending money on an IQ test—they're not cheap and I don't need one on you anyway*. I already know what it's going to tell me, and I resent the fact that you purposefully tried to get me to get you tested."

"Uh—"

"What about your raise?" he said, snatching the copies I'd made. "Gave you more than anyone, didn't I? Which was doable since you were basically making nothing. Didn't want to hire you—I've told you that before. Wanted to hire a lab animal—maybe an ex-eyeliner testing monkey—just something with little hands that could push start. But then you show up with your résumé and your recommendation, and what was I supposed to do? Ignore them? Absolutely. The résumé, I mean. And I did. But the rec? Impossible."

I found this even more confusing. I'd listed Mr. Raley as my only reference, but he said he'd never gotten a call.

"The problem is," Salton said, walking around the room tapping his finger to his cheek in a distracted way, "the drums are pounding now. Boy, are they. Some of the worms are feeling threatened. Even that recommendation of yours—I'm telling you—lotta people have been out to get you from day one. So I ask myself, *Why? What is it that they fear about this guy? Could it be he has something they* don't*?*"

I was completely lost. First, I was idiotic; now I "had" something.

"Happens all the time in companies," Salton said, still pacing. "People out to get other people—saying things, doing things in order to hurt 'em, put 'em in a bad light. It's basic office organizational behavior." He stopped abruptly and put his hands on his hips. "You get me, right? I got an MBA from Wharton, and sometimes I talk technical, and the poetry people just

don’t get it. If I don’t rhyme every other word, some of them barely listen. I hope that’s not the case here. I want to at least entertain the fantasy that you’re a clever guy.”

“I—”

“Fine,” he interrupted impatiently, spreading his arms wide, “let me explain how a company works. It starts with a normal dysfunctional family during the holly-heavy holidays. You got little Bobby running around with his new BB gun, and little Jeannie hugging her doll, and Mom all happy with her new Dustbuster, and Dad oddly thrilled with his aftershave. Are you following? But the reality is, Bobby is deeply disturbed and wants to wound as many things as possible. And Jeannie thinks the doll would look better with a shaved head and piercings. And Mom’s using the Dustbuster for, well—not exactly for dusting. And Dad? He’s drinking the aftershave.”

I nodded slowly.

“That’s Peck & Peck in a nutshell,” he said. “Everyone’s got their peccadilloes, and that’s why I say: watch the hell out. Because if it smells like aftershave”—he waved Mira’s memo—“it probably *is* aftershave.”

“Uh—”

“The question is, what to do about it. How we turn it to our advantage.”

It worried me when he said “our.”

“Liked what you said about the *Edmund Fitzgerald*. You didn’t tell me how the poem worked; you told me how it felt. Shows sense. I’m referring to the common variety, obviously. You majored in math, correct?”

“Pre-law.”

“You *told* me you studied accounting.”

“I—”

“That’s what we need here. Not you, specifically, but people *like* you. Numbers people. But instead, I’m stuck with a bunch of Ph.D. blowhards typing away on their stone-age IBM Selectric I’s, crying out for the newer model just because it’s new. Well, I can tell you, minus a few fluffy features only a smart squirrel would appreciate, it’s the same damn thing. Ever compared a page typed on a Selectric I versus a Selectric II? Don’t bother. Exactly the same. IBM. God love ’em!”

I had no idea what he was talking about.

“That’s why I like you,” he continued. “You’re like the Selectric II of Peck & Peck. Full of new features no one cares about. Like your opinions,

which I find refreshing in a career-ending way. What do you think of Xing Xing Yao's work?"

"It's—awful."

"Right again!" he said. "Fingernails on a chalkboard!" He seemed delighted.

"But, Salton," I said, thinking about Declonius's worry of creeping mediocrity, "if you know that, why publish her? I thought you thought too many people thought they could write."

"My *god.*" He shuddered. "You *do* have a rather large imbecilic streak, don't you? *I thought you thought people thought?* Don't you know you can't use the word 'thought' three times in one sentence? Stop it!" Salton jerked his head so hard I swear I heard his neck snap. "And anyway, do I really have to explain these kinds of moves to you? *Why* publish Xing Xing Yao? Isn't that like asking a pharmaceutical company why it puts sugar in its cough medicine? Haven't you read *Mary Poppins*?" His neck turned a sudden sea of red. "If you want to be a success, add sweetener, Beater. That way, when people get to the important stuff, they're still in the mood to swallow." He shook his head. "I explain what I feel should already be obvious to you and it's *not* obvious. And now I just don't know. About your promotion, I mean. That was my plan—promotion—but when you question the Xing Xing Yao business policy plan, I just don't know. Maybe promotion is the wrong move."

"You want to *promote* me?"

"I was thinking Associate Editor," he said. "Not all the way to the top, but still up there. That way you'd be over Mira and Dex. And you could keep an eye on Slater for me. He needs surveillance."

"*Associate Editor?*"

"Hold on. Not so fast. I haven't done it yet. I don't know if you know this, but at Peck & Peck, we don't promote people. Doesn't happen. Openings only occur here through two avenues: death, or death wish."

I nodded.

"I promote you and people are going to be very upset. Very, very upset." He rubbed his hands together in glee. "Still, you deserve it. There's something about you. The way you just cut right through to the heart of the matter—poems; ads; Xing Xing Yao. You're a blurter, you know that. Fantastic attribute. If I had more blurters like you, Aviary meetings would

be half as long. Plus, I wouldn't have to waste my time laying a trap for our latest traitor. The traitor would just blurt it right out."

"Traitor?"

"Oh please, Beater. You don't have to pretend with me. I know you know absolutely everything that goes on here. You see a confidential memo directed at only two people; you read it. I give you the raises to copy with express instructions not to look, and you read those too."

"I—"

"How much did I give Lou?"

"Ah—"

"Which is why I know you know all about what happened. About the poems. The ones that were taken from the building. Stolen."

I felt my stomach drop.

"Yes," he continued, "Andy has informed me that someone had the audacity to take work out of this building and there's a very, very good chance it will soon be published elsewhere. I could *kill* this certain someone, that's how angry I am." His fist hit the desk like a gavel.

I thought of Dexter's firing squad. "Any idea who?"

"As a matter of fact," he said, "Andy phoned me ten minutes ago with new intel. And just as soon as I can prove who did it—or pretend to prove it anyway—she'll pay. It will be the second happiest day of my life"—he smiled—"the first happiest being the day my thieving brother went to prison. Anyway, she's the reason I need more people around me I can trust—people like you. You know things; you get things. You and I—we're a lot alike. Almost like teammates. You know what I'm saying."

I didn't like hearing he thought we were a lot alike. And as for the poems—who was the "she"? *I'd* done it.

"Back to your promotion," he said, busying himself with papers on his desk. "Can't do it right away. Have to move some pawns around the chessboard—free up some space, if you catch my meaning. But in the meantime, I expect you to step up to the plate. Start doing the job before you have the job. That's how it works."

"I'd be thrilled, Salton," I said, my heart pounding. "I welcome this opportunity. I know I have a lot to learn, but—"

"What the hell are you doing? Don't play modest with me, Beat. I *know* you've got an ear—I know because I have one, too, and it takes one to

know one. It's that ear of yours that makes the rabble uncomfortable."

Like Declonius, he thought I had an ear? I felt myself sit up straighter. The compliment should have meant nothing coming from someone who couldn't tell free verse from a rondeau. I scooped it up anyway.

"It's your ear the kids don't like. That's why they expend so much effort trying to get you out of here. Memos, recommendations. Could they be any more transparent?"

"Salton, about that recommendation you keep referring to—"

"Right," he said, shuffling papers around on his desk. "Who *would* stoop that low? Well, let me describe the type. A coward. A bully. A whiny bastard who recognizes that you have what he lacks. Hate to break it to you, Beat, but your editorial siblings hate your unimpressive non-Ph.D. guts, and it's not because you can't seem to operate a copier; it's because you simply *know* what they can't seem to learn. Poetry, I mean. Not as well as me, of course. But you're in the ballpark." Then he looked up from the papers on his desk. "The outfield," he clarified.

"Who wrote that rec—"

"Your new job," Salton said, as he sorted through some papers on his desk, "will be to find the so-called half percent. You know what I mean—the high and mighty stuff. Can't do it myself right now. Too busy laying the master plan."

"The half percent," I echoed. I instantly pictured myself sitting with Howard in his office, the two of us discussing Derek Walcott's new work over fresh espressos. "I'm honored, Salton. Really. And of course, I will try my very best to earn the other editors' trust and respect. I already study their recommendations and—"

Salton looked up at me in disbelief. "Have you been listening to a *single* word I've been saying? I'm not asking you to play nice with the other kids. I am telling you to gun the motor and mow the bastards down!" He shook his head. "Anyway, don't you know what recommendations really are? They're nothing but hidden agendas. What's wrong with you? When your mother shoved you out of her uterus, did anyone mention brain damage?"

My heart began to pound.

"Can you keep a secret, Beat? You look like a secret keeper."

"I—"

"I'm flipping the quarterly," he confided. "Taking it from all those so-

called wise words and turning it into the world's number one source for poetic porn. Isn't that great? Best of all, I plan to get sickeningly rich doing it. Who says you can't have your cake and eat it too? German chocolate's my favorite. What's yours? Don't answer; you know I don't care."

"Wait," I said, "when you say you're flipping the quarterly, you mean —?"

"—pulling an Emperor's New Clothes, Beat," he said, impatiently. "Taking *Peck & Peck* down, *not* by letting it fail—financial failure is too easy—but by undressing the damn thing. Every issue I'll be sifting in more of the lipstick pieces—the kind of crap that would make a kitten yack. That's how you get smart people to accept awful stuff—by slowly introducing it into their intellectual diets while informing them of its brilliance. Before you know it, *Peck & Peck* will be parading around in its disgusting birthday suit and snobby academics everywhere will be falling all over themselves to defend its naked integrity!"

"*What—?*"

"You know how people are." He sniffed. "If there's one thing they hate, it's looking stupid. *Peck & Peck* has a reputation, Beat, one that's been carefully and relentlessly built on the back of impossibly high standards. We don't publish garbage—never have. That's why there isn't a poetry expert out there who will dare to question our judgment—not a literati alive daring enough to be the first to propose the Emperor's sudden new taste in clothes is a bit—how do I put this? See-through."

"But—"

"The best part is," said Salton, his face moist with excitement, "I'm not just taking down *Peck & Peck*. I'm taking down *everything*. The *entire* enchilada."

"What enchilada?"

"Poetry."

"Poetry?"

"POETRY. You know—*this* crap," he said, tossing an anthology off his desk. "Enough of the rhymes already. Let's kill this puppy before another defenseless kid has to memorize 'O Captain, My Captain.' Who talks like that anyway? I bet the military hates it."

"Salton," I said earnestly, "you can't *kill* poetry."

He laughed. "I admire your fake outrage, Beater," he said. "But what's

poetry ever done for either of us? Except," he said, waving Mira's memo in the air, "cause endless pain and misery."

He had a point. What *had* poetry ever done for me? Those poetry classes in college? I'd nearly flunked them. The writing workshop? I'd hated it. My one published poem? Still ruining the rides of unsuspecting New Yorkers every day. And what about this? The work I'd "stolen" was now going to be blamed on some innocent editor who would lose her job. My god. What a fool I was. And yet none of those failures came close to the biggest one of all: I'd been tricked into attending a poetry slam where I met the woman of my dreams who just *happened* to be in love with my mortal enemy, an asshole who also, unfairly, was one of the best poets I'd ever heard. I hate to admit it, but Salton was right. I hated poetry. Any sane person would. And yet I could not abandon it.

"Naturally," Salton continued, "I can't turn *Peck & Peck* into a heap of junk overnight. Has to be done gradually. Let the syrup seep into the woodwork; that's the only way to get this baby to rot from the ground up. Xing Xing and others like her will help reel in our new target audience of Average Bettys at Paint Yer Nails, but it's the other people—the snobs—we have to keep fooling. That's your job. You'll find the normal stuff they've come to expect—that half percent crap—while I'll be combing the kitty litter box for the rest of it. If we play our cards right, it's only a matter of time until *Peck & Peck* is the sort of low-grade rag that'll annoy the living hell out of my dead relatives, shove my lying brother ever closer to his own grave, and reveal those academics for the posers they are."

"But, Salton," I argued. "What about the competition? If they start publishing the work we would have published, then they'll become the new industry standard. Surely you wouldn't want that."

He laughed out loud. "No, no. These other publishers you speak of—these so-called competitors? They're just me-too publishers—followers, imitators, mynah birds dressed up in people outfits. They only ever want to publish what we publish. Why do you think we have that rule about work never leaving the building? It's because the me-tooers are standing outside hoping we'll drop something—or better, send it sealed with a kiss via our very own in-house traitor. No, no, no, our so-called competitors aren't in any danger of becoming the new industry standard. In fact, once I start rotting *Peck & Peck* from the inside out, our competitors will jump on the

imitation bandwagon and start rotting their quarterlies, too. Without knowing it, they'll help us get rid of poetry forever. God love 'em!"

The whole thing sounded preposterous until I thought about how easily people believe whatever they're told. Like in the sixties, when everybody switched to margarine because it was supposed to be healthier than butter, only to discover in the eighties that margarine was death in a plastic tub. Same with Salton's plan. Holly Hobbie? Sylvia Plath? Would anyone in the future be able to tell the difference?

"I'll require complete loyalty," Salton was saying. "You support my picks in meetings, and I support yours."

Before I could answer, his phone rang. "What NOW," he shouted into the receiver as I tried to convince myself that accepting this promotion wasn't really selling out. First, it would give me the opportunity to do what I was good at—what I was *born* to do. Second, it would give me the opportunity to work as an equal with brilliant people like Lou and Tang and Hernandez—maybe even get an office near Howard. Third, it would give me better access to Salton. If anyone could bring him back down to earth, it was me, right? Hadn't I talked him into the rogue wave poem?

"Salton," I said, as he slammed the phone down, "I appreciate this opportunity more than you'll ever know. I just have one last question: are you saying you want me to come to all the meetings in the Aviary? And if so, where will I sit? Should I order a chair?"

He looked at me with amazement. "Beater," he said, "you know that saying *There's no such thing as a stupid question*? Well, that's a lie. Yours is a stupid, *stupid* question and I resent you wasting my time with it, as well as trying to pretend that was only one question when really it was two. Yes, you will come to all the meetings. And where will you *sit*? In a chair, goddamn you. For now, a folding chair, but eventually you'll have your name on one, same as everybody else. Didn't I just tell you I have to clear some space?"

"Yes, but how?"

"Howard Gadley," he said, waving his hand dismissively. "You're taking his place."

47.

As I left Salton's office, my chest swelling at the promise of promotion, my gut churned. *Call Paul,* it insisted. *Tell him everything*. Not that I wanted to. One call to Paul and I might find myself taking the LSAT sooner rather than later. I waited until Friday; then I called.

He picked up on the third ring and in a quiet voice I barely recognized said, "Hey."

"Hey, Paul," I said. "It's me."

"I can hear that," he said

I hesitated. Maybe I'd woken him, or maybe he was in the middle of something. "Did I catch you at a bad time?"

He heaved a loud sigh. *Call me,* his last phone machine message had demanded. *I need to talk to you about something personal. It's important.* But I hadn't.

"Hey, Paul," I said as music started to play in the background. I knew it—the saddest song ever written: "Walk Away Renee." "*Paul,*" I said a little louder, "I'm really sorry I didn't call before. Things have been—"

"I don't care," he said in a voice unfamiliar to me.

"I'm sorry. It's just that I'd been mugged and—"

"Everybody gets hurt. So what." With that, the music volume increased to a point where further conversation would be difficult. I thought I heard weeping.

"Paul?" I said, alarmed. "You're scaring me now. What's going on?"

Nothing.

"Sit tight. I'm going to the train station. I'll be there as soon as I can."

Nothing.

So that's what I did. I hopped a train to Union Station in DC and, hours later, stood in front of his door, and guess what: "Walk Away Renee" was *still* playing.

Obviously, Paul had been dumped. Although how was that possible? Paul didn't have *a* girlfriend—he had thousands. I rang the bell, and he

opened the door as if he'd been standing there the whole time, then turned and flung himself back into his sofa's deep cavity.

I lowered myself next to him and put a hand on his back. "Hey," I said. "What's wrong? What happened?" I patted him with concern, although, selfishly, some of it was reserved for me. If no-flaws Paul could have his heart broken, what hope was there for the rest of us? I sat beside him, useless, my pat slowly losing its power. After several more "Walk Away Renee"s, I tried again. "Paul, it'll help to talk about it."

"No, it *won't,* Batter," he said in an angry voice. "You wouldn't understand."

"Did something happen?" I asked. "Are you sick?"

He raised his head sharply, obviously offended, as if trying to determine the true meaning of my question. But a moment later he gave up and buried his face in my shoulder. Tears soaked my shirt. To say I was alarmed was an understatement. I'd never seen Paul cry—not once in all the years we roomed together And, believe me, at college, people cry *all* the time.

"Listen," I said, putting my arm around him, "you're Paul Acheson. It's her loss." But the way he collapsed into me, his sadness coming from some bottomless well, indicated otherwise. "She's *not* worth it," I added with a twinge of anger. "Whoever she is, she's *not* worth it." In that moment, I hoped this woman's name really was Renee so I could track her down and give her a piece of my mind. How *dare* she break Paul's heart? *What the fuck, Renee?*

But telling Paul she wasn't worth it made him cry even more, and the fact that we were having this discussion without any alcohol in the immediate area meant I could offer no substantial consolation outside of my clumsy pats and nonreassuring words. So, like so many others who fail at comfort, I did a dumb thing: I offered him what I knew would make *me* feel better. I quoted Pablo Neruda. *Love is so short, forgetting is so long.*

What was I thinking?

He lifted himself to half-mast. "Jesus Christ, Batter, are you stupid? What the fuck was that? Also, just to be clear, I'm not in love with some woman named Renee. I'm in love with a man named James. A man, Batter. I'm gay."

I did feel stupid. After spending four years fielding phone messages from Teresas and JoAnns and Melissas, piling them up on his desk like unpaid

bills while explaining to countless disappointed female drop-ins that they'd "just missed him," I'd ignored the obvious: he'd never once proclaimed affection for any of them. And while more than a few cologne-heavy men had also dropped by, cologne wasn't a reliable gender yardstick back then—plenty of guys wore Old Spice because their regular deodorant couldn't handle the workload. The real problem, besides my blindness, was the era itself: the seventies. *Not* being true to yourself was essential. The closet remained full thanks to all the standard, injurious weights of expectation: family, religion, reputation. But also ignorance. Now it's the eighties, and guess what. Same damn thing.

I studied his profile, hoping to see a trace of his confidence, but his face was a stubbled mess.

"Paul," I said. "This guy, James. Did he break up with you?"

Paul nodded.

"But *why*?"

He shrugged.

"How long were you together?"

"Six months," he whispered. "He found someone else."

"Someone *else*?" I said. "Someone *else*?" It didn't get better than Paul Acheson. The whole thing reminded me of a once-popular car commercial—the one that compared the look of a Ford Granada to a Mercedes Benz, implying that if you couldn't tell the difference, why not buy the Ford?

"Let's go," I said. "Get up, wash your face. We're going out."

"I don't want to."

"No excuses. Up and out. We're hitting the bar."

"If you plan on quoting poetry again, forget it. One mention of Robert Frost—"

"You can't lay here another second. You're wallowing. This James person doesn't deserve your wallow. Get up." I wrapped my arms around him and pulled him to his feet.

"PROMISE."

"I will not quote poetry. Jesus, Paul."

He leaned on me. "I haven't told my parents. Or really anyone."

"Of course you haven't. I don't tell my parents anything either. They think I'm a copy editor at *Peck & Peck*."

He looked at me funny. "You aren't?"

48.

Late the next morning, nursing the worst hangover of my life, I boarded a train back to the city. Despite Paul's broken heart, he insisted on hearing every detail about my job, all of which sounded much worse drunk. When I mentioned the mugging, he seemed genuinely angry.

"You're lucky you didn't end up in the hospital," he said. I'd left out the detail about the muggers' ages. "You should press charges."

"I can't," I said. "I did commit the first crime—taking the poems from the building. That's *why* I got mugged."

He took this in. "Good point." We sat in silence for a few moments. "But just so you know, poetry theft hasn't come up a single time during my last three years of law school. Want to know why?"

"Because no one cares."

"Because no one cares. And yet, here we are. So, as your lawyer," he said, "I want you to proceed as follows: get the stolen work back. Return it to Salton. Quit. As for dating your mortal enemy's girlfriend, that's out, too. Break all ties with *Peck & Peck*, Batter. Do this the minute you get back. Don't make me hire a private investigator to find out what else is wrong with this place. PIs are expensive and I don't need one to tell me what's already obvious. This place is fucked. Stay there another second and you'll be playing with fire."

The minute my train pulled into the station, I followed Paul's plan. I went directly to Declonius's loft and, swan door knocker in hand, announced my presence with a BAM BAM BAM, throttling the bird exactly the way I wanted to throttle the man who lived there.

"Declonius Peck!" I shouted. "Open up." Music was blasting inside. It was one of Paul's favorites: the Bobby Fuller Four's "I Fought the Law and the Law Won," which seemed appropriate given Declonius's circumstances, even though, technically, Declonius was the one who broke the law and

that's why the law won. I shoved my weight against the door in frustration. To my surprise, it instantly gave way.

"HEY," I shouted as I pushed in. "DEC—" But before I could finish, a terrifying screech came from above. I looked up just in time to see a large hawk, talons out, bearing down on me at raptor speed.

"JESUS!" I cried, diving to the floor, arms protecting my head. For the second time that month, I was splayed on the floor, quaking.

"Batter?" I heard a voice say about twenty seconds later. The music had stopped; the room was silent. "What are you doing? Get off the floor."

I looked up to see Declonius, hands on hips.

"The bird won't hurt you," he said in a tone that implied he thought I was overreacting. "It's a burglar alarm." He waved his hand, activating some switch that sent the huge-winged beast back up to the ceiling. "Heard you stopped in the other morning," he said, extending a hand to help me up. "Sorry to have missed you."

"What the hell is *wrong* with you?" I said, watching as the attack hawk retreated with a menacing look. "I could have been injured."

"Come on now, *relax*," Declonius ordered, as if my histrionics were wearing thin. "By a stuffed bird? He's dead. They all are."

He raised his arm, motioning to a spacious, light-filled room where countless stuffed birds of various shapes and sizes hung suspended in all manner of activity: swooping, diving, gliding, soaring; their wings spread wide, their flights, joyous. "We're not allowed to have pets in the building," Declonius said, following my gaze. "But I needed a watchdog. A little proud of how it works, truthfully. I'm not very mechanical." He turned my attention to the rest of the loft. "An architectural salvage place owns it. I let them store some of their stuff here in exchange for reduced rent. Have a seat. I'll mix some cocktails."

"I'm not staying," I insisted. "I just came to get the work you stole from me. And my messenger bag and wallet." But he'd already disappeared.

While I waited, I cast a wary eye about his living quarters. It reminded me of Rome—Rome in the process of being ruined, I mean. Everywhere I looked there were columns of marble, stone, and wood, all in various states of disrepair, all probably hundreds of years old, all standing, leaning, or flat on the floor, all littered about the place like an old-growth forest in the midst of deforestation. Six of the columns marched down the length of the

room, reaching all the way to the twenty-five-foot-high ceiling, while others stood in their shade, just seven or ten feet tall, crowned by intricate capitals or cornices, every last one chipped, broken, or eroded, as if shrapnel had been an intentional design tool.

Between and around these columns flew the dead flock of ninety-odd birds, no two alike, their wings stretched wide, their hued underbellies revealed, their determined eyes searching for a new way out. None of the birds looked dead—that was part of what made it odd—probably due to a small continuous air current that leaked from the old arched windows and that moved the flock just enough to suggest a lazy vitality. None of these feathered creatures would have been neighbors or friends in real life, yet here they flew in unheard-of pairings: a swan with a woodpecker; a finch with a bald eagle, the latter pair diving like tightly integrated Air Force jets toward goldfish who swam, very much alive, in an old stone trough just beneath them.

I looked down just in time to prevent myself from tripping over an orchid in my path, until I realized it wasn't a single orchid but a sea of orchids—each individually balanced on a stack of books and staggered around the room like garden lights defining a path, every bloom creating a sudden surprising pocket of bright white luminosity. It was the *Angraecum sesquipedale*; the comet orchid—the one made famous by Charles Darwin, who insisted that this orchid's extraordinarily long spurs—up to twelve inches in length—indicated that a moth with a similarly long proboscis had to be its pollinator. No one believed him, of course; not until forty years later, when a moth matching that exact description was discovered and the idea of coevolution—the interdependence of two species on mutual survival—became more firmly fixed. How did I know all this? Sociobiology 101. At least the first two weeks of it.

I took the path, passing an old park bench covered in moss and thyme. Little, pale flowers dotted the arms, which swept forward like eddies, one of them tattooed with a faintly etched "D + B." A small pair of pruning shears lay on the arm. I kept moving, taken by the sudden appearance of a huge lion's head, which commanded the potted garden from the far end of the room. Carved out of a massive block of golden citrine, the lion's sculpted mane raged like a river three feet in either direction, but its eyes were calm, its mouth, open, its demeanor, hungry, as it gazed into an old schoolyard

fountain, permanently parched, not for food or water but for knowledge. The fountain was overflowing with thin books.

Finally, in the center of the room, an enormous ampersand lay flat and wide, a remanent of some outdoor signage now pressed into service as a table. Its somber serifs pointed to four rusted iron garden chairs. The chairs, which surrounded the ampersand like downed tree trunks at a campfire, looked hideously uncomfortable. Despite the presence of hothouse orchids, the place was freezing.

"Sit anywhere," Declonius called as he disappeared into a small alcove, but all I saw were the four cold metal chairs. I mentally reviewed my tetanus shot history, then chose the least rusty.

He returned, placing a tray on top of the makeshift table, indicating I should help myself to drinks, and then sat down and removed his glasses, foggy with fingerprints.

"So," he said, rubbing the lenses on his shirt while sighing with disapproval. "Let's get right to it. I believe you stole a package from my upstairs neighbor. It contained eight poems."

Textbook Declonius.

"You mean you stole the work I was carrying," I corrected him firmly. "You arranged to have me mugged, and now that work is in the hands of competitors. As a result, someone at Peck & Peck—someone who had nothing to do with any of this—is going to get fired."

"What?" he said. "Who has what? Who's getting fired?"

"The *poems*. The ones you had me mugged for. They're being published elsewhere!"

"Batter," he said, looking at me annoyed, "I never did anything with those poems. They're right there." He pointed just off to my left. There it was, my messenger bag. A small stack of papers lay next to it. "And as for the mugging—they were children. I called in a prison favor; I specifically asked for beginners. I was being thoughtful."

Jesus, *this guy*. I grabbed the pile. Sure enough, the work was all there. Not that *that* meant anything.

"Now what's this about someone getting fired?" He took a long drink from his cocktail. "And did you bring Portia's work? The poems *you* took from *me*? My poor neighbor, she feels terrible."

"I'm certain you already had these copied," I said, waving the recovered

poems. “Because I know for a fact that this very work is now being published elsewhere; Salton said as much. He also believes he knows who’s responsible for the theft—a woman, by the way. Not me, not you. We have to make this right before an innocent person gets canned.”

Declonius looked at me blankly.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he said. “I took those poems to protect you. Under no circumstances should you ever take work from the building. Ever.” He seemed astonished that I would doubt his integrity. “I’ve already apologized about the mugging,” he continued, “but fine, here it is again. Sorry. But I didn’t give that work to anyone, nor did I have it copied. I’d never do that. I don’t talk to anyone in the poetry business—writers or editors. And they have no desire to talk with me.”

This pissed me off. “You talk to *me*, and I’m in the poetry business.”

“You’re right,” he conceded. “I do talk to you. I also talk to Portia, the nine-year-old poet. She lives down the street. Her father was supposed to be picking her work up. Where is her work anyway? The poems were in an envelope. Those were her originals. She didn’t make copies. Kids don’t think of these things.”

“You’re not even *allowed* to work in poetry anymore,” I said sharply, retrieving the manila envelope containing Portia’s poems from my backpack and laying it on the ampersand. “It’s part of the restraining order. So, if you’re using the poems you took from *me* to launch a new venture, that’s enough to send you right back to jail.”

“I’m very well aware of what my restraining order says, Batter,” Declonius replied evenly. “And I am working as a sort of editor, but not in any kind of way that would send me back to jail. My choices are extremely limited these days. I could probably make more money folding T-shirts at the Gap. You did, right?”

I sat back, dumbfounded.

“You don’t remember,” he said, rising to his feet, “but that’s where we first met. I was returning a Christmas gift and you helped me. You had a poetry book next to the cash register—Carolyn Forché: *The Country Between Us*. I asked you about it.”

This rang a faint bell.

“You gave me an incredibly incisive response,” he continued. “You were checking tags and refolding the clothing and, in the process, managed to tell

me more about Forché's work than I had ever intuited myself."

I did remember this. It was during the Christmas return rush; I'd been on the floor for nine hours already without a break; I was near death with exhaustion. A man had come up with a complicated return, and while I was sorting through his unwanted jeans and T-shirts, he asked me about the book. Without thinking twice, or maybe because I was so starved for a real conversation, I'd launched into an impassioned lecture about Forché's use of language as a tool of revolt—the way she used simple words embedded in a distinct meter to lay politics next to humanity, defining their relationship like a magnet that both attracts and repels. "That's why we'll always have war," I'd said, my head down, "because we can't seem to live without it." It was embarrassing. After I'd finished, I looked up at him, but he was focused on his wallet.

"I don't remember," I said.

Declonius nodded. "Well, that's where we differ. After I left, I couldn't stop thinking about what you'd said—how you'd phrased your thoughts. You reminded me of my uncle and my father—that's about the highest compliment I can give. Then, oddly enough, I saw you again. It was at a reading just a week later. At St. Mark's."

I went to St. Mark's all the time.

"You were sitting in an empty row of chairs, listening to the nervous poets, and from your expression, I could tell you were willing them to be better. After that, I started to keep an eye out for you."

"Well. But I never saw *you*," I accused. "Which doesn't seem possible, given what you're saying."

"Because I don't like to be seen," Declonius said. "My being seen puts old friends on the spot. New ones, too, for that matter. Prison is a teacher, and most of its lessons one should try to forget. But how to be invisible—I memorized that one."

"You're not invisible," I said. "One day someone is going to walk into that copy room and see you and that'll be that. How do you get in?"

He shrugged as if I was missing the point. "Let's ask a more interesting question," he said. "Let's ask how *you* got into Peck & Peck."

I stood up, nervous. What did he mean how did *I* get into Peck & Peck? I applied, that's how. I had the right credentials, topped by a killer recommendation—even Salton had said so. Although I just couldn't

imagine Mr. Raley writing a killer recommendation. Actually, I couldn't imagine Mr. Raley writing anything. Jesus, how *did* I get in? I looked back at Declonius, his head tipped to the side as if willing me to come up with the right answer.

"What are you saying?"

"You have an extraordinary ear—possibly the best I've ever encountered. I knew I needed to hire you, so I did."

"But you *didn't* hire me; your brother did."

"No, *I* did. By setting you on the path to discover Peck & Peck for yourself. Think back to an evening at St. Mark's. Four poets read that night, including Dick Gallup and Ron Padgett, the Tulsa legends. At the end of the evening, someone stood near the door, head down, cap low, and handed you a handwritten flyer about a new bookstore in town with a 'pretty good poetry section.' Do you remember? The flyer provided an address—nothing else. That someone was me. And sure enough, two nights later, there you were. It was late September. It was snowing."

"You were *there*?" I said.

"I watched you," he said. "You stood there a very long time—long enough to eavesdrop on a private conversation between two editors. They were talking about an opening; I watched as your face registered the information."

My mind spun back to that night—the snow, the editors, the building ablaze with activity. With a start, I also remembered one other thing. A man just off to the side, behind a light pole. He'd paused momentarily to clean the snow off of his glasses, then disappeared.

"I knew you were going to apply. I also knew you'd never get it—not unless I helped. So I followed you to a restaurant—the—the Okay Corral."

"The Just Okay."

"The Just Okay. And I spoke with your manager. I told him I wanted to file a complaint. It was the only way I could get him to give me your name."

"You filed a *complaint*? Against me?"

"I said you were rude."

"Are you *kidding* me?"

"And once I had your name, all I had to do was write a recommendation Salton couldn't ignore."

“Which was *what*?”

“I told him someone named Batter Gray—your manager kept calling you Alex, but on the employment form you were listed as Batter—was going to apply for a position, and that under no circumstances should he hire you. I told him you were a rude and untrustworthy liar, and that if he truly cared about the quarterly, to please ignore your application as a small family favor to me.” He cocked his head to the side. “I guess you could say it was more of an anti-recommendation.”

“You called me a *rude and untrustworthy liar*?”

“I may have added that you weren’t very bright.”

“Jesus Christ!”

“Also, that you were homophobic. Sadly.”

“Why would you say that? That’s a lie!”

He leaned back in his chair. “You got the job, didn’t you?”

“You can’t do that sort of thing!”

“I know my brother very well. I knew exactly how he’d react. You realize we’re fraternal twins. Two eggs. Separated in the womb and forever after. You’re an only child, aren’t you?”

“How did you know *that*?”

“You told me. That day at the Gap.”

He was right. I had told him.

There’d been a family of five at the cash register next to mine and the kids were fighting. “Do you have siblings?” he’d asked, and when I said no, he’d said, “Lucky you.”

But I’ve never felt lucky.

“I’ve told you: Salton and I were like oil and water. Surely you have people in your life like that,” he said. “The ones you’re supposed to like but absolutely hate.”

“Dexter.” Which I regretted saying almost immediately.

Declonius startled. “Dexter? But I’ve only ever heard good—”

“Probably from Howard,” I cut in. “Howard *loves* the guy.” I sounded like a jealous sibling.

“I don’t talk to Howard,” he said. “I don’t talk to anyone at Peck & Peck.”

“Well, Howard is always going on about how bright Dexter is, how well educated—how friendly. But he doesn’t know him at all.”

“On the contrary,” Declonius said. “Howard knows him very well. He’s Dexter’s godfather.”

That news practically knocked me off my chair. His *godfather*? Howard hadn’t mentioned that. I felt betrayed.

“Well,” I said, more hurt by the news than I cared to admit. “I don’t think I’ll be talking to Howard much anymore either. Salton wants to promote me—he wants me to take Howard’s place.”

Now it was Declonius’s turn to look dumbfounded. “Salton is *promoting* you? To Associate Editor?”

“Yes.”

“Howard would—retire?”

“I guess.”

He sat back as if trying to take it all in.

“I’m not on board with that part of it,” I interjected. “I want the promotion, but not at Howard’s expense.” I was surprised to find I still felt this way after the godfather news, but I did.

“Don’t worry about Howard,” Declonius said quickly. “He’s made a name for himself in this industry; he’ll be fine. But you being promoted—that’s what really matters here.”

“What *is* it with you people?” I said, infuriated. “You and your brother are completely heartless. Howard’s been there more than thirty years. He’s the best editor Peck & Peck has.”

“I am *not* heartless,” Declonius snapped. “And I am *not* like my brother. You don’t know me at all, Batter. My brother and I don’t agree on anything.”

Except for my promotion, I thought.

“When it comes to Howard,” he said, pushing a small bowl of ancient-looking Triscuit crackers in my general direction, “you have to understand that he might be better off *not* being there. It’s too stressful; he has a bad heart. Howard was my closest friend. I only want the best for him.”

I nodded, thinking how strange it was that Declonius and I both counted Howard as a close friend—although in Declonius’s case, it was in the past tense, and in my case, it was marred by what I now knew was a godfatherly affection for Dexter.

“Anyway,” I said, “getting back to the poems you had me mugged for. We’ve got a situation.”

“Salton has a situation,” Declonius said. “I don’t. Although I am worried about Andy.”

I scoffed, and Declonius gave me a look of disappointment.

“Andy is far more than a security guard, Batter. He was my father’s best friend, a constant figure in our house growing up.”

“He told me.”

Declonius nodded. “I’m surprised. He never talks about it, tries to keep it all business at work. Salton and I both loved him; he was a better father to us than our own father. But he and my father argued constantly. My first memories are of them fighting. Still, he stayed in our lives—even became our scoutmaster. Said his mission in life was to bring me and Salton together—make us see the best in each other. *You’re family,* he used to insist. But that’s not always enough.”

With a start I remembered the newspaper article. “War Hero Attributes Valor to Scout Training—and Poetry.” That vaguely familiar-looking man in the middle trying to smash Declonius and Salton together. Andy.

“He’s a poet,” Declonius continued. “Or was. Quit when he was young. My father said he didn’t have it.”

“How long’s he been at Peck & Peck?”

“About twelve years. He was a cop but got shot in the line of duty. The injury was bad enough to force him into retirement. After he recovered, he came to me suggesting Peck & Peck might need protection from all the angry poets we were always rejecting. He tried to make it sound serious, and I did my best to act alarmed, but we both knew he needed a job.” He stood up, agitated. “Look, I know what everyone thinks,” he said. “Andy is fat, old, and sweaty. His gun’s a fake, and that can of Mace he carries is empty. But he’s important to me. And, I think, to Salton.”

“Speaking of which, how was it that you became the sole Editor in Chief?” I asked. “The company has always been run by both brothers.”

“Salton had no interest,” Declonius said. “He’d majored in economics, graduated magna cum laude from Penn, earned an MBA from Wharton. This was during World War II, when everyone was committed to fighting the Nazis except for my brother. He took a stockbroker job on Wall Street. Made a fortune.” Declonius rose and went to a desk, opening a drawer to reveal various pruners. He selected a pair, then set to work on the orchids.

As he snipped, he revealed that although Salton did not want to work

with him at Peck & Peck, he insisted on maintaining his Editor in Chief status. According to the bylaws, all he had to do was sign each quarterly with the silvery pen and attend two Aviary meetings a year—"have a presence" was how it was worded. The first time, he sent his secretary in his place; the second, the paperboy. A full decade later, when Cusp and Rye finally stepped down, he sent a blow-up doll with a note attached that said, *Wake me if anything happens*. Sometime during those years, he married, had a child. Declonius didn't know much more.

"I probably could have used his advice," Declonius admitted. "*Peck & Peck* wasn't making a lot of money. We were staying on the right side of the line, but I wanted more—not just profits, but presence. My goal was to change the field of poetics. Make poetry important, not just to the literati, but to everyone."

"That seems like an uphill battle."

"Uphill battles are the ones worth fighting, Batter," he asserted. "I was proud of our publication. *Peck & Peck* has been translated into more languages, used in more schools, quoted more often, and given rise to more now-famous poets than any other poetry publication on earth. Nearly every library in the country had a subscription until Salton made it unaffordable for them. And yet we *still* weren't well known, except within our narrow field. It doesn't make sense to me. Poetry is fundamental."

Just then, an updraft snuck through the leaky windows and the birds moved with a little more force, as if disproving their stuffed state. Declonius followed my gaze.

"I know how some people feel about taxidermy," he said, "but none of these specimens were killed unnecessarily. They came from aviaries—died from old age. I stuffed them myself. At heart, I'm a preservationist. Whether it's poetry or birds, I try to keep beauty alive."

"But *you* slaughtered the quarterly," I reminded him.

"No, dammit," he said. "I *fed* it. My mission as Editor in Chief was not only to seek out the truth but to make sure the good poets were heard and rewarded; to spread their ideas in hopes of changing what was broken about the world. I wanted to make *Peck & Peck* the standard-bearer for the very best work, to be a think tank of inspiration and knowledge. I wanted our writers to speak in town halls, argue points on Capitol Hill, appear before the United Nations. I think of great poets as oracles. I wanted *Peck & Peck*

to be based on that—on the idea that wisdom still exists—that it's *still* being written." He sighed. "I must sound like an idiot."

"No, no, I understand," I said, feeling my face redden with shame. It wasn't that long ago that I'd bragged to my parents about how I'd "sat in" on the Xing Xing Yao product placement phone meeting.

"As for the poets themselves," Declonius went on, "in exchange for their ability to change lives, I wanted to change theirs. So—I paid them. *A lot.* For years *Peck & Peck* had run under the same old poverty rate: ten to twenty-five dollars per published poem plus a free copy of the quarterly. But I believed that if we paid more, we would not only help these people earn a living but also attract better, smarter voices. So I paid twelve hundred a poem. I once wrote a check to a poet for three thousand dollars—that's how good her work was."

I nodded, but in my head, I could see money draining from the company like an IV drip open all the way.

"Unfortunately, within a short period of time, things changed," he said. "Based on those rates, we had every Tom, Dick, and Harry sending us their deep thoughts on notebook paper and demanding an answer either way—yes or no—and if we weren't willing to pay twelve hundred, what about eight fifty? Meanwhile, Peck & Peck—a company that had always run in the black—was lurching toward the red."

"So why didn't you lower the rates?"

"Because part of my plan was working. We started gaining readers and subscribers at a prodigious rate. And according to my math, the new subscriptions outweighed the cost of paying our poets more. But there were other costs as well; printing went up; health insurance became unaffordable—and the cost of maintaining Peck & Peck itself—difficult. After the crash of 'twenty-nine, my father and uncle had to sell the building. We've rented it from an investment firm ever since. I tried to buy it back on three separate occasions without luck. At one point they doubled the rent; a ploy to get us to move so they could tear it down and put up a high-rise. But I paid that damn doubled rent. I had to. Otherwise, the Aviary, the topiaries, the domes—all of it would have become ancient history."

I imagined a wrecking ball slicing through the Aviary, breaking the spines of the iron railings, tearing through the bookshelves and library ladders, reducing the domes to rubble. Despite how difficult my days had

been there, I went to work largely *because* of the building. That's what good environments do: they inspire people to carry on despite great odds; to reach for something better because the walls and windows insist it's possible.

"So I cut salaries instead," Declonius was saying. "I paid myself nothing, and I lowered everyone else by ten percent. Finally, in 1978, desperate beyond all measure, I went looking for investors. I thought if I could just get us over the hump—put a little extra money in the bank—things would turn around. I went to Salton, but he refused to see me. He still wasn't showing up at Aviary meetings himself—he'd continued to send someone, or something, in his stead for more than two decades. But as I stood outside his office door that day, I heard him tell his secretary to give me a message. *Tell him to expect an extra-special treat at the next Aviary meeting. A "presence" to top all presences.*"

"Oh god. What did he send?"

Declonius set his cocktail down. "The police. They arrested me on the spot, in front of everyone. It was humiliating. Out of all the people to be accused and found guilty of embezzlement," he said, "me. That's the laughable part, Batter. I have no idea how one embezzles. And even if I did, I certainly didn't need to commit embezzlement to cause harm. It seemed like I was driving Peck & Peck straight into the ground all on my own.

"They took me away in handcuffs while reading the charges aloud. Embezzlement. Grand larceny. Fraud. Two of Salton's attorneys appeared and explained to the editors that Salton had suspected something was amiss—that he'd taken a close look at the financials and realized I'd completely drained the company of its resources. I'd been siphoning off money for years. I'd made large withdrawals over time, each carefully coinciding with private bills I *did* need to pay. College tuitions. My wife's training."

"What does she do? Your wife."

"Nothing anymore," he said, his voice dropping an octave. "She died five years ago, a few months after I went to prison. She was the love of my life, Batter. She was perfect." He paused. "Billie. That was her name." He set the pruners down and looked away. "She never stopped believing in me. Knew I was innocent." He stopped.

"I'm—I'm so sorry."

He shook his head as if still attempting to make sense of it. "She was an

infectious disease nurse—loved her work. She'd been assigned a new patient with what they thought was meningitis, but it turned out to be the Marburg virus. Have you heard of it? It can look like all sorts of things—malaria, shigellosis—but it's far more deadly. Once they understood what it was, they quarantined her immediately, but it was too late. She died eight days later." He cleared his throat. "She—she was cremated within an hour of her death."

"*My god—*"

"It's Marburg protocol," he said, his voice, hardening.

"*I'm so sorry*."

"The day of her funeral, there was an incident at the prison and we were in lockdown. I wasn't allowed to go."

"Declonius, I—"

"My kids had to go alone. No coffin; no ashes; no father. My son has never forgiven me. I can't blame him."

"Forgiven you for what?"

"Prison," he said angrily. "The ruin of our family. Her death. After I was convicted, Billie worked double shifts. She had to; we were wrecked financially. That's why she had so much exposure to that patient. Double shifts."

He rose; then disappeared into the kitchen. I thought I heard him mixing another drink, but a minute later he came out empty-handed.

"Have you ever lost someone?" he asked. His voice had grown thick.

My brother, I wanted to say. *My identical twin, Declonius. I'm a twin, too*. But it's wrong to milk a loss you don't remember.

"A—a relative," I said quietly.

"I'm sorry."

I was grateful he didn't pursue it further; I didn't have any more detail to give. I had no idea why my brother didn't survive.

In a quiet voice, Declonius went on to explain what I'd learned from a newspaper clipping that day in the library—most of it anyway. Peck & Peck closed for two years after his arrest. "The editors were out on the street," he said. "Some taught, a few freelanced, Lou sold Avon. The building was locked pending sale. No offers came in until 1980, when a developer managed to secure the permits to tear it down. That's when Salton showed up with his millions. He dismissed the offer, restored the editorial jobs,

announced to the press that, although he was a very busy and successful man, he was still a Peck. He could turn my disaster around in no time."

"The editors don't like working for him," I said, defending them.

"But they do it."

"Well—he did just give everyone a raise."

"*What?*" Declonius said, disheartened.

"Some huge, others, not so huge."

"Well, that's it, then," he said, visibly discouraged. "How can any of them challenge his leadership now? If the quarterly is successful, they're successful. They're finally on a winning team. I just wish someone would question how Salton managed to bring Peck & Peck back from the edge and make a profit so quickly. Yes, he invested his own money, but he has to get that investment back, doesn't he? Business isn't my forte—I've certainly proven *that.* But I ran the company for decades, and this I know for sure: the poetry market hasn't changed. If anything, it's gotten worse."

He had a point. It wasn't like poetry fans were lining up, three abreast, in front of Books & Co. on the Upper East Side to get a signed copy of Helen Gardner's *The Metaphysical Poets*. How *had* Salton turned a profit? Blurbs? Starbursts? Doubtful.

"The Peck & Peck team is unmatched in talent," Declonius continued, "but they've been forced into pragmatism. Even if others question *Peck & Peck*'s new taste in poetics, the editors will stand by it. Quietly. Without resistance. They might harbor a secret hope that things will get fixed, but they won't be the ones doing the fixing. *Peck & Peck* bankrupted them once; they can't afford a second go-around." Without warning, he slammed his fist down on the ampersand. "MY GOD," he shouted. "How the *hell* are we going to get them back? We've got to get the editors back!"

His outburst scared me, but what scared me more was his use of the word "we."

What was I doing? I'd arrived less than an hour ago with two goals: to get my things back, and then to quit. Instead I'd allowed myself to be swept up in Declonius's tragic story; the facts I already knew grew faint. I forced myself back to reality. He *had* been convicted. He *continued* to enter Peck & Peck all the time, despite a restraining order. He'd had me *mugged*. He *was* working in poetics—Portia's writing proved it. And this loft apartment—maybe it was cheap, but the orchids had to be worth a small fortune. And

what about the way he'd dismissed Howard's probable forced retirement? And the horrible things he'd written about me in my so-called recommendation? Who does that? Who does *any* of these things?

I'd been on the verge of divulging Salton's plan of destruction: not just the quarterly but poetry itself, but the facts made me stop short.

"Your promised promotion," Declonius said, "is the best news I've heard in a long time. We can use it to our advantage."

"Our advantage." Salton had used *exactly* the same words. I felt my body seize.

The phone rang again. Declonius ran to it.

"Please don't hang up," he begged. He turned to me, his hand over the phone, his eyes watery. "Would you excuse me?"

49.

I'd been planning on going to Nuyorican's Poet Café that evening, but instead I returned home, worn out, more than ready to begin my poetry-free life. As I entered my apartment, my phone machine blinked with messages, but before I could listen to any of them, my phone rang.

"Tell me you got the poems back, handed them over to Salton, and quit," Paul said.

"I got them, Paul, but it's Saturday. No one's in the office this weekend." Which wasn't true. Issue 324 was in the works, which meant another crisis loomed large on the horizon, which meant the place was packed, which meant those blinking messages were from angry editors wondering where the hell *I* was. "I'll quit Monday."

"You have to. I mean it. I hired a private detective and he's—"

"I can't afford that!"

"I know. But your taking-poems-out-of-the-building nonsense turns out to be an actual crime. Minor, but real. As your attorney, I thought it best to

hit the ground running. You won't believe the amount of shit my PI's uncovered already."

"Like what," I said dully.

"Like this. Peck & Peck has an Aviary except there isn't a single bird in it. And the building's filled with eggs. And dead trees. And framed trash. And oh, get this: felons run the mailroom."

"I *know* all this, Paul," I said. "*I work there*, remember?"

"Okay, how about this. Ever met a guy named Andy Smith?"

"Of course. He's the security guard; an old friend of the family, a second father to Salton and Declonius, an ex-cop. Married a woman named Daisy," I said, trying to impress Paul with my command of the facts. "And he's a poet. Or was."

"You should know by now that that kind of statement doesn't impress me."

"He was also Cusp Peck's best friend," I added. "Before they had a falling-out."

"A falling-out." Paul snorted. "That's putting it mildly. You know what kills me about poets? They think it's their duty to commit every feeling to paper. It's like they've never heard the admonition *Keep it to yourself*. My PI discovered that Andy had an affair with Daisy. An *affair*, Batter, not marriage."

I thought back to that day in the lobby. *Loved her with all my heart*, he'd said about her picture.

"Daisy was Cusp Peck's wife," Paul said. "Get it now? Andy was having an affair with his best friend's wife. Yet another benefit of having me as your best friend. I will never be interested in anyone you date or marry. Guaranteed."

"But how—"

"Andy. He wrote poems about Daisy—scads of poems—which he shared with Rye Peck in the hope of getting them published." I heard a match strike as Paul lit his pipe. "This is why no one likes poets, Batter," he said, puffing. "They're idiots. Andy didn't even change the names."

"How do you know all this?"

"Because I made the ultimate sacrifice. I read Andy's poetry. He self-published."

I heaved myself onto my sofa. The Peck drama was exhausting. "Okay,

so Andy and Daisy had an affair," I said. "So what."

"So what? I believe their affair resulted in a son. Named Salton."

"Not possible," I said, blowing air out between my lips. "Declonius and Salton are fraternal twins. Born the same day to the same woman. And Declonius looks exactly like Cusp Peck; everyone says so."

"True, he does. I've seen photos."

"So what are you telling me? One twin was switched at birth?"

"No," he said. "It's a lot weirder than that." I heard him rifle pages of a book. "Ever heard of heteropaternal superfecundation? It's when an unhappily married woman has sex with her overbearing husband and her doting lover on the same day her fallopian tubes decide to drop two eggs instead of one. Dropping two eggs or more is called hyperovulation—the reason behind fraternal twins and triplets. We already know the Pecks are into their bird eggs, but they may have overlooked the fact that Daisy's *human* eggs could hold their own. One of her eggs was fertilized by Cusp, the other by Andy. Presto. One mother, two fathers. Believe me, it's rare. Although given the generally rocky state of marriage, doesn't it seem like it should happen all the time?"

"Come on, Paul. This is ridiculous. Neither Salton nor Declonius has ever mentioned—"

"I'm almost certain they don't know."

"*Paul.*"

"Paternity testing wasn't conclusive back then. But based on the way everyone says Cusp treated Salton, I think we should assume he suspected something. Salton was short—like Andy. Unattractive—like Andy. Daisy's favorite—like Andy. But again—no one knew much about heteropaternal superfecundation back then. Or now for that matter."

"You have no proof of this."

"No, but get a load of this: Andy has a genetic blood disorder. Mild hemophilia. That's why he had to retire from the police force—he got shot—probably bled just a little too much. I suspect that—"

"—that Salton has it, too." I filled it in without thinking.

"Exactly. That's my hunch," Paul said. "Salton was rejected from the Army on medical grounds during WWII. I haven't found out *why* exactly, but—"

"Because Salton has it, *too*," I repeated in a sort of daze. "Mild

hemophilia. I saw it on his health insurance form."

"What do you mean you saw it on his health insurance form?" Paul said. "How is *that* legal?"

"I copy things—it's my job."

"Yes, but I doubt you're supposed to *read* what you're copying," Paul scolded. He exhaled into the phone. "Man, between you and Andy, I don't know who to kill first. Maybe you. Andy's an idiot, but it's hard not to feel sorry for the guy. Read his poetry and it's obvious all he ever wanted were the basics: a chance to serve his country, a house, a yard, a family, respect, love, puppies, bunnies. Instead, he only heard no. Cusp despised him, Daisy left him, the police expelled him, his own blood rejected him, no one published his poetry, and the boys, whom he treated as his own, haven't come close to honoring that relationship. They hired him, sure, but my PI got hold of his pay stubs. They pay him next to nothing."

"Oh. That's normal—that's publishing."

"No, Batter, that's *robbery.* I know you revere the Pecks, but honestly, Cusp Peck does not sound like the nicest guy. And Daisy, well, let's just say, while swans may mate for life, she was more of a red-winged blackbird—nested with just about anyone. As for Salton, he's a living legend in the mean boss world. Only Declonius seems to have some decency. He won Prisoner of the Month five times. Please, Batter. Get away from these people."

50.

On Monday morning, I went directly to Salton's office, poems in hand, resignation at the ready.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" Dexter scowled, refusing to let me pass. "Salton's out for the day."

"When's he coming back?"

“Shall I repeat? He’s *out* for the day.”

The resignation letter felt heavy in my hand. *Give it to him*, I could hear Paul urge. *You can tell Salton about the poems later.* But as I took in Dexter’s arrogant face, I shifted to Plan B.

- Stay until I was awarded my promised promotion.
- Enjoy Dexter’s crushed expression when he heard.
- Hand him ten impossible copy assignments due yesterday.
- Then quit.

He started to say something else, but I ignored him. Whether I quit today, next week, or in a month, I had a problem that exceeded my hatred for Dexter: I didn’t have a new job to go *to*. Worse, I’d *just* gotten a raise. Could I not be afforded the chance to enjoy at least *one* living-wage paycheck?

I took the long way back to the copy room, Paul’s “quit immediately” advice slowing my steps with anxiety. Worse, as I made my way down the bomb shelter’s long hallway, I noticed the door to my copy room was ajar. *Declonius.* Jesus. I shoved the door open in dread.

“*Mom?*” I gasped.

“Batter! Finally!”

“Mom! What are you doing here?” I cried, scooping her up and holding her close. “Mom, are you okay? Did something happen? Is Dad okay?”

Why hadn’t I called my parents? Would it have killed me?

“We’re fine,” she assured me in a bright voice. “Really, honey.”

“But, Mom,” I said, “why didn’t you call first?”

She gave me a funny look. “I *did* call.”

Of course she had.

“But—how did you even find your way down here?” And then it occurred to me—my mother was standing in my copy room, taking in the reality of my so-called brilliant career.

“I’m sorry to barge in like this during your workday,” she said. “I realize it’s unprofessional, but your father was asked to speak at a conference here, it was all very last minute, and they covered his hotel and airfare and everything, and out of the blue he suggested that I come, too, so I called in sick to work, imagine me doing that, and we got on a plane and, yes, I’d

planned to call you from the hotel and see about dinner, actually, I made a reservation for seven-thirty just in case, but you know me; I couldn't wait, I had to see you. I looked Peck & Peck up in the phone book, and here I am. I can't believe you work here! A man named Andrew gave me a tour. Not a complete tour—just a little one. Actually, just the lobby. He insisted I couldn't wait there—this is even after I told him I was your mother. Then he brought me down here. He even checked my ID. I have no idea why anyone would do such a thing. How many mothers does he think you have?"

"Mom," I said, "how long have you been here?"

"A little over seventy minutes," she said. "Were you at brunch? Is that common in publishing?"

She looked almost girlish, her grayed hair slightly awry, her orange pantsuit neatly pressed. She surveyed my dingy kingdom. "This is a very impressive room. *Three* machines. And these bank tube things—they've been pouring in nonstop."

I turned away, flushed with embarrassment.

"Batter? What's wrong?"

"I—" I couldn't bring myself to go on.

She tilted her head to one side. "What?"

"It's just that—" I motioned around the room in defeat.

"Batter," she said, immediately understanding. "Are you making apologies for your work?"

"Well, I—"

"Never make apologies for your work. What did you think? That you should start at the top? Big executive office? No. The best people always start at the bottom. No one likes a young person who starts at the top. It screams nepotism, favoritism, cronyism, bullshit."

"But I told you I was—"

"A copy editor," she said. "And so you are."

I reached for her again, surprised to find her smaller than I remembered, my arms wrapping around her so tight her wiry hair seemed to explode from the small barrettes on either side of her head. Her squeeze back was quick and earnest, followed by a gentle tap on my back letting me know I could let go if I needed to; she was fully prepared to take what she could get and no more. But I held her close. "Mom. I'm so glad you're here."

“Me, too, honey.”

She smelled of Jean Naté, the olfactory backdrop to every one of my childhood memories, including a few iffy report cards, which she’d dutifully signed in twenty-eight-point Magnetica, reminding me that *life is full of judgment, but that doesn’t mean the judges are always right.* I took a deep breath, hoping the scent would permanently lodge in my lungs. My mom still believed in me. Even when she had good reason not to, she managed to see past my weaknesses and, like a navigator who knows land is just up ahead, chooses not to focus on the swells that slow the journey.

“Now,” she said, drawing herself away. “Tell me everything.”

I filled each copier with jobs, working quickly while my mother sat on a stack of paper reams, listening. “Go on,” she said whenever I paused in the middle of my story regarding the confusing war between Salton and Declonius.

I talked for an hour straight; she never once interrupted.

“Well,” she said, when I finished, “no wonder you haven’t had time to return phone calls—you’re in the classic battle between might and right, truth and lies. And people on both sides are trying to use you to validate their positions.”

“But I can’t tell which of these two sides is the right one,” I said, feeling enormously guilty and grateful that she would find me honest, especially given the fact that I’d just revealed I’d been lying to her about my job.

“You’re in a tight spot,” she said. “Which leaves you only one choice: *Act*. Do not sit on the sidelines. Batter, your namesake, never did. I won’t pretend it’s easy; in fact, it could be dangerous. On one occasion he nearly lost his life—”

“*Mom*.”

“Unfortunately, I can’t tell you the whole story right now,” she said, “too much blood. Maybe over dinner.”

“Mom,” I said. “Come on. This is my life we’re talking about here—my real life. I don’t need to hear some made-up story about Batter singlehandedly pulling a dogsled across the Arctic Circle in order to feed the last Eskimo or whatever wacky thing you’re going to claim he—”

Her face clouded with confusion. “I never said Batter was in the Arctic Circle. I never said Batter was anywhere near the Arctic Circle feeding Eskimos. I have no idea what you’re talking about. Also, the Eskimos prefer to be called the Inuits.”

“Mom, you know what I mean. The Batter stories. The dog who brought you two dozen roses on Valentine’s Day; who locked the teenagers in the janitor’s closet so they wouldn’t give the future Vice President of the United States strep; the dog who gave hundred-dollar bills to poor children; the dog who was Batman to your Alfred.”

“I’m not following.”

“Mom,” I said growing angry. “I’m twenty-five years old. You can stop with the Batter stories. I don’t live in a fable; I have a real job with real problems.” My hands were shaking. “Honestly, I can’t believe you named me after an imaginary friend. Who does that?”

“He *wasn’t* imaginary.”

“And his name—”

“—it was the name on the report. At the shelter. He had a name. I chose not to change it. Why would I?”

“But, Mom, he couldn’t have had a name because he didn’t have a collar. That’s what you always told me. So where’d the name come from?”

This logic seemed to stop her. “It was on the report,” she repeated. “It was on the report, the part where they say where they found him. The report said he was black and white, about two years old, and that he’d been Batter.”

“*Been* Batter? *Been?*” I emphasized.

“The report was hard to read. Whoever had filled it out was obviously not a type designer; the glyphs were all over the place.” She took a deep breath. “*Been*, Batter. That’s what it said. And I thought how smart of that animal control officer to recognize the dog had *been* something before but was determined to be something else *now*—to be the dog he was meant to be—that he was literally dying for a second chance. All of us are entitled to a second chance, honey. And the moment I saw Batter, I knew I was there to give it to him. They were going to put him down. His back leg was broken.”

“Maybe because someone had *battered* him, Mom. *Battered*.”

She looked surprised, as if this was the first time she’d contemplated the possibility. Then she fell silent.

“Mom,” I said gently. “I’m an adult now. I need you to treat me like one. I never want to hear another Batter story in my life.”

This was probably the worst thing I could have said to her. She looked astonished and hurt. And then, out of nowhere, old.

“I’m sorry, Mom,” I stumbled, “it’s just—” And then I managed to say something even worse. “You’re not still swapping that medicine out of your pills, are you? I never thought that was a good idea.”

She looked back at me, her face frozen, like set cement.

“I should go,” she said, quietly, checking her watch. “I know you have a lot to do. I need to get back to the hotel.”

“Mom—”

But she was already out the door. “Mom,” I said, dogging her down the dingy hallway. “I’m sorry. Of course, I loved the Batter stories when I was young—of course I did, Mom.”

“How do I get back to the lobby?” she asked in a low voice. “Where the hell are those stairs.”

We reached the lobby in record time.

“We’re still on for dinner, aren’t we?” I said. “Tonight at seven thirty?”

“Unless your father has to attend an important wine and cheese party,” she said, removing the possibility. “He might have to eat cheese and mingle,” she added tersely, turning her hurt face away from me. “*His* job is very important.”

“Mom,” I started to apologize. I’d never asked her about her work. I placed my hand on her shoulder, preparing to beg her forgiveness, when a familiar voice rang from across the lobby.

“*Batter,*” Howard called. “I need to talk to you about your outburst in the Fat Ass meeting the other day.” He practically flew at me. “I cannot believe —” But when he noticed my mother, he stopped. “I’m sorry,” he said. “Who’s this?”

“This is my mother, Howard.”

“Your mother!” he said, grasping her hand and instantly changing his tone. “Mrs. Gray, excuse my outburst. I’m Howard Gadley. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Thank you, Mr. Gadley,” my said mother quietly. “I popped by to surprise Batter, but I shouldn’t have. He’s busy. I’m leaving now.”

“What do you mean you shouldn’t have?’” Howard said. “Nonsense.

How much of Peck & Peck have you seen?”

“Howard, we’re not allowed—” I began.

“Please,” he said, “I’m an Associate Editor. Of course we can show your mother around.” And then he turned to my mother. “You’re not a poet, are you? You don’t write or want to write?”

“Absolutely not,” my mother confirmed.

“Excellent,” Howard said. “Let’s go.”

“Perhaps another time,” she said, her voice dropping even lower. “I’m due back at the hotel. My husband—John—Batter’s father—is an historian.”

“Your husband is an historian, and your son works at Peck & Peck? You must be bursting with pride.”

She looked at him, her face as flat as stone. “How do I get a cab.” At which point Andy, who had been hovering nearby, dashed outside and found one sitting right in front—something that happens in New York City once every ten years.

“It’s your lucky day,” he said, opening the cab door for her.

“If you say so.”

51.

I’d never asked her the hotel’s name—I’d been too busy talking about myself to gather the simple facts of my parents’ visit. Ditto for the name and location of my father’s conference. No clue. On any given day, there were about five hundred conferences going on in New York City—finding his would be next to impossible.

I stood outside of Peck & Peck, not knowing what to do next. “Hurry up,” Andy said, holding the door open.

“I’m in trouble, Andy.”

“Huge surprise.”

“That was my mom.”

“I’m fully aware.”

“I said some stupid things and she’s upset, and I can’t go make things right because I don’t know where my parents are staying—I don’t even know what conference my dad is speaking at. I have no idea how to find either of them.”

“What the hell were you and your mother chatting about for the last hour?” he scolded.

“Me.”

He shook his head, disgusted. “They’re staying at the Holiday Inn on Sixth.”

“Oh god, thank you, *thank you*.”

“And your dad is at Columbia. His talk is on lying in history or something like that. Let’s see what else I learned while I stashed your mother in your dungeon office. Oh right, you’re a big-time copy editor. And you have a poem on some bus.”

“Oh Jesus—”

“You’re also directly involved with the Xing Xing Yao—”

“I never said that—”

“Let me tell you something,” he said, wagging his finger in my face. “Xing Xing is my favorite actress in the world, Batter. Do *not* tarnish her name.”

“I won’t.”

“I also learned that Futura was the typeface chosen for the signage they put on the moon.”

“Andy—I’m sorry.”

“A typeface is more than just twenty-six letters, it’s all the punctuation, too—”

“Please—stop.”

“Your mom’s smart. And she’s very proud of you. That makes you lucky. A lot of kids don’t get that. A bad parent can ruin a person.”

“I’m sure you’re right, Andy.”

“Named after a dog, huh?” He put his hands on his hips as if seeing me in an all-new light.

“Shot in the line of duty,” I said, seeing him for the first time in his.

His face registered the smallest trace of pride. “Get outta here. If anyone

asks, I'll tell 'em you went home sick."

I went directly to the Holiday Inn, but my mom wasn't there, so I turned in the other direction and made off for Columbia. It took me thirty minutes to find the History Department in Butler Library, another twenty to locate Hamilton Hall in Morningside Heights, where the conference was taking place, and an additional ten to discover not just anyone can attend. People actually *pay* to go to these things.

I stared at the board listing the conference's various meeting rooms and speakers but didn't see my father's name listed anywhere. Maybe he'd already spoken, or maybe this was the wrong place, or maybe his talk was listed under someone else's name—a real possibility seeing as how he'd apparently been asked to come at the last possible moment.

"Excuse me," I said to a woman behind a desk. "I'm looking for a particular speaker. Can you tell me where he might be?"

"Name?" she said in a bored tone.

"John Gray—he's a history teacher."

"They all are. Fourth floor."

"Great, thanks."

"Wait. Your name?"

"Batter Gray."

She looked at a list and then studied a small sea of unused badges that littered the table before her. "I don't see you here."

"Right. I'm not an academic. I just wanted to see this particular speaker."

"Well, you can't. No pop-ins."

"I know," I said. "But I'm not here as a participant. John Gray is my father. I just wanted to say hi."

"I heard you the first time," she said. "But the answer is still no. This is a conference. You have to have paid and be *registered*."

"I understand," I said, "but is there any way—"

"No," she said. "Anyway, his talk is on now. We don't encourage anyone to go in and out during talks. It's disruptive."

"Look, what if I told you it was an emergency?"

"So now it's an emergency." She picked up her book and pretended to

read.

“I’m Dr. Perez,” a voice said from behind me as he reached for his badge. “Where can I find The Cold War: A Retrospective?”

“Eighth floor,” she said.

“Has it started?” he asked.

“Fifteen minutes ago.”

The man ran to the elevators.

“Wait, you let *him* barge into a lecture already in progress, but not me?”

“You look familiar. Didn’t you try this last month at the thoracic conference?”

“No. I’m asking for your help.” I tried to look both sincere and needy. “Please.”

“Sorry I was gone so long, Claire,” came a woman’s voice from behind me. “My class ran over.”

“No problem,” the woman behind the desk said, standing and gathering her purse. “Just so you know,” she told the new voice. “This one is trying to get in, but he’s not registered. I’ve already told him no twice.”

“No registration, no entry,” said the new voice as she walked past me, dumping her sweater on a chair. “I’ll handle it, Claire. Thanks so much.”

Claire gave me a hard look and walked off.

“I’m not certain your friend understood,” I said. “My father is one of the speakers. I know I’m not registered, but it’s very important that I—”

The new woman, freshly seated, turned her face up at me. “I’m sorry,” she said, “but she’s not my friend, she’s my colleague. And as for the conference, in order to get in, yes, you must be registered.”

. . . . . .

It was Wren. Oh my god. *It was Wren*.

I just stood there.

“Did you hear me?” she asked.

I said nothing.

“Wait,” she said, tilting her head slightly. “It’s you. The poetry slam. We shared a table.”

I just stood there.

“You left early.”

I just stood there.

“Are you okay?”

I wasn’t.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “you don’t remember me. I’m Wren. And I’m relieved you don’t remember me because that means you won’t remember my awful attempt at poetry.”

“No, no,” I struggled to say. “Of course I remember you. Of course.”

“I’m not a poet,” she said. “Poetry is difficult,” she said. “The writing, the reading. As I proved.” She laughed nervously and grabbed a pen, clicking it open and shut ten times fast.

“Your poem was called ‘Syringe.’”

“Oh no, please. Don’t remember it. *Please*.” She continued to click the pen plunger up and down until, without warning, the clicky sound stopped. I think she’d broken it.

“I’m studying to be a nurse,” she reminded me, even though I needed no reminder. “But I work here part-time doing registrations. For extra money,” she emphasized as if I might think checking off names was a lifelong dream.

An awkward silence followed.

“So you want in.”

“In?”

“To the conference.”

“My father is speaking, but—”

“Your father is—” She looked down at the speaker list.

“John Gray. Yuba City Community College.”

“Ah,” she said, tapping a finger against the list. “Untruths in History.”

“But the thing is,” I said, quickly, my heart whirring like a blender, “his talk has already started and I really shouldn’t walk in—it’s disruptive. It’s not like I can talk to him while he’s lecturing. I should probably just wait for him here.”

With you, I wanted to say. *We could get to know each other.*

“Is he expecting you?”

“No.”

We could talk. I’d have to mention at some point that I work with Dexter and that he wasn’t good enough for you. You would probably nod. You might even say you knew it all along.

“Well, that settles it then,” she said, “you should go. It’s the least I can do after you bought me that glass of wine.” But I swear she sounded reluctant.

Another historian barged in; then another. *Jesus, people, not now!*

She signaled to the line forming behind me, then leaned over a table of unused badges. “Here,” she said, plucking one from the pile. “I happen to know this guy left already.”

“Dr. Puttaiya Visvesvarayya?” I said, reading the tag. As she handed it to me, our fingers touched. I nearly fainted.

You would invite Dexter to our wedding—no hard feelings. He wouldn’t come but would send a nice gift. Probably candlesticks. I would sell them at our first garage sale.

“Don’t worry,” she said confidently. “I don’t think anyone will check it. Fourth floor,” she instructed.

“But—”

“It’s nice, what you’re doing,” she said, “surprising him like this. He’ll love it. I know my dad would.”

What we don’t know about our parents could fill oceans.

Here’s what I didn’t know: my dad was popular well beyond the boundaries of Yuba City. Even though it was the end of the day and everyone wanted to hit the bar, the room was packed. Every seat was taken, plus about a hundred extra people lined the wall in the back with several dozen more crouched along the aisles on the floor. I couldn’t believe it. It was like walking into a concert and finding out your dad is Mick Jagger.

My father stood center stage with a microphone in his hand. Behind him a large screen displayed a single slide. *Napoleon Bonaparte wasn’t short.*

“He was actually a little above average, height-wise,” my father was saying—“about five foot six during an era when the norm for French men was five foot five or less—but he was depicted as a little man in a series of editorial cartoons published by James Gillray, a noted satirist and caricaturist, who portrayed Napoleon according to his reputation—as a stubborn, needy, thin-skinned child. That image stuck, and voilà, the Napoleon complex was born. We see these sorts of things in history all the

time," my father continued, "exaggerations, editorial asides, personal biases, all of which eventually become 'facts.' In Napoleon's case, I don't doubt the man was highly competitive and threw tantrums, but to infer this had something to do with his stature condemns every short person to the same reductionist thinking. So how do we, as historians, the keepers of the past, make sure the past doesn't lead us astray?"

About forty-five rapturous minutes later, the lights came up, and my father stood onstage behind a podium, adjusting his glasses. "I can take a few questions," he said.

At least sixty hands shot up. "Doctor Gray!" people shouted, to which he responded "It's *Mr.* Gray" before fielding their questions like a pro quarterback tossing perfect passes downfield. "Professor Gray!" a few more shouted, to which he responded, "Again, it's Mr. Gray," before answering their questions with elegance and intellect. The historian next to me murmured to the historian next to her, "I learned more in the last two hours than I did during my entire postdoc."

Ditto for me.

It was like my father had performed the role of Lou Gehrig in *Pride of the Yankees* to rave reviews and I didn't even know he could act—or hit a baseball for that matter. I was filled with a mixture of pride and shame.

I knew my dad hadn't finished his Ph.D.; it didn't seem like a big deal. He loved Yuba City; he loved his community college; he loved his students. But other teachers at his school did have Ph.D.s. and earned more because of it. *John Gray is getting cheated*, I once heard the department secretary say to another secretary. *Best teacher in the school—worst paycheck. All because he lacks a piece of paper.*

"I'm sorry," my father was saying, "I'm out of time. But please feel free to mail me your questions, and if you're ever in Yuba City . . ." Knee-deep in admirers, he left the stage to talk to a student, then made his way up the aisle until he spied me.

"*Batter?*" He beamed. The people in my vicinity looked at me with awe and interest. "What are you doing here?" he said, delighted. "This is my son," he announced to his fan base.

Everyone smiled approvingly, and a few people clapped.

"Dad," I cheered, "you were great. Just great!"

"Oh now," he said, "come on." He slapped his arm around me. "Your

mom's here too," he said. "She's made dinner plans. Have you heard from her?"

"Yes."

"Good."

"*Not* good, Dad."

Hearing the change in my voice, he turned to the others who were still standing around like groupies.

"My son's a poetry editor," he said proudly to the group. "Works here in the city for Peck & Peck," which got nods of approval for absolutely no good reason. "Have a good evening, now," he said to everyone, holding up his hand to prevent them from following us further.

"What's this about your mother?" he said as we made our way to the elevators.

I gave him an abbreviated version of the visit, ending with "And then I told her I knew all the Batter stories were that. Just stories."

He looked at me with disappointment, then pushed the elevator button. "Well," he said, the creases on his forehead deepening, "that certainly changes the tonal quality of this visit."

The doors reopened. We made our way across the lobby, me glancing furtively in Wren's direction. But it was after seven and she was gone.

Just like my mother.

52.

"Now, I'm worried," my father said, as we both stood in the deserted hotel room. "This isn't like her."

"What do we do?"

"We wait," he said.

It was 7:45 p.m.

"Do you think we should call the police?"

“Your mother is upset, not foolish.”

We sat in silence for a few moments.

“It’s her nerves, again, right?” I ventured.

He looked at me in astonishment. “You insult and wound your mother and you blame *her* for being upset?”

Silence again.

He sat heavily on the edge of the bed. “I can understand why you feel the way you do. You have problems at work. You don’t think hearing another outlandish story about the dog you were named for will help.”

“That’s all I’m saying. My problems won’t be solved by an imaginary dog doing impossible things. I hate my name. Everyone gets it wrong anyway.”

“Batter wasn’t imaginary,” my father said sharply. “And your mother didn’t name you. You don’t know the whole story.”

The room seemed to grow darker and heavier. “*What* whole story?”

No reply.

We sat there, the two of us, on the edge of a bed in a run-down Holiday Inn, the motel’s mission to mask all the sorrow it had seen by cloaking every room in riotous bedspreads and seaside prints. I had to wonder if anyone had ever experienced the slightest amount of joy in this room, had ever heard good news here, had tried to fall in love here.

“Dad?”

“I know you know about your twin, but you don’t know the rest. None of it,” he said sharply.

“Well. Are you going to explain—”

“—yes, but—but, it’s hard. It’s— Jesus.” For a moment, I thought he might cry.

“A twin pregnancy is extremely difficult,” he said, his voice shaking in a way I’d never heard before. “Your mother suffered in ways I never fully understood. I was wrapped up in my own troubles back then—I was at Dartmouth—you know this—close to finishing my Ph.D. and focused on one thing: a tenure-track position there. I’d been led to believe it was mine. Others were in the running, but they were long shots. One of the long shots was someone you know. Doug Payne.”

“*Doug Payne?* My asshole adviser?”

“Doug’s not an asshole,” my father snapped. “He was a friend of mine.

He’d gone to Dartmouth as an undergrad and then as a grad student, following in a long line of wealthy Paynes doing exactly the same thing. We used to talk about that open position and Doug would always clap me on the back and say *May the best man win, and you’re the best man, John*. But I wasn’t.”

“Of course you were—”

“*No*,” my father charged, “*I wasn’t*. When your mother had to quit working because of the pregnancy, we fell into debt. We had no savings, no family money. Worse, the longer I stayed in academia, the more I found myself hating it. Was I impressing the right people? Writing the right papers? Teaching the right classes? I had. But in the end, it didn’t matter. Doug Payne got that job. He’d known for a year. I had a friend in the History Department who showed me the paperwork. Family connections. Done deal.”

“*What?*” I said, outraged.

“I couldn’t tell your mother. Without that job, I had no idea how we were going to survive. Her doctor had been explicit about the dangers of the third trimester. Insisted that I be available at all times, and I made sure I was. The switchboard operator knew how to reach me until five p.m. I always left right at five. When I got home ten minutes later, Batter would be right by her side—he was very protective. But his protectiveness scared me.”

“Why?”

“When I was nine, I’d been bitten by a rabid dog. Twenty-eight stitches and twenty-three shots in the stomach later, I vowed to steer clear of dogs forever. But when I met your mom, Batter was part of the package. I told her about my dog bite with hopes she’d understand and get rid of him. But instead, she tried to help me get past my fears by telling me the Batter stories. The results were not good. Although he’d always been friendly to me, I couldn’t shake the feeling that he might turn on me. According to those stories, his mission in life was to protect her; he’d stop at nothing to ensure her safety. I didn’t believe them, but neither could I ignore them. I grew apprehensive and—I’m ashamed to admit this—jealous. Compared to him I was weak and hesitant. Merely human. And I made a lot of mistakes—some catastrophic.”

“Dad,” I said, alarmed to see his eyes filling with tears. “What happened?”

He rose, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. “Dartmouth is a wealthy community. Over the years, I’d been approached by a number of rich students willing to pay me for a better grade. I’d always refused. But the day I learned how Doug had gotten that job—that he’d known for a *year*—I made a different choice.”

My heart practically stopped beating. “*Dad.*”

“An undergrad came to me offering cash for the upcoming midterm answer key. When he opened his wallet, I saw more money than I’d made in two months.”

“*Dad*.”

“The next day, another undergrad dropped by. Then another. By the end of the week, I’d made five sales.”

I cringed trying to imagine this younger, desperate, disappointed version of my father.

“I told myself I hadn’t really done anything wrong—I was only trading one unfairness for another. I hadn’t *asked* these students to pay me; they just did. Your mother’s health was tenuous. I was protecting her. I told no one, but Batter knew—I swear it. Every time I walked in the door, he looked at me with disappointment. He *knew.*”

I sat on the edge of the bed, my stomach in knots. I thought of the bribes we’d talked about at our kitchen table. Shoeless Joe. The White Sox. The Teapot Dome Scandal.

“A couple weeks later, as I was preparing to go home, Doug Payne barged into my office. It was five p.m.—exactly the time I always left because that’s when the switchboard closed.

“ *‘What the hell are you thinking?’* he roared. *‘Accepting bribes?’* He lectured me on honor. I was furious. I told him I knew about the job—how *he’d* gotten it—how *he’d* been lying to *me.* He insisted he had no intention of taking it—that he never had—he wanted to succeed based on his own merit, not nepotism. I didn’t believe him. We argued for nearly two hours. It probably would have gone on all night if it weren’t for an insistent bark right outside my office door.” He stopped, placing a hand on my shoulder as if to steady himself. “You have to know this: Batter had never once been to campus. I’m certain he had no idea where I worked. But when I opened the door, there he was. Covered in blood.”

“*Oh my god—*”

“I broke every speed record, ran every light, but none of it mattered. By the time I got home—two hours late—your mother was pinned in agony to the floor, writhing, moaning, the space between her legs red, as your brother’s small, strangulated body, six weeks early, made his way out onto the rug like a limp doll. You were still inside.

“I grabbed the phone and called the operator, trying my best not to look at that little alien; that shriveled, lifeless lump—my son, your brother; but while I was begging for help to come, I watched in horror as old Batter started to lick your brother, his tiny nose, his slight mouth—and if that weren’t bad enough, then he started to pounce on him—he did it over and over—as if he were playing with him, even though I was certain your brother was already dead. And I remember this, I remember screaming, ‘He’s hurting the baby,’ and begged the ambulance to come *now*, the address somehow delivered between spurts of regret and fear and shame before I slammed the phone down and ran to Batter, tossing him out of the way to scoop up your brother from the floor, shocked to discover he was breathing. And then I watched as he took a breath, and then another. And then no more.

“That’s how the ambulance crew found me, holding him as your mother moaned in pain, Batter barking for all he was worth. They loaded her, sirens wailing, while a cop put a rope around Batter, his fur still matted in blood, his paws nearly black from pouncing on your brother’s small body—and took him away. Where, I had no idea, nor did I care. I went with you and your mother, cursing myself, and hating Batter; dogs can’t be trusted—I *knew* this better than anyone. And then we arrived at the hospital, and thirty minutes later, you came into the world, too small, but tough. But your mother was nearly gone; she required a transfusion and a hysterectomy. ‘We have to do this *now*,’ I heard a surgeon say as someone else dragged me out to a chair in the hallway, where I collapsed in sobs.

“I did not move, not for hours. When the doctor finally found me, I was bent in half. He sat down beside me, said your mother would recover, insisted it was no one’s fault, especially not hers; he’d examined your brother’s body, determined he’d been too weak. *This happens a lot with twins*, he said, *sometimes only one survives, multiples are difficult, it was an imperiled placenta; the blood flow failed. And yet,* the doctor said, placing one hand on my shoulder, *I noted the bruises on his chest. You did CPR,*

didn't you? he asked me in quiet awe; *you cleared his nose and mouth; you forced air into his small lungs, applying exactly the right pressure, along with just the right sharp, concussive push on his tiny body. Incredible. You nearly saved him; you did exactly what needed to be done, I couldn't have done it better myself. But he must have been gone already—you saw no signs of life, not a single breath. Understandable. He was weak, it's not your fault, you're still a hero, you saved your wife, you saved your second son, you're a hero,* he repeated, pressing on my shoulder to communicate his full admiration. And then I was alone again until ten minutes later that cop appeared, the one who'd slipped a rope on Batter, his face filled with news, and he put a reassuring hand on my arm, told me quietly, privately that they'd taken care of the dog, he'd never hurt anyone again, they'd noted everything I'd said to the phone operator, he, himself, had witnessed the dog lunging for the baby, it was over, it was done." He took a breath in, then sobbed.

"*Dad.*" I looked at him with horror, but his eyes didn't meet mine. He was looking at a figure in the doorway. Her hand over her heart.

53.

When I saw my mother in the doorway, I started to apologize. But before I could, she came to us, her arms gathering my father and me with such ferocity, all I could do was cry and hang on. I saw her in a different light now—not just as my mother but as a woman who, twenty-five years ago, nearly bled to death alone on a rug. A woman who in one night had lost everything: her child, her dog, her womb, the man she thought she'd married. A woman who didn't suffer from nerves. She *had* nerve.

I would never again mistake it for anything else.

In a hushed voice, my father explained they'd left campus two weeks later. Packed the car and got as far away as possible. He quit the Ph.D. program; left the remaining money in his office; never spoke to Doug again. They drove all the way to California, and when he saw the Sutter Buttes—the world's smallest mountain range—he felt his own smallness sift into the soil, and they stayed.

"It took me years to tell your mother everything," he said. "About the money, about Doug—who was true to his word; he never *did* take that position—and especially about Batter. I've told you I never believed her stories; I regret that. Because when you personally witness a small, gimpy dog doing exactly what she'd always described and yet still refuse to accept it, that's not rationality, it's weakness. History is full of it: people who insist the Holocaust never happened, who say we never walked on the moon, who believe what they want to believe because that suits their personal biases, and god forbid the embarrassment of being wrong. It was Batter who tried to save your brother—I witnessed it—and it was Batter who saved both you and your mother. So when you tell me your name has cost you something, let me be clear. Your name is the only reason you're here in the first place. I'd long ago understood that the dog hadn't been named Batter," he said quietly, "but rather that he'd *been* battered—nearly beaten to death. He only survived because your mother refused to let him die. That was Batter and your mother: beaten but not finished. *I* named you Batter, Son. Blame me. Blame me for everything."

We all stayed together in that room that night; the three of us laying side-by-side on the same lumpy bed, blanketed in the same sorrow, cloaked in the same anguish, missing the two family members we would never get back. My twin. And the little dog who'd tried to save him.

In the morning, I was in no shape to go to work, nor were my parents. But you know how life is: relentless. Despite loss, it moves, heartlessly, ruthlessly, forward. My father announced he was scheduled to give a second

lecture; my mother had already agreed to meet a fellow type designer; and me—I returned to the scene of my own crime. Peck & Peck.

Those fucking poems. It was time to return them.

54.

"GUESS WHAT, PEOPLE!" Salton shouted as he entered the Aviary. I'd gotten there later than usual. There had been no time to meet with him beforehand.

"The Xing Xing Yao movie is out! Sneak preview, tonight only, and because of it, I've taken the liberty of securing each of you two tickets. You will use these two tickets to take yourself and a date to the showing. Starts at eight p.m. Arrive early. Do not attempt to sit together like pack animals. I don't want it to look as if we've stocked the theater with poetry professionals. When the copy of *Peck & Peck* appears in the movie on the nightstand, turn to the stranger sitting next to you and murmur, *Why—that's* Peck & Peck—*the famous poetry quarterly, isn't it?* This is big, people. It's product placement. Attendance will be taken. Here, Dex," he said. "Pass these out."

"A sneak preview?" someone ventured. "But, Salton, isn't that what a studio does when they think the movie isn't quite ready yet?"

"NO!" he roared. "Sneak previews are designed to build buzz, and we're going to be that buzz. We're all going to go, we're all going to clap, then we're all going to come back to our desks and write our newspapers and congressmen and rave about this film. I'll have some spontaneous comments drafted by later this morning."

"But what if the movie isn't any good?" someone asked.

"Any *good*?" Salton shouted. "What's *wrong* with you?"

“It’s a Xing Xing Yao movie,” Mira said. “It doesn’t matter if it’s good.”

“Exactly!” Salton said.

“I’m sorry, Salton,” Howard said, offering his tickets to the editor next to him, “but I can’t make it. I have a family commitment. If it were any other night, I—”

“Howard,” Salton said. “This is not a request. This is a nonnegotiable company event. You *will* be there. Kill two birds with one stone and bring your so-called family member. No excuses. That goes for all of you. I mean it.”

This worried me—I also had a family commitment: the dinner that had never materialized the night before was back on for tonight. But miraculously, before I could call my parents and explain about Salton’s ultimatum, my mother left a message at Peck & Peck, asking that I call back right away.

“I’m sorry, honey,” she said, “but I’m afraid it’ll just be you and me tonight. It turns out Doug Payne is also at that conference, and your father finally got the nerve to ask him to dinner. Much to his horror, Doug accepted.”

“That’s great, Mom; I understand. But since it’s just you and me now, I was wondering.” And then I told her about the movie problem.

“A sneak preview,” my mother said. “It sounds important. Of course I’ll go.”

“Full disclosure: it’s a Xing Xing Yao movie.”

“Xing Xing is the poet who was featured in your latest quarterly.”

“I’m not sure I would call Xing Xing a poet.”

“But she’s a good actress, correct?”

I hesitated.

“I’m just thinking her movies may not be your kind of thing.”

“I’m not sure you know what my kind of thing is, Batter,” my mother said. “I’ve never attended a sneak preview before. What do I wear? Is it formal?”

Hours later we were standing in line, my mother’s friendly pink pantsuit in sharp contrast to her purse, which was securely attached to her forearm like

a shield. “It’s New York City,” she explained. “If I hold it this way, I can not only protect the purse and its contents but use it as a weapon if necessary. It’s standard female operating procedure.” I felt a sudden pang. June had always carried her bag the same way.

Speaking of June, the invitation to her wedding had arrived in the mail that very day. It was a formal invite—the kind where the bride’s parents would probably be requesting the honor of one’s company at something o’clock in the year one thousand whatever, the heavily italicized words protected by a tiny slip of gauzy paper. My mother was holding it and several other pieces of mail on the front stoop of my run-down apartment building when I arrived home from work. I saw her from half a block away, her pantsuit a small cloud of fresh polyester next to the filthy garbage cans that surrounded her. She clutched my mail and her purse against her chest, smiling at everyone coming in and out of the pawnshop.

“Surprise!” she called when she saw me. “It’s me!”

“Mom,” I said, worried. “How did you—?”

“I walked!” she said. “And guess what: I met some very interesting people along the way. A few of them were half-naked. One tried to sell me some earrings for a very good price, but you know me; I don’t wear clip-ons. Here’s your mail. The postman gave it to me, and he doesn’t even know me! People are so friendly here.” She handed over a small packet of bills, placing the wedding invitation on top.

“See this typeface?” she said, pointing to the invite’s scripted letters. “In the business we call this Overdone Italic. Italic is usually a ten-degree slant. This is twelve.”

“Uh-huh.”

“It’s a wedding invitation.”

“I can see that.”

“Who’s getting married?”

“A friend.”

“Are you going?”

“No. She lives in Wisconsin.”

“She?”

“I have friends who are women, Mom.”

Her look said she didn’t believe me.

“I love weddings,” she said. “But your father and I eloped.”

“I know.”

“Eloping was the right thing for us to do at the time; we had no money. But I would have loved to have had a real wedding—the dress, the cake, the shoes.”

“Uh-huh.” I was leading her upstairs, hoping her ramble about weddings would distract her from the sour cooking smells coming from the apartment directly below mine.

“How well did you know her?” she asked.

“Who?”

“Your *friend*. The one who’s getting married.”

“Here we are,” I said, opening the door to the apartment.

“Are you sure they’ll be happy?” she asked, giving me a hard look.

“It’s not much, but I’m planning to move.”

“Many marriages aren’t happy,” she said. “About fifty percent.”

“This is the kitchen,” I said, pointing at a hot plate and the sink.

“June is a nice name,” she said, studying the invitation after I let her open it. “I like the idea of naming someone after a month or a day. Tuesday Weld, for instance. She was named after Tuesday.”

“That’s my bed—it folds up into a sofa.”

“And you were named after a hero.”

“Right.”

“We were going to name you Lawrence. Can you believe it?”

“It was Grandpa’s name.”

“Yes, but he went by his middle name. He went by Buck.”

“I thought Buck was his nickname.”

“The point is, he didn’t like Lawrence. It didn’t fit him.”

“It fit Lawrence in *Lawrence of Arabia*.”

“Yes, but Lawrence was Lawrence’s last name. I liked that movie, but it went on too long. There was too much sand.”

“We should probably grab a quick bite to eat before the movie.”

“I would have never named you June—if you’d been a girl, I mean. June is too warm for my taste. All the summer months are. But still, I like the idea of naming children after time segments. Maybe I would have named you March. Or November.”

“For dinner I was thinking we could grab some authentic New York pizza. How does that sound? I know a great place.”

“Did June like pizza?”

“Yes.”

“Pizza sounds fine, then.”

I was starting to regret inviting my mother to the sneak preview, but the pizza seemed to take her mind off the wedding invite—that and the fact that I asked her to tell me about her nursing days—all things which I’d probably been told long before, but had dismissed in that adolescent way of seeing one’s parents only as parents, and not as people who had faced the same kinds of hurdles and disappointments that I now faced. It was sort of embarrassing—discovering my parents were such fascinating people at this late age. *My* late age, I mean.

“You have to be a bit of a masochist to be a nurse,” my mother said as we walked to the theater. “Not only because a nurse is on the front lines of human decay—”

“*Mom—*”

“—but also because nurses are often disrespected. At least when I was working at a hospital. Maybe it’s better now. Although I doubt it.”

“I’m sure it’s better.”

“How do you know? Do you have nurse friends?”

I paused, thinking of Wren. Did she qualify as a friend? “No,” I said.

“No one does,” she said emphatically. “Because nurses are always working. Nurses don’t have time for friendships.”

We turned the corner to see a long line forming.

“How do we know this is the line?” she asked. “There’s no signage.”

“We just know.” But no one in the line looked familiar.

“Poor signage is why I quit nursing. Unless things are clear, mistakes are made. One time in my hospital a man was given the wrong dosage and died. They blamed the nurse, but it wasn’t her fault. It was the typeface—the two and the seven were nearly indistinguishable—any of us could have made that mistake. That’s when it came to me: my true calling wasn’t in nursing. I was needed on the front lines, where the real action was.”

“What action?”

“*Typeface design*,” she said, annoyed. “Type saves lives. Ever tried to

read something without a typeface? Good luck."

"Batter!" shouted a voice from across the street. Andy. "What are you doing over there?"

We *were* in the wrong line—everyone else was across the street.

"Twelve-point Times *Extra* New Roman—that's me," she said.

"What the hell are you doing?" Andy asked as we reached the other side. "This is a Xing Xing Yao movie. Do not disrespect her by getting in the wrong line."

"Sorry, Andy, we just—"

"She's the most talented living actress today," Andy said. "The. *Most.* Talented."

"I wasn't trying to—"

"It's nice to see you again, Mrs. Gray," he said, turning to my mother. "You're gonna love this movie."

"Mrs. Gray?" another voice said coming up behind us. Howard was dressed in an ugly gray sweater decorated with large red chevrons. Next to him stood an elderly woman wearing a rayon dress and large black shoes made out of rubber. "I'm so glad you're here. We barely got a chance to chat the other day."

"Thank you, Mr. Gadley. Batter invited me to tag along and here I am."

"I got stuck, too," said the old woman.

"This is my mother," Howard said. "It's her birthday."

"How nice," my mother said. "A sneak preview on your birthday. Could your son have planned it any better?"

"Yes," she said.

"I guess this preview took us all by surprise," my mother said. "As of a few hours ago, I was supposed to be having dinner with my son and husband in a nice restaurant."

"Are you mad?" Howard's mother asked. "I'm mad for you."

"*Mother,*" Howard said.

"That's an unusual sweater," my mother said, changing the subject.

"Isn't it?" Howard said, embarrassed.

"I got it for him," his mother supplied. "They had a huge pile of them. Seventy percent off."

The doors had just opened. We all moved four steps forward.

"Try to be nice," Howard whispered to me as the line picked up speed.

“Dexter’s at the door checking our names off the attendance list, and he doesn’t need any attitude from you. He’s been having a rough time lately.”

“*Right,*” I said. “Poor Dexter.”

“Still at it, are we?” he said.

“Who’s Dexter?” my mother asked.

“Salton’s assistant,” Howard answered.

“Salton’s bootlicker,” I corrected.

“He looks nice. Very blond and fit,” my mother said, craning her neck to get a better view.

“That’s what they said about the Nazis.”

“You need to learn to keep your opinions to yourself,” Howard hissed in my ear. “Honestly. Every time you say something like that, you go down a notch in my estimation.”

And every time you defend him you go down a notch in mine, Godfather.

“Look,” Howard said, his voice filling with warmth. “He brought Wren. She really brings out the best in him. Have you met her? She’s . . .”

Wren.

My god. It was Wren?

Of course he would bring Wren. Salton had said *to bring a date*. Why hadn’t I thought of this?

“You don’t really know Dexter until you know Wren,” Howard said. “This might change your mind about him—I’ll introduce you.”

“No, no,” I said. “It’s okay. I’m not really in the mood to—”

“Howard,” my mother said gravely, touching his arm. “Batter got a wedding invitation in the mail today.” She gave him a hard look. “A *friend* of his is getting married. A girl.”

“I see. I’m sorry to hear that, Batter,” Howard said, picking up the pity in my mother’s look.

“What? No! It’s not what you think. *Mom*.”

“June. That’s her name,” my mother went on. “Not only her name, but also the name of the month in which they will be married. Which I think is going too far with the entire June thing. Why not get married in July in that case?”

“Agreed,” Howard said.

“We were only friends,” I protested. “Honestly!”

“The invitation was pretty,” my mother said as we moved forward at a steady pace, “although the wedding script was too delicate. The serifs didn’t hold up well. Not only that, but although the typeface was already in script form, the typesetter chose to further italicize it.” She shook her head. “The constant forward slant of the relentless italic. I practically got seasick reading it.”

“I can tell you know your typography, Mrs. Gray.”

“Because I am a typeface designer.”

“Are you really?” Howard said, delighted. “Remarkable. Where would any of us be without type?”

“I wish more people would ask that question.”

“You must let me give you a tour of Peck & Peck. The fourth floor. It’s a salute to type designers everywhere—you won’t believe it.”

Meanwhile the line moved relentlessly forward. I was now standing three feet from Dexter. “Well, well,” he said, leaning over and whispering in my ear. “If it isn’t Batman. And who’s the old biddy?” he said, motioning to Howard’s mother. “Robin?” Then he pulled away, turning his back toward me in order to exclude me from the conversation.

“Dex,” Howard said. “Good to see you. And you brought Wren. I’m so glad.”

I moved forward, trying to push my mother into the theater before Wren, who was in conversation with Hernandez on the other side of Dexter, looked in my direction.

“Howard!” Wren cried, turning toward us. She reached out and gave him a hug as I pushed my mother forward a little harder, turning my face away from Wren’s while using Dexter’s athletic back as a shield.

“Have you ever met my mother?” I heard Howard say. “And—hold on—Where’d he go? Batter!” he called after me. But I’d managed to propel my mother and myself into the sanctuary of the busy lobby.

“Howard’s calling you,” my mother said.

“What?”

“Howard. He’s calling you.”

“We better find our seats—”

And then:

“Batter.”

Wren stood before me.

“Oh. Well. Hey.”

“How was the conference?” she asked. “Did you find the room okay?”

“What conference?” my mother said.

“You already know each other?” Howard asked, looking at me sideways.

“Not really,” I said.

“We shared a table at a poetry slam,” Wren said. “And then we ran into each other again yesterday at the History Conference.”

“You were at the conference?” my mother said sharply.

“A poetry slam,” Howard said disapprovingly.

“His father was speaking,” Wren said. “Did you hear him?”

“Caught the tail end,” I murmured.

“This is Mrs. Gray,” Howard said to Wren. “She’s a typeface designer.”

“Really?” said Wren. “So you design type for *Peck & Peck*?”

Howard looked confused. “No, no,” he said. “Mrs. Gray is Batter’s mother. Batter works at Peck & Peck. Mrs. Gray lives in California. She’s visiting here with her husband, a historian. Have I got that straight, Mrs. Gray?”

“Yes.”

Wren looked at me in surprise.

“Wait. *You* work at Peck & Peck?” she asked. “Seriously?”

I opened my mouth to speak, but my mother got there first.

“My son is the Copy Editor. Do you work there, too?”

“No,” she said slowly. “I came with Dexter. He works there. I work in a hospital—I’m getting a degree in nursing. I’m not good at poetry,” she said. “Batter can attest to that.”

“You’re a *nurse*?” my mother said.

“I think you’re a wonderful poet,” I managed.

“You’re writing poetry, Wren?” Howard looked uneasy.

“My real birthday was yesterday,” Howard’s mother said.

“I thought you said you didn’t know any nurses,” my mother hissed in my ear.

“Bad poetry,” Wren admitted. “Please don’t tell them how bad,” she said to me. “I’m trying to attempt one hard thing a day,” she told Howard. “A personal goal.”

“Eleanor Roosevelt,” my mother said.

“Right,” Wren said.

The lobby lights flashed three times.

“Everyone’s accounted for,” Dexter said, coming up from behind, tapping a clipboard.

“Happy belated birthday, Mrs. Gadley,” Wren said to Howard’s mother.

“We have to take our seats,” Dexter said. “Come on, Wren, we’re this way.” He grabbed her wrist and started to pull her away.

“Dex—wait a sec. I know Batter. Isn’t that something? I had no idea he worked at Peck & Peck.”

Dexter stopped.

“Let’s go, Mom,” I said, pushing my mother in the opposite direction.

“What do you mean you *know* Batter?” Dexter asked.

“His dad is an historian.” I could still hear Wren. “He was speaking at that conference I’ve been working at this week.”

“You never mentioned going to your father’s talk,” my mother said to me.

“I went because I was worried about you,” I said in a low voice. “Because you left my office upset.”

“Showtime,” Howard said.

Xing Xing Yao really *was* one of the sexiest women alive. It was easy to tell because the director had forgotten to clothe her in most of her scenes.

“Jesus, Mom, I’m sorry,” I whispered.

“Don’t be,” she whispered back. “I’m loving it.”

I turned to look at her, her profile blue in the light of the screen. She did look delighted.

“Wren seems nice,” she whispered.

“Ummm.”

“Smart, too.”

Someone shushed us from behind.

“Was June pretty?”

“You wouldn’t have liked her. She was edgy. Had a nose piercing.”

“How long did you date?”

“We *didn’t*,” I insisted. “Just friends. Let’s watch, okay?”

She sat quietly for five minutes. On-screen, Xing Xing made a date with a Goodyear tire salesman.

“Good for her,” my mother said. “A lot of people don’t take tires seriously.”

“Mom. He’s the serial killer,” I hissed.

“How do you know that?” she hissed back.

“It’s been implied.”

“Because he had all those knives in his kitchen?”

“Because he keeps a list of the people he kills.”

She shook her head. “Xing Xing really shouldn’t get involved with a serial killer.”

“She’s supposed to. She’s an undercover cop.”

“She should have had her original tires rotated first. Sometimes that’s all one needs to do anyway.”

“She’s only *posing* as a tire customer.”

“I *know* that, Batter, but a new set of tires is expensive. And if he kills her, she’ll never use them.”

“Shut up!” someone snapped from the side.

Ten minutes later she said, “I can’t believe she’s married.”

“It’s part of her cover.”

“No, I mean June.”

“*Mom.*”

“I mean *getting* married, Batter. *Getting*. She could still change her mind.”

“June and I were not right for each other. We’re friends, that’s all. Now can we drop it?”

My mother nodded and folded her hands together in her lap. “So you *did* date,” she nodded knowingly. “Was she too edgy? A little edginess can go a long way.”

I pretended I couldn’t hear her.

Fifteen minutes later she said, “Am I supposed to believe Xing Xing’s husband thinks Xing Xing works in a bank when she dresses like a prostitute and has a .45 strapped to her ankle?”

“They don’t have a good marriage,” I whispered back. “He hasn’t noticed her in years.”

“Oh, that’s sad,” my mother said, softening. “Poor Xing Xing. No wonder she’s falling for the serial killer.”

“She’s not falling for him.”

“Yes, she is.”

“She’s setting a trap, Mom.”

“But then why buy the whitewalls? They’re a lot more expensive.”

“Mom.”

“Wouldn’t it be awful if June’s future husband is a serial killer?”

“*Mom.*”

“No, no, I’m sorry; of course he isn’t. Hopefully.”

“QUIET!” came a savage spew from the left.

I spent the next ten minutes scanning every inch of the theater for Wren.

“In the center,” my mother whispered brusquely. “About fifteen rows from the front.”

“What?”

“Your nurse-friend, Wren. Fifteen rows from the front.” She dug in her purse and extracted a pair of opera glasses.

“I *wasn’t* looking for Wren.,” I insisted. But I took them anyway.

“You know what I think?” my mother continued. “I think Xing Xing should hire the tire salesman to kill her husband.”

“Mom. She’s a cop. She’s trying to *trap* him, not find him new victims.”

“I realize that. It just seems to me that she could kill two birds with one stone: encourage his unusual hobby while putting an end to her loveless marriage.”

Which is exactly what Xing Xing did ten minutes later.

“Psych!” my mother whispered, slapping my knee.

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With my mother’s glasses, I scanned the theater for other Peck & Peck employees. Mira was easy to pick out—way down front, her small curls jittering in the darkness. Lou was easy, too, her shiny head practically emitted light. Tang was reading a book under the exit light.

“I think this might be it,” I said a little while later. “The Peck & Peck scene.”

And sure enough, there it was.

The quarterly lay at an angle on the nightstand, flanked by a ballerina music box and an open tube of lipstick, the small quail egg filling the screen with meaning. The camera zoomed out, putting Xing Xing in the scene. She was sitting in front of a large makeup mirror, crying. Her makeup must have been shellacked on, because it was still perfect.

“I thought you loved me,” she said to the mirror in a not-entirely-cinched silk robe. She’d just learned that the serial killer tire salesman she’d unfortunately fallen in love with, and who’d killed her husband for her so they could be together, was actually in love with someone else.

“Oh, that’s a stretch,” my mother whispered, “that a man who sells tires for a living and kills people for fun has a lot of extra time to date multiple women.”

But I barely heard her; I’d finally found Wren. My mother was right: she was fifteen rows from the front, her arms folded across her chest, her head wedged up against Dexter’s shoulder.

Back on-screen, Xing Xing rose and walked across the room, a bottle of bourbon in one hand, a full pill jar in the other.

“The problem with combining pills and alcohol like that,” my mother continued, “is that she’ll probably vomit. Which means she won’t die. And that means that when she comes to, she will be laying in her own vomit. And vomit is very difficult to get out of silk, especially after it’s dried.”

As if she’d heard my mother’s warning, Xing Xing threw herself down on the bed, gently spilling the pills and dropping the bourbon bottle to the floor. With her free hand, she lurched for the quarterly. She clutched *Peck & Peck* to her chest, her face taking on a quiet sense of longing and hope. The light caught the quarterly’s textured cover, making it look expensive, important—word-of-God-like. Sure, it was overly dramatic, but I was proud. There it was—the publication I worked for—in a starring role.

Slowly, Xing Xing lifted the quarterly from her chest and began drinking in the words on the page like someone applying salve to an open wound. Her eyes flickered in deep understanding.

“The idea is that the quarterly is filled with wisdom—that poetry is guiding her to do something important,” I whispered.

“That’s obvious, Batter. I think everyone gets that.”

“Shut up!” the guy next to me fumed.

Suddenly Xing Xing got up and strode across the room. Opening a

drawer, she removed a gun and filled it with bullets.

"She's going to arrest him now," my mother whispered. "And then she's going to turn herself in."

I nodded, like I agreed, but I wasn't actually watching the movie. I was watching Dexter elbow Wren. Ah, so she'd fallen asleep—that's why she was wedged up against his shoulder. He nudged her again, but she slapped his hand away. I must have stared at them for some time because when I finally looked back to the screen, Xing Xing was standing in an entirely different house. Now she was in the serial killer's new girlfriend's living room. Xing Xing said, "You must be the new girlfriend. Nice living room."

Xing Xing informed the new girlfriend that her boyfriend was a serial killer, and that she was there to arrest him and put him away for life. The new girlfriend suggested that Xing Xing might have the wrong address—her boyfriend sold tires. As the new girlfriend said this, she lifted her hand, calling attention to a very large diamond ring.

"He must have sold *a lot* of tires," my mother noted.

"You're in imminent danger," Xing Xing told her.

"Not me. He loves me," the girlfriend replied.

At which point Xing Xing said, "No. I meant from me." And then she shot the new girlfriend dead.

"Oh honestly," my mother said. "The ring wasn't that nice."

Xing Xing stepped calmly over the now dead new girlfriend and moved to the kitchen, where a little orange goldfish swam in a bowl. She raised her gun and pulled the trigger. The camera zoomed in on a little orange body slipping through shards of glass and dirty water.

My mother shook her head. "No one likes people who shoot fish," she whispered. "It's not sporting."

Down below I noticed movement from Wren's direction. According to the opera glasses, she was putting on her sweater as if preparing to leave. Dexter looked pissed.

Slowly, Xing Xing made her way into the now dead new girlfriend's bedroom, and once there, lifted the gun toward the cowering tire salesman, who, despite all the shooting, remained in plain sight. "You were the love of my life," she said. "But you killed me. You killed me *without* killing me." She reached into her tote bag and pulled out the copy of *Peck & Peck*.

“Page thirty-three,” she said, tossing it at him. “It explains everything. About life. About justice. About love.”

Then she shot him right through the heart.

The screen went instantly black, which I didn’t understand at all. Why would she give him the exact page number, and then, before he could even read it, kill him? What now?

“Sequel alert,” my mother hissed.

As if on cue, a second shot rang out.

Now the screen was suddenly alive, filling end to end with the image of a beautifully manicured hand laying still next to a smoking gun.

And one other thing. A copy of *Peck & Peck* covered in blood.

I looked at the screen, not believing.

The credits rolled.

Just like that, Xing Xing Yao had taken her own life—in the movie anyway. And *Peck & Peck* right along with it.

55.

Winter was extralong that year—that’s what I remember—longer, colder, and more depressing than any other on record. Or maybe it just felt that way inside the walls of Peck & Peck.

Xing Xing’s movie was a hit—not because it was good, but because it was controversial.

“In her first serious role, Yao gives new meaning to the phrase ‘killer looks,’” one reviewer wrote. “A bang-up ending you’ll never see coming!” another promised. SMOKING-GUN HOT! screamed a headline.

Controversy may have been good for Xing Xing’s career, but for us nonsensational types over at Peck & Peck, it was the worst kind of fame. After the movie hit the theaters for real, it wasn’t long before people demanded to know what kind of sick quarterly we were publishing over

there in Manhattan—the kind that attracted *sick* people writing *sick* poetry, which our *sick* editors chose to publish based on its *sick* satanic messaging.

This outrage was followed by something truly awful: a flood of new submissions written by the *truly* sick—skinheads, fetishists, bondage enthusiasts, people who pulled legs off spiders. They began sending us their work in droves.

Their stampede was followed by an equally depressing stampede in the opposite direction. We experienced a complete exodus of real talent—the poets we admired. Those people didn't just go away, they ran away.

The only person none of this seemed to bother was Salton.

"GREAT NEWS, PEOPLE!" he shouted during a particularly glum Aviary meeting. "We're on our eighth printing of Issue 323—the same Issue 323 that Xing Xing clutched to her lovely chest in the movie. And take a look at this little baby," he said, unbuttoning his shirt to reveal a T-shirt underneath which said, I READ PAGE 33. "This thing is selling like hotcakes."

"I still don't understand it," Lou said despondently. "I still don't see how the poem on page thirty-three had anything to do with that movie. It was about an old woman doing laundry. And why in the world would Xing Xing's character reference that page, especially right before she kills herself? It makes no sense."

"What is your *point*, Lou?" Salton said, exasperated.

"PTAs across the country are calling for a nationwide ban on those I READ PAGE 33 T-shirts in high schools," Slater informed us. "I heard it on the radio this morning. They say they promote suicide."

"Wrong. They promote *reading*," Salton argued.

"And there's more," someone else said. "The Christians for Christ people called yesterday—they say page thirty-three actually refers to the age Jesus was when he died, making Xing Xing a present-day girl Jesus—that she killed herself to absolve the tire salesman and girlfriend of their sins. They want to order another four thousand copies."

"Four thousand copies!" Salton whooped. "Just a reminder: we don't offer quantity discounts."

“Salton—did you see my note?” Dexter said, worried. “We got a call from Anna Kurz—the poet who wrote the piece on page thirty-three. She’s afraid to leave her apartment. All sorts of weird people are camped out in front. She’s asking that Peck & Peck provide police protection. Suicide is a very serious issue, Salton—we can’t—”

“Oh poor Anna,” Salton interrupted. “How sad for her that a blockbuster movie made her POPULAR. What is it with poets? She should be thanking us. You tell this Anna that if she keeps it up, we won’t ever publish another poem of hers—about laundry or anything else.”

“But that’s the part that really bothers me,” Howard said. “I talked with the scriptwriter, and it turns out the page thirty-three reference was just a random number he picked out of thin air. He’s never even *read* the quarterly. He could have mentioned page fifty-two just as easily. Page thirty-three has no significance whatsoever.”

Salton stood up, throwing his chair back. From above, rain pelted the Aviary dome as if we were under attack.

“Are you people DENSE?” he yelled. “Do you really NOT get it? Page thirty-three? Page fifty-two? It’s not the page number that matters, and it is most certainly *not* what it actually says on the page. If people want to think a poem about laundry is really a poem about suicide, let them. Laundry *happens* to be depressing, by the way; I hate it so much, I pay a woman to do mine. So if people read that poem and decide Xing Xing killed herself because she couldn’t stand to separate whites from darks, can we blame them? It’s called Freedom of Pretending You Know What a Poem Means, people! And as for the PTA—since when do we care about them? They don’t actually *buy* the quarterly, remember? They check it out of their goddamn communist libraries like the freeloaders they are. And anyway, even if they *did* buy it, who cares what they find on page thirty-three? ‘I Read Page 33’ is not a suicide message. It’s a *learning* message. It *promotes* reading. Has anyone bothered to explain this to those idiots from the PTA?”

“Salton,” Lou said, changing the subject. “At least Anna’s poem was quality work—something we can’t say about our recent submissions. You have to take this seriously. Worse, we still haven’t gotten to the bottom of the poems that walked out of this building months ago.”

“So your issue is that we’re not getting the ‘quality’ we’re accustomed to—is that right? That your sorry little depressing poet friends don’t want to

play with us anymore?" Lou looked away. "WELL, GOOD!" Salton shouted. "That's what we want!" He slammed his hand down on the table. "You know what a mountain of bad submissions from crackpot poets means?" he said. "It means your jobs just got a hell of a lot easier. For starters, someone tell the parolees in the mailroom to toss every other envelope. That's a fifty percent reduction in reading right there. Second, celebrate. Having a ton of bad stuff makes picking out the good stuff child's play. Third, stop griping. Sure, maybe the crackpots we're hearing from now are a little more graphic—a little more violent—but are they really *any* different from the people who were sending us their rainbow poems before? No. So the next time any of you find yourselves whining about a skinhead's rhyme on automatic weapons, remind yourself you could be reading some idiot's ode to making dolls out of felt. Really, people, I'm getting tired of this. Change is good."

"We're not against change," Howard said, rising to his feet. "We're against trash."

"Oh for god's sake, Howard," Salton said. "Sit down before you have a heart attack, or whatever it is people your age do."

"Salton," said Tang, "I haven't found a single poem this month I can recommend in good faith. Not one."

"You don't have a *recommendation*, Tang?" he said, emphasizing the word "recommendation" with a wink in my direction. "How devastating!" he said. "But if any of you really think every good poet is going to give us a miss, you don't know this industry. Poets are desperate people. They'll come around. My feeling is, we give them their little foot-stomping, I'm-taking-my-toys-and-going-home moment and then try to act casual when they come crawling back a nanosecond later."

"We're running out of time," Dexter said. "The press date for Issue 324 is almost here. Several signatures are still blank."

"How many empties do we have?" Salton asked.

"Three signatures," Dexter repeated. "Eight pages per signature, so twenty-four pages total."

"Child's play," said Salton. "We'll fill it with ads. Flood it."

"Can't," Sam Slater said. "Some of our advertisers have already pulled out. Even that Swiss watch company dumped us. They say they can't afford to be affiliated with a quarterly equated with death."

“THE GODDAMN SWISS AND THEIR HOLIER-THAN-THOU NEUTRALITY!” Salton shouted. “Are they really going to start pretending all those blockbuster movies featuring expensive-looking watches attached to ticking time bombs aren’t good for business? There isn’t a terrorist alive who wants to trust their bomb to a Casio. What a bunch of hypocrites.” Salton looked to the sky. “Wait a minute,” he said. “I’ve got it. Xing Xing’s work. We run twenty-four pages of Xing Xing.”

“Salton, *no*,” Gupta said.

“Oh stop it, Gupta,” Salton said. “She’s just been nominated for a huge award. Did you know that? Best Actress.”

Around the room, the mood changed.

“But she’s only written one poem, Salton,” Dexter said.

“Not possible,” Salton snapped, “nobody ever stops at one.” He got up from his chair again. “I like this idea,” he said. “Xing Xing dies in the movie, but we bring her back to life—perfect timing considering the next edition comes out around Easter—spot-on for the Christians for Christ—they’ll point out the resurrection theme, then double their orders. I’m sure Xing Xing has written about all sorts of crap; all we have to do is craft her words into printability and increase the point size to make it go even further. Surely you people can rewrite whatever it is she writes. How hard can it be?”

“We’re not poets, Salton,” Howard said wearily. “We’re editors. We make suggestions that might amplify intentions. We do not write or rewrite.”

For some reason, these words stopped Salton cold. “Wait,” he said. “You’re absolutely right, Howard. You’re editors, not writers.” Then he hurtled himself to the back of the room. “BEATER!” he shouted, coming to a fast stop within a foot of my face. “Did you or did you not write something that appeared on a bus several months back—the bus drivers liked it so much, they put it up next to bail bondsmen ads, correct?”

He gave me an intense look. *Cooperate,* it said.

“Did you know about this, people?” he asked, turning to the room at large while gripping my forearm. “Beater’s a poet!”

“Salton—please—I’m not.”

“No false modesty, Beat. I’m sure the bus drivers’ daily inhalation of deadly diesel fumes didn’t impact their selection process at all. I’m sure

whatever you penned was absolutely bus-brilliant! That's why I want *you* to work with Xing Xing—you're a poet, she's a poet—ergo, you're both . . . poets. Howard agrees. In fact, it was his idea."

"No!" Howard shouted.

"Here's how it's going to work," Salton said. "Beater goes to Xing Xing's hotel room—she happens to be in town right now. Once there, he pretends to knock around some ideas with her. I don't care how you do it, Beat," he said, swiveling to face me, "turn her aerobics routine into a sestina, throw in some sex spondees—whatever. Just make the drivel sound serious."

"Do you know what a spondee is, Batter?" Gupta asked with concern.

The other editors stared back at me like I was the enemy in their midst. And maybe I was; I wasn't completely sure how a spondee worked. I suddenly felt like I was back in college and being taken to task for being able to recognize the power of a poem without completely understanding its pedagogy. As the battle raged on, I said nothing. There was a line I would not cross. I would not fake-write a celebrity's bad poems for her.

And yes, I know—bad poets need someone to believe in them just as much as good poets do; that's how they get to *be* good poets. But Salton wasn't asking me to encourage Xing Xing; he was asking me to cheat—to perpetuate her clichéd ideas through my own underpowered writing skills. That was never part of our deal.

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It'd been six weeks since Salton had promised me the promotion, and, true to his word, he'd done everything except give it to me. I was a permanent fixture in Aviary meetings now, not just as the Copy Boy but as a full-fledged participant. At first the other editors tolerated my occasional suggestion with an obliging smile. But the previous week, when Salton started agreeing with every single poem I backed without argument, the tide turned against me. The editors—even those I'd counted as allies—resented my presence. After one particularly tense Aviary meeting, Tang took me aside.

"What's going on between you and Salton?" she demanded.

"Nothing."

Likewise, Howard had drawn me into his office and asked me, point-blank, what deal I'd made with the devil.

"I'm just saying what I think," I told him. "That's all."

Howard had given me a hard look. "*Peck & Peck* is not a one-man show, Batter. It's forty-one minds coming together to discuss the ideas that have the power to impact the world. Difference of opinion, Batter, diversity of voice—that's why *Peck & Peck* has so many editors. You know nothing of the poets in the Mideast, nor the entire continents of Africa and South America; you have zero experience with translators; you don't understand New Formalism or fragmentation; I'm fairly certain you've never heard of Nayi Kavita, nor are you aware that we're in the middle of a Native American poetry renaissance. I can excuse it; you're young. But stop acting like you know it all. *Peck & Peck* represents the world—not Manhattan, not you, and certainly not Salton. Our job is not to showcase one country, one culture, one race, one idea. That's homogeny. That's extinction."

He'd sat quietly for a moment, then reached across his desk to retrieve a copy assignment. "Forty copies," he'd said without a trace of friendliness.

We haven't spoken since.

. . . . . .

"Can we please get on track again here?" Lou demanded, rocketing me back to the present. "I didn't know Xing Xing was being considered for Best Actress. That changes things—at least a little. If you're really serious about this, I'll work with her."

"You?" demanded Sam Slater. "What a waste. I'll go. I'm the expert in mesostics anyway. Where's she staying? I'll go right now."

"What does mesostics have to do with anything?" Lou interrupted, "Xing Xing doesn't write mesostic poetry."

"Well. Structurally, her work does have a mesostic look to it," Tang said.

"It should be me," Mira said. "I'll be the Editor in Chief here one day—I should be the one representing the company." With this announcement, at least half of the other editors hung their heads.

"Look," Tang said. "Obviously we can't send Batter. *I'll* do it. If she's really up for Best Actress, we can't run the risk of having her look bad in our pages. We're both Asian—she'll respond better to me."

“Beater,” Salton whispered to me while the editors continued to insult each other as well as me, “do you believe these jerks? They really *do* think you’re an idiot. Boy, I was looking forward to rotting the quarterly slowly, but given the circumstances, I say man the torpedoes, full speed ahead. You head on over to Xing Xing’s hotel—she’s at the Plaza, room 512. I’ll call and tell her you’re on your way. Then I’ll finish the paperwork for your promotion and get that chair nameplate ordered. This is exactly the opportunity we needed, and Howard, of all people, dropped it in our laps. Isn’t that wild?”

I started to protest, but he held up his hand. “All right, all right. I already *know* you don’t approve of Xing Xing’s syrupy sicklies,” he hissed, “but I don’t *care*. Prove these jerks wrong, Beater! Go channel your inner Mary Poppins and get ’er done!”

I looked past Salton at Dexter. He’d somehow managed to produce a copy of my bus poem and was reading it out loud. Some of the editors laughed. Even Howard shook his head when Dexter got to the part about a collating copy machine sounding like birds in flight.

I know I just said there was a line I would not cross—the one about aiding or abetting the inclusion of schlocky poetry—but you have to understand, I didn’t cross the line—I was pushed.

56.

Xing Xing Yao opened the door dressed in sweatpants and a T-shirt, her hair pulled back in a ponytail. Seeing her without makeup, I would have guessed she was about sixteen. With the exception of her whitewashed teeth, which could have illuminated a dark cave, it was hard to believe this small, entirely average-looking woman was the sexy, bad-ass undercover cop from the movie. But as soon as she opened her mouth and said, “You

must be Batter Gray," her gravelly voice indicated she couldn't have been anyone else.

"I know it's small," Xing Xing said, gesturing to the room, "but that's intentional. I always request the smallest room possible. Big suites make me uncomfortable. We'll have to work on the bed. Is that okay?" She sat down near the pillows, tucking her legs beneath her. "I expected someone older. How old are you, anyway? If you don't mind me asking."

"Twent—twenty-five," I said.

"Really? That's funny. Me, too."

I glanced at the books on her nightstand to steady myself. Styron, García Márquez, a poetry anthology, two scripts, and a book on nutrition.

"I apologize in advance, but I don't have a lot of time," she said. "I understand you want to publish a few more of my poems—this is what Mr. Peck told me on the phone." She leaned over to the nightstand and opened the drawer, pulling out two nearly identical small black notebooks. Flipping through both, she chose one and put the other back in the drawer.

"Yup," I managed.

"I'm really honored," she said. "But I'm not sure what I've written is any good. I'm interested: what does *Peck & Peck* have to say about my work?"

"We." I stopped. "We like it."

She gave me a death look and leaned in. "Look," she said. "I work in the movie industry, which means I have a bullshit detector the size of Miami. So, if we're to work together, Batter—is that right, is it Batter?—on something that means as much to me as poetry does, I'm going to have to demand a little more honesty."

"Understood."

"I don't like people who tell me what they think I want to hear." Her face was grim. It was exactly the same face she'd made in the movie right before she blew the tire salesman away.

"Got it," I said.

"So let me ask you again," she said slowly, her hands resting on the small black notebook. "What do you *really* think of my work?"

This time I didn't hesitate. "It's awful."

Her head whiplashed in surprise.

"I would go so far to say that it's some of the worst I've ever read."

She looked back at me, astonished.

“Sorry,” I said quickly.

“Did you just say, ‘some of the *worst*?’” she asked.

“I did.”

She looked away.

How could I have been so cruel? I was like the most vicious people from my old poetry workshop; the ones who always justified their feedback as constructive criticism. Where was the tact? The encouragement? I’d only read one poem of hers!

“Sorry.”

She turned to face me. “No, no,” she said, her voice heavy. “I wanted honesty, and you gave it.” She exhaled. “I’m just not used to people being *quite* so honest.” She picked up her notebook and threw it back in the nightstand’s drawer.

“Look,” I said. “Don’t listen to me. Salton shouldn’t have sent me; I’m not even an editor. I’m sorry. I’ll go.”

She looked startled. “What do you mean you’re not an editor?” She reached for the phone as if to call security.

“What I mean is, I’m the copy editor. No—wait. I’m not really that, either. I mean I *make* copies. In the basement. I’m the copy guy.”

She had one finger on the dial. “Peck sent the copy guy? To *me*?”

“Yes.”

“But why?” she said, her eyes suddenly watery. “Is this some sort of joke?”

“It’s a long story.”

She moved away from the phone, her face slack. She picked some imaginary lint off the bedspread, gathering herself in a way I suspected she had to do far too often. Then she glanced at her watch and tugged hard on her ponytail as if to tighten it. “Oh hell, Batter,” she said, in the voice of someone accustomed to assholes. “Sit down. I could use a long story.”

. . . . . .

I opted for the abridged version.

Xing Xing took it all in. “Wow,” she said, leaning back against the headboard. “That’s not a story—that’s a movie.”

“Speaking of which,” I said, “your movie just about ruined us.”

Then I told her about the dead air that now blanketed the once airy interior of Peck & Peck; how the pickets, reprints, T-shirt sales, and media were driving the kind of warped submissions that really ought to be reported to the police, and even though her movie essentially caused this problem, and for that reason alone, we should steer clear of her, the fact that she’d been recently nominated for a big award, coupled with the fact that she tended to spell words like “love” “l-u-v” meant that her work was now not only somewhat credible but completely nonthreatening, adding a much needed balance to the sadomasochism that now poured in daily.

“In short, I’m here to get enough work to fill twenty-four pages,” I said. “That’s what we need. Twenty-four pages to keep *Peck & Peck* from going down.”

“Well,” she said, clearly irritated. “Couple of problems. First, I haven’t been nominated for any awards—it’s not even the right time of year. How could you not know that? Plus, actresses in action films rarely get nominated. Men, yes; women, no. The average four-year-old knows that. I think Salton Peck made that up.”

As soon as she said it, I knew it was true.

“And as for spelling ‘love’ ‘l-u-v,’ that was an intentional misspelling. I’m not stupid, Batter, I just play stupid people in movies. Intentional misspelling is a poetic convention. It’s like when Wanda Phipps spells ‘nervously’ ‘newvously.’ Surely you’re familiar with it.”

I was, but honestly—and in my opinion only—‘luv’ didn’t qualify. I changed the subject.

“Did you major in acting? In school?”

“No,” she said. “Classics. You?”

“Ask me what I didn’t major in.”

She laughed. A little.

“I think you’re a very good actress,” I added. “Honestly.”

“I’m not,” she said. “Sometimes I think I could be if I was offered a different kind of role. But maybe I’m just kidding myself—I’ve been typecast. For my last three movies, the director insisted that I play up my Chinese accent. I’m from upstate New York, Batter, as were my parents and *their* parents. I don’t *have* a Chinese accent. My real name is Esther Xing Yao, but my family always calls me Xing Xing. I prefer it to Esther, so I

made it my screen name. But my true desire is to put the movies behind me. Write poetry full-time—earn a living that way."

"Um. A couple things you should know," I said, worried by her career plan. "For instance, about the pay poets receive. Well. I would hesitate to call it pay."

"No, no, I realize I would have to get established," she said, "before I could make a good living."

Good god. Was she on drugs?

"Do you write?" she asked.

"Not anymore."

"But why? If you want to write, you should."

I shook my head at her naïveté.

"Well," she said quietly, "that's that. I guess I just wanted to be somebody."

"Ahh—Xing Xing? You sort of *are* somebody."

"I meant, you know, a person of substance."

I knew exactly what she meant.

"And based on my last movie," she continued, "I'm pretty sure I'm getting further from my goal. So tell me more about you. Do you have a girlfriend?"

"No."

"But you're in love with someone."

"No."

"Batter," she said, looking through me as if I were a pane of glass. "There are only two states of being for people like you and me. You're either wishing you were in a relationship or leaving one. What's her name?"

"Wren."

"I like that."

"What about you? Are you?" The tabloids claimed she was dating three men at once.

"No," she said. "I'm this close," she said, holding her thumb and index finger closely together, "to being a nun."

"But you're in love with someone."

She shrugged.

"So what's the problem?"

"I don't know. What's your problem?"

“Wren already has a boyfriend.” I thought about Dexter at that poetry slam. *This one’s for Wren. My better half. With all my love.*

“Same,” she said.

“But you’re Xing Xing Yao, the Sexiest Woman Alive.”

“So what? You’re Batter Gray, Copy Editor.”

“Again, not actually an editor.”

“Again, not actually that sexy.”

We took a moment to contemplate our mutual dishonesties.

“I guess that means we’re both frauds,” she said.

“At least we’re good at nothing,” I agreed. “That’s something. Isn’t it?”

She was silent for a moment. “You hungry?” she asked. She pressed a button for room service. “Also—do you mind me asking?” she said, her hand over the mouthpiece. “What kind of name is Batter? Is it short for something?”

“I was named after a dog.”

“Really?” she said. “What kind of dog?”

“A hero,” I said.

That’s how we spent the next few hours—eating—while I told her Batter the dog stories. Every time I’d finish one and remind her—beg her, really—that we needed to talk about her poetry, she’d say “just one more” until I finally said no; from here on out it was one story per poem. Reluctantly, she withdrew her notebook from the drawer. “Do not mock me,” she said. “I mean it.”

I read at least twenty poems of hers, and I’m astonished to say that four of them were not bad at all. Fairly good, in fact.

“About this one,” I said, flipping back through the notebook. “This one has enormous potential. I just have to wonder: have you ever considered putting the last line first? Here, I’ll show you.” I took out a pencil and circled it, moving it up front, then hesitated, before crossing out the word “suddenly” in a different line.

“Hey,” she said. “Do you *mind*?”

“This piece is already all about speed. You don’t need to tell us.”

She stared down at the page, her forehead pleating into rows. “If that line

moves to the front, then I think I'd want to move this idea up here. But now the punctuation doesn't work."

"Get rid of the punctuation for now," I said. "You can adjust it later. Focus on the idea first."

"But the rhythm—"

"It'll come. Keep the visual in mind—how the piece looks on the page—it will strengthen the audible. And remember that poetry is all about economy. Each letter is an atom, each word, a molecule; together they create phrasing, and phrasing gives rise to substance." I was quoting my mother, and I knew it, but Xing Xing looked at me like I was some sort of genius.

"What about this one?" she said, flipping to another poem I'd liked. We spent another hour examining her individual lines.

When the phone rang, Xing Xing jumped. "Oh my god," she said. "Look at the time."

We'd been talking for almost five hours.

"Don't start with me, Brandon," Xing Xing said into the mouthpiece. "Yes, well. I know. *I know*. Well, something came *up*." This was followed by a lot of rapid-fire chatter from the other end, during which Xing Xing looked at me and rolled her eyes. "No," she said, "would you *relax*? Of course I'll be there. Yes, yes, *of course* I'm wearing the dress. *Yes,* it fits. Relax. I'll be down in the lobby in ten. Okay. Bye."

She hung up the phone. "Give me five minutes," she said, grabbing a dress out of the closet and disappearing into the bathroom. "Please don't go."

From the other side of the door I heard splashing water, followed by the sharp snap of several Kleenexes being torn from a box, punctuated by the sounds of little jar lids swiveling open and shut. Then I heard a sharp intake of breath as if she'd lifted a heavy weight, followed by the slow and tortuous closure of a reluctant zipper. Four minutes later she reemerged.

"WOW," I said. I couldn't help it.

In mere minutes, she'd gone from average to unbelievable. Her lips were fuller, her eyes were smokier, her nose was smaller, and her skin shone like a freshly polished apple. She yanked the rubber band out of her hair and combed her fingers through, then tipped her head down and shook it a few

times. “Do you believe this dress?” she said. “I feel like I’m wearing a wet shower curtain.”

I could not believe the dress.

She grabbed a shoulder bag off the table before tossing her notebook back in the drawer. “Batter,” she said, “it’s been a true pleasure.”

“For me, too. Really.”

“I feel like we’re—you know—friends.”

“Me, too.”

“No, I mean, really. I never say that. I haven’t made a friend in years. Not one I could be completely honest with. Certainly no one with whom I would share my writing.”

“Me neither.”

She opened the door; then stopped abruptly. “Wait,” she said, “What was I thinking? You need it—my notebook.” She dashed back to the bed and reopened the nightstand drawer. “Here,” she said, handing it to me.

“No,” I said, pushing it away. “Absolutely not. I refuse to let Salton use you.”

“Using people is the name of the game in my business,” she said, pushing it back. “I’ve been playing a long time. I know how it works.”

“No, Xing Xing. No games. That’s not how poetry works.”

She laughed, but it sounded hollow. “Poetry isn’t sacred.”

“Yes it is.”

She looked at me with pity. “Let me explain. You let Salton use me because if you don’t, you’ll get fired, and you won’t become an editor, and *Peck & Peck*’s reputation will continue to go downhill, and it’ll be your fault. And please remember: your company’s only in ruins now because of *me*—because of *my* movie. So do us both a favor: put your morals aside. I need an editor and we both need a publication. Salton is the price we pay. This is how things work in my world, and movies aren’t that different from real life.” She stabbed at the elevator button again. “Why is this so slow?”

“Xing Xing,” I said. “Movies are *nothing* like real life.”

She frowned. “You’re right. In the movies, the copy guy would print the really bad poetry, making the actress look like a fool, then call the tabloids and sell everything I’d told him today for a million bucks. And the famous actress who finally thought she’d found someone to trust would lose her faith in humanity and sue.”

I stood in front of her, her notebook heavy in my hands.

“I’m aware there isn’t enough good work in there to fill twenty-four pages, Batter. But I trust you to do something with it.”

“No.”

“And please guard it with your life. Also, I didn’t change any names in the poems. Change all the names first thing.” She looked at the ceiling. “No, wait. Changing the names will throw everything off.”

“Xing Xing,” I said. “No.”

“Are you busy this weekend?” she said, ignoring my concern as she dug through her purse. “Maybe we could go to a bookstore or something.” The doors were sliding shut.

“Xing Xing,” I begged.

“I trust you,” she repeated. “Friends.”

57.

“Don’t leave anything out,” Sam Slater said. “Tell me *everything*. Start with what she was wearing. Or wasn’t.”

It was 7:00 a.m. and I’d opened my office door to find Sam sitting on a tall stack of paper reams.

“How long were you there? What did she say? Did she come on to you? And don’t say yes, because I won’t believe it. Unless she really did.” And he looked worried. “Did she?”

“Sam, I don’t have time for this right now.”

“Oh, come on. Give me the highlights,” he begged. “Did she give you anything to work with? Is that it?”

He motioned to Xing Xing’s notebook, which was tucked under my arm.

“It’s my work log,” I said, laying it down next to the pneumatic tubes while surveying my office. A stack of copy assignments, which I definitely

hadn’t run myself, now sat ready for delivery on the hand trolley. That could only mean one thing—Declonius had been there.

“What was she like? Does her normal voice really sound like she eats gravel?”

I ignored him, lifting the lid on Copier 3 to find a sheet of paper face up.

Extremis malis extrema remedia, Declonius had written in unmistakably angry handwriting across a photocopy of the “Smokin’ Hot!” Xing Xing Yao review. *Desperate times call for desperate measures.*

“You play your cards pretty close to your chest, Bat, I’ll give you that,” Sam was saying. “So just tell me this. Did she smell like candy? That’s what I imagine. Cotton candy.”

“I didn’t meet with her, Sam. She was sick.”

“Sick!” Sam said, relieved.

At the bottom, Declonius had added. *Time to rally the troops.*

I turned toward my thin window to watch the grimy shoes of picketers idling outside.

“You’d think they’d get tired of us by now,” Sam said, getting up to share the view.

“You’d think,” I said, wishing he’d leave.

That’s when Andy burst in.

“Something’s happened,” Andy barked, his face damp with perspiration. “We’re in lockdown. I’m closing off this entire floor. Both of you get to the Aviary right now. Let’s go. Hurry up.”

“What’s happened, Andy?”

“No time for questions—out—*now*—both of you.”

He motioned with his gun—he’d actually drawn his gun. Fake or not, it made an impression. “Now,” he said. He herded us out the door. “My instructions are to get you to the Aviary. Everyone else is already there. No fooling around now.”

“Are people in the building? Did pickets get in?” Sam worried aloud as the three of us walked briskly toward the elevator.

“I can’t discuss it,” Andy said, as he closed the elevator gate, pushing the button for the fifth floor. “Security reasons.”

Once on the fifth floor, we slipped past Dexter's empty desk, the lights on his phone flickering like tiny hot emergencies.

Andy continued to prod Sam and me down the hallway, past the petrified trees, which looked even more threatening than usual. "In, in, in," he said as he shoved us through the doors of the Aviary. All of the other editors were milling around like nervous sheep.

"Found him," Andy shouted to Salton. "Mr. Slater was in the copy room with Batter."

"Good god, Slater!" Salton shouted. "What do I have to do—throw a cowbell around your neck? We've been looking for you for fifteen minutes."

Andy holstered his gun. "I'm locking you people in here now," he said. "I'll go investigate. Try not to panic. This is what I'm trained for."

"You'd better be on it, Andy," Salton shouted. "I don't have time for this bullshit."

A small, disturbing noise echoed up from the floor below. It sounded like metal clinking against a railing.

"What was that?" Lou whispered.

"Call the police," Howard demanded.

"Everyone sit tight," Andy commanded.

"This is no time to play hero, Andy," Tang implored. "Call the police."

"It sounds like someone is downstairs," Gupta quivered. "I hear doors opening."

"I SAID SIT TIGHT," Andy shouted. And then he grabbed both doorknobs and backed out of the Aviary, slamming the doors behind him. The next sound we heard was a key in a lock and a pair of heavy boots stomping down the hallway. We looked at each other with disbelief. Surely we were safe in the Aviary. Or as safe as anyone can be in a cage.

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"Okay," Salton said irritably, "can someone please enlighten me? One minute I'm at my desk; the next, Andy is herding me in here with disturbing news about our shrubbery. That's right, people. Our *shrubbery.* Seems there's some worry about our *plants*. Who knows about this? The goddamn plants are on *your* balconies. Who's seen something? I want answers."

“Are you referring to the topiaries?” Lou ventured.

“OF COURSE I’M REFERRING TO THE FUCKING TOPIARIES,” he shouted. “The only plants I allow *in* the building because, technically, they are not *in* the building; they are outside the building. You know I hate living things.”

“I thought you might have meant the petrified trees,” Lou ventured.

“Lou, stop hanging around Slater—you’re beginning to sound as stupid as he is. The trees are dead. That’s what happens when you dig a live thing up, deny it water, and nail it to a wall. Try it on your ficus tree at home—I promise you’ll have similar results. Now can we *please* get back to the issue? Who knows something?”

No one made eye contact.

Salton looked around with disbelief. “You’re telling me some madman with pruning shears has been trimming our shrubbery—shrubbery which sits on each of your balconies and is snipped at *while* you are in your offices—and none of you even noticed? This didn’t happen overnight, people!”

“I’m confused,” Lou said. “Yes, of course a man with pruning shears has been in the building, but he’s the gardener. You know him, Salton—we all do. It’s Akio Fujikawa; he’s maintained the Peck & Peck topiaries for decades. You’ve spoken to him before.”

“*Never,*” said Salton. “I do not speak with gardeners because I don’t like gardeners. I have long made it a personal goal to stay away from people whose job it is to keep plants alive, and anyway, it makes no sense to chat with someone holding a pruning device. Shears are mini guillotines. Snap. Finger gone. There’s a reason gardeners aren’t allowed on airplanes, and it’s not just because their loppers won’t fit in the overhead compartment.”

“Gardeners aren’t allowed on airplanes?” Sam Slater said. “I didn’t know that.”

“Akio Fujikawa has been in charge of the Peck & Peck topiaries for decades,” Howard said, dismissing Salton’s paranoia. “He’s an artist.”

“So how do the airlines know who’s a gardener and who isn’t?” Sam asked.

“Oh, is that so, Howard?” Salton said. “Now you’re an artist expert.”

“What if you’re only a gardening enthusiast?” Sam asked cautiously.

“We *are* artist experts, Salton,” Howard reminded him. “We’re curators.”

“Curators,” Salton scoffed.

“Salton,” Lou said, “does it really make sense that Akio would harm our topiaries? What would be the point?”

“Salton,” Tang said, “like Howard said, the topiaries have been covered for months—they always are in winter. In fact, Akio doesn’t usually work during the winter months. It’s too cold.”

“What do you mean it’s too cold?” Salton charged. “We’re paying someone who doesn’t work just because it’s cold? *We* work when it’s cold. The people across the street work when it’s cold.”

“But he *did* work all winter and all spring, too,” Tang continued. “Maybe he had to since the individual letters needed so much work. I think he’s using a new typeface.”

“Baskerville,” I supplied without thinking.

“And even some italics.”

“I could give a rat’s ass about the typeface, Tang!” Salton shouted. “The point is, Andy, who has the good sense to carry a gun and because of it has kept this building mostly poet-free for years, has alerted us to the fact that something’s amiss. And now I learn a letter has changed. Who else noticed their letters have changed?”

A few hands—maybe six—rose across the room.

“Oh for heaven’s sake,” Mira said. “All this concern about topiary. Mine’s changed, and so what. It’s not even a letter. It’s a stick.”

“What do you mean it’s a stick?” Salton said. “I’m not paying for topiary sticks.”

“Just what I said. It’s a stick. I think he messed up because it’s just barely connected to its base now. It looks like a baseball bat with a ball.”

“Huh,” Howard mused. “You mean—like an exclamation point?”

Mira’s vibrating curls froze instantly.

“*An exclamation point?*” Salton gasped. “There’s an exclamation point in a topiary on a Peck & Peck balcony?”

“I very much doubt it’s an exclamation point,” Lou said.

“It better not be,” Salton said. “Exclamation points have absolutely no place in poetry—or in *any* decent sentence, and I will certainly not have them parading around the topiary at Peck & Peck. My god, people!”

“Don’t worry, Salton. I’m sure it’s not an exclamation point,” Dexter said, throwing a stern look at Howard for fueling Salton’s paranoia. “If Mira says it’s more of a stick, I’m sure it is.”

“I think this whole shrubbery thing is nonsense,” Salton said. “And it’s distracting us from our real issue, which is that it’s publication week and we still don’t have a full quarterly. Come on, people! Give me something to read or I swear I’m going to start lopping each and every one of your heads off with a pair of pruning shears from the confiscation pile at the airport. Beater, you were our envoy to Xing Xing’s little lair. What do you have? Don’t disappoint me.”

“He’s got nothing, Salton,” Sam tattled. “He didn’t even see her. Xing Xing was sick.” He put “sick” in air quotes. “I told you sending him was a —” Sam began. But before he could go on, the doors to the Aviary flew open.

“I’m back,” Andy said breathlessly. He looked pale.

“And?” Salton demanded. “Did you get to the bottom of the topiary mess?”

Andy nodded. “Almost, but I need more time. Just wanted to give you an update. I think the best strategy is that you people sit tight for now. Remain here while I reason with the guy. No sense in getting everyone all riled up.”

“*Guy?*” Lou asked.

“Is it a picketer?” Salton asked. “Because I will not tolerate picketers on our balconies inserting exclamation marks in poetry. I need to see this topiary mess myself.”

“No, Salton,” Andy said, “please.”

“You think I can’t handle topiary damage?”

“It’s more than that.”

“*What’s* more than that?” Salton said, seething. “What the HELL are you talking about?”

“The letters have been put in a specific order.”

“MY GOD, MAN,” Salton boomed. “Letters are always put in a specific order. That’s called SPELLING. My question to you is, what the HELL do they *spell*?”

But Andy resisted the question. “Look, I’ve already called a crew—we can have those topiaries rearranged in no time. I think it’s better if you all wait here.”

“That’s it,” Salton said. “Enough.” He strode to the door, and we all followed, pouring right past Andy and down the hallway, past the dead trees and down the staircase, two steps at a time, pounding through the lobby and

out the front door, until we spilled onto the sidewalk like a messy avalanche.

. . . . . .

“I don’t get it,” I heard a picketer say, looking up at the topiaries.

“This is why I hate poetry,” said someone else from the crowd. “It never makes sense.”

“Look—there’s a man up there. He’s still working on it.”

And sure enough, there was our gardener, his familiar protective jumpsuit caked with soil, his pockets heavy with a surgical selection of pruning shears. He seemed unaware of the crowd that had gathered below him. I watched as he removed another protective burlap sack and tossed it casually to the sidewalk. He stepped back, considered the shrub for a moment, then began to snip again.

The employees of Peck & Peck moved from one side of the building to the other, looking up, slowly piecing together the letters, then the words.

“I thought we were going with Blake this time,” someone said.

“David Diop,” someone else said.

“That isn’t iambic tetrameter, is it?”

A few more editors mumbled guesses.

“Oh. Wait. It’s not a haiku, is it?” said Mira, horrified.

We stood for several more minutes until the gardener removed the last of the burlap sacks.

From behind me came a sharp gasp.

“Oh my god,” Mira cried. “*Three* exclamation points.”

TO: Whom it may concern

FR: Whom it *still* concerns

RE: BURN IT DOWN!

Editors. Your job is not to print what Salton Peck wants. Your job is to print what the world needs. Go back to those piles. Find originality. Reward creativity. Burn the rest. DO YOUR JOBS! *Come* the hell *home*, dammit!

The editors stood silent, their lips moving as if that would help flush out the meaning.

“I’m embarrassed to say I don’t know this piece,” someone admitted.

“It’s definitely postmodern,” someone else said.

“It might be a translation,” another offered. “Meter-wise, it feels Cambodian.”

“I don’t understand the structure,” Mira said, irritated. “It almost looks like a memo.”

“It’s a lot more than a memo,” Gupta breathed.

“It’s Declonius,” Lou whispered.

As others continued to guess at the meaning, I glanced down at my basement office window. It looked as if someone had turned on a light in my copy room; a small buttery glow danced from the slitted window. But how could that be? That room was lit only by awful bluish fluorescent lighting. I watched the glow, uncomprehending, until I realized that it wasn’t really a glow but a flicker—a flicker that almost instantly turned into flames.

“Fire,” I said hoarsely. “*Fire*.”

No one seemed to hear me. “Fire,” I gasped again, more harshly this time, pointing across the street, and maybe that helped, because all of a sudden about twenty people shouted, “Call 911!”

The street turned into a sea of shrieks, everyone panicked by the sound of breaking glass as the flames shot from my window like sharpened knives. I looked up at the gardener, who was still hard at work from his perch on a balcony; it was obvious that neither the news nor the smoke of the fire had reached him. He leaned back for a moment against the railing, his posture sagging. It wasn’t until the whine of the fire truck that I finally saw him look out on the scene unfolding below. When he took in the pandemonium, all he did was slowly remove his glasses and clean them, as if to get a better look.

My body seized. That motion; the cleaning of the eyeglasses. It was so familiar. That’s when I realized: I’d seen this gardener dozens of times—not only in this jumpsuit with a cap pulled close, but in woolen pants matched with gray leather shoes, a pair of ever-dirty hands handing me, as he was

now, something to read. Except, I'd never really seen him. Because, as he'd once claimed, he'd been invisible. Even to me.

58.

The next morning, Dexter, his arms laden with copies of that day's *New York Times*, paced around the Aviary, thudding a copy in front of each of us. He looked terrible—unshaven, unironed—his signature starched white shirt smudged with newspaper ink. On a normal day, I would have been delighted with his state of imperfection, but today I couldn't enjoy it. I looked just like him. All of us did.

The fire had destroyed a large part of the bomb shelter—my office, the supply closet, the machines—leaving behind only a black, smoky grime that clung to the destroyed pneumatic tube system, giving it an anatomical look of death, like the charred bones of a criminal whose crime had been so heinous, he'd been both hanged and burned.

According to the fire department, Peck & Peck had been lucky: not only had the fire been contained within twenty minutes, but no one had been hurt. The only discernible artifact of yesterday's horror was the lingering smell of smoke.

The forty of us had come to work that morning because we had to—Salton had called a Crisis Meeting. But as we sat in the Aviary together, it felt as if something had permanently shifted—as if we'd stepped off some cliff and were in free fall. Declonius's message was obviously meant to remind us of our real duties, to inspire us to get back to our actual work. *Come. Home.* it demanded, quoting the poem that had fronted every copy of *Peck & Peck* for generations.

The only one who didn't look troubled was Salton himself. At 9:00 a.m., he marched through the doors of the Aviary, his face aglow, his demeanor celebratory, a thin manila envelope tucked under his arm.

“What a day!” he barked. “Isn’t it? Welcome to work, everyone!”

A few editors shifted in their seats, but no one replied. Salton laid his manila envelope on the table and sat down.

“Let’s get right to it,” he said. “I called this Crisis Meeting for three reasons.” He held up one finger. “Critical Reason Number One: As we all know, yesterday my loving twin brother pruned a threatening message into our balcony plants and then tried to kill us all.” He shook his head in happy wonder. “It’s hard to make this stuff up,” he said, waving *The New York Times*, “but here it is, my new favorite photograph of all time: Mr. Crazy Shears wearing this season’s latest look in handcuffs. I got each of you a copy. It’s a gift. You’re welcome.”

We all looked down at the newspaper, where Declonius, his face defiant, was being shoved into a police car.

“Isn’t the light in this shot incredible? Probably because of the flames.” Salton peered closer, nodding his head in satisfaction. “I wanted you all to have a copy because I think it makes a nice keepsake, something for your publishing scrapbooks. Because now, thanks to my firebug of a brother, we can print dog food labels and people will still buy us.”

“How can you joke about this?” Howard said reprovingly. “What happened yesterday was terrible.”

“Of course it was, Howard,” Salton said, suddenly serious. “Just awful. We lost three copy machines and some toilet paper. But don’t worry. I take our loss seriously. I’m having some herbal teas brought in.”

“That’s not funny.”

“Come *on*, Howard,” he chided. “Lighten up. Once the investigations are done, this company will have enough evidence to put my brother away for life. If that isn’t worth celebrating, I don’t know what is.”

“I just can’t believe Declonius would go that far,” Lou said. “His message didn’t mean *burn the building down*. He wasn’t being literal.”

“Who the hell knows what his memo meant,” Salton said. “Talk about needing some serious editing.”

“Thank god we left the building when we did,” Gupta said.

“Yes, yes, I know you’re all grateful I saved your lives,” Salton said, taking a deep breath. “I get that, and you’re welcome. But can we move on? I was just about to announce Critical Reason Number Two for throwing this Crisis Meeting and, truth be known, I’m excited about it. So—move on?”

He opened his arms like a friendly car salesman. “It’s about our celebrity poet, Xing Xing Yao. I didn’t have a chance to mention it yesterday because of all the topiary to-do, but I wanted to let you know that I talked to Xing Xing earlier—before all this nonsense started—and she told me that working with Beater was, quote, ‘fabulous!’ unquote.”

Everyone turned to look at me.

“Talkin’ about you, Beat,” he said, giving me a thumbs-up. “Lovin’ it.”

“Salton,” I said, the mention of Xing Xing’s name filling me with despair. “The fire—” But I couldn’t finish.

What was I going to say? The fire had destroyed Xing Xing’s black notebook. Even worse, it wasn’t the notebook she thought she’d given me. When she’d reached back in her drawer that day in her hotel room, she’d managed to grab the *wrong* notebook—her personal diary filled with her private thoughts and fears—I know because I’d read the first few pages looking for poems before slamming it shut. She would die knowing someone else had read it. I had no idea how I was going to explain that loss to her, much less to Salton.

“He spent five hours with her, people,” Salton informed the other editors. “Think about it. Given that the standard Xing Xing Yao poem takes only three minutes to write, plus an additional thirty seconds where someone who is *not* Xing Xing Yao crosses out approximately ninety-five percent of it, I think we can surmise Beater gathered enough so-called material to fill the next twenty quarterlies. Isn’t that right, little buddy?”

I shook my head in disgust. “No. It wasn’t like that. And the *fire*—”

“Now, now, Beat,” Salton said, “enough with your ever-present false modesty. Our very own Best Actress made it very clear that she has every faith in you. That you and *only you* can turn her crap into something—quote—and here he raised his voice an octave and added a breathy overtone, ‘*amazing.*’”

About half the editors looked at me with envy, the other half with disgust. Howard was in the latter group.

“That’s another thing, Salton,” I started. “Xing Xing is *not* nominated—”

“Quiet, Beat!” Salton commanded, holding up his hand. “I’m doing some mental math right now, and according to my calculations, you have very little time to fill those pages with whatever drivel you can manufacture from her shallow well of flabby bunny thoughts. My advice is, stay within

character. Don’t make it sound too smart. I want a copy no later than this afternoon. And don’t bother to give it to these guys,” he said, motioning to the rest of the room. “Unless you want to see grown-ups cry.”

“Her notebook was destroyed in the fire,” I cut in. “I have nothing to work with.” I was careful not to mention it was the wrong notebook. “She has no other copy. It’s all gone.”

Around the room, a few people cheered; others simply shook their heads. “Serves you right,” Sam Slater hissed at me. “Liar.”

Salton closed his own notebook. “So what,” he said casually, looking at me. “What’s the problem?”

“Salton, I’m trying to tell you: her poetry went up in smoke. I called her and told her—I left her three messages yesterday, but she hasn’t called me back. I’m sure she’s furious.”

“But you’d already read her stuff, correct?” Salton gave me a sharp look that read *Stop right now*. “You spent five hours in her hotel room. You know the general gist. Relax—she’s not going to remember what she wrote anyway. Writers write, drink, forget, repeat; they call it ‘the process.’ Don’t sweat it. You have something on my desk by this afternoon and let’s get off this boring topic, because, frankly, you’re *ruining* my dramatic timing. I am *trying* to get to the grand finale here—Critical Reason Number Three for calling this Crisis Meeting.”

“But—”

He stood up, planting his fingertips on the table like squat tripods. “As you all know,” he said slowly, savoring the tension, “I’ve been devoting a great deal of my time to getting to the bottom of our recent theft. I’m referring, of course, to the poems that left this building approximately two months ago.” He began a long, slow stroll around the perimeter of the room, pausing in front of one of the quail egg shadow boxes.

“Someone decided to backstab us,” he said, as if addressing the eggs. “Someone decided to steal our intellectual property.” He gave the eggs a closer look, as if they might provide an answer. “And not because this Benedict Arnold wanted to make some extra cash on the side, but rather because this person wanted to make *me* fail.”

Outside, ominous clouds began to gather above the Aviary dome. From across the room came a nervous cough.

“Everyone knows taking work out of the building is an offense

punishable by immediate dismissal," Salton said. "But *giving* it away on purpose to our competitors—well—that begs for something a little more brutal. But who's responsible?" he whispered, turning back to ask the eggs. "Who would do such a thing?"

No one spoke; no one moved an inch.

Salton tapped one of the shadow boxes as if to force the eggs to hatch. "Stupid egg," he muttered. "Always taunting us with the same question: Who? Who came first, the *chick* or the egg?"

He took a step back, his face unusually dark, his gaiety from earlier gone. He continued his slow, predatory amble around the room, the tension rising and falling with each step he took. "Who?" he hissed, stopping abruptly. He placed his hands on the back of Lou's chair. "Which—*chick*, Lou? Are you the Benedictress Arnold?"

"How *dare* you accuse me," she said, her face flushing with anger.

"Or maybe," Salton said, continuing down the table until he stopped behind Tang's chair, "maybe it was a different chick. Maybe it was Tang."

Tang looked ill. "*No*, Salton. I'd *never*—"

"Come on, Tang, get it off your chest!" he bullied, rapping the back of her chair. "You'll feel so much better!"

"But I *didn't*—"

"Well, if not you, Tang, then who?" Salton said, pulling away to pace again. It was like watching a cat play with an injured mouse. "What I can't understand," he said, "is how a chick could have so *little* business sense. I mean if you're gonna steal, Mira, don't forget to come out financially ahead. That's the point, after all."

"It wasn't me," Mira said. "I—"

"Further," Salton said, cutting her off, "this thief apparently told this so-called editor at this so-called quarterly that I was turning *Peck & Peck* into a *joke*. A joke! Can you imagine? We're practically printing money here, and this thief has the audacity to question *my* taste just because we're successful. Bad girl," he said, swatting Mira's head.

"Dad—stop it," she begged.

But he laughed and swatted her a second time before moving to the head of the table, where, for reasons I did not understand, he now stood behind Dexter.

"You have to ask yourself," he said, putting his hands on Dexter's

shoulders and squeezing them like unripe avocados, “how such a person could have so little business sense. Especially since this person has poetry in the DNA.”

Dexter’s eyes widened as he turned to look at Mira. She, in turn, went completely ashen. *No,* she shook her head at him *no, no, no,* the panic buzzing through her curls like an electric current. *I have no idea what he’s talking about.*

“To whom are you referring, Salton?” Lou demanded. “I’m tired of this. If you want to accuse someone, get on with it.”

“Oooh—I’m sorry, Lou-Lou,” Salton said, taking his hands off Dexter and holding them up as if to calm a spooked horse. “Easy, girl.”

“Salton,” Tang said. “Could we get back to the business at hand? You say you know who took the work. Tell us. There’s no point dragging this out.”

“No point?” Salton said looking sad. “Gosh, Tang. You really know how to take the fun out of everything. Can’t you at least hazard a guess? It’s more fun that way. Who wants to try?”

No one moved.

“How about you, Slater? Howie? Gupta?” he taunted, swatting each editor’s chair from behind.

But there were no takers.

And then his eyes rested on me.

“I know!” he shouted, reignited. “Let’s ask Beater!”

He charged toward me, his eyes wet like those of a crazed dog. “Beater’s our man on the street,” he said, “he’s our very own average Joe. Let’s see who Mr. Middle America thinks did it. What about it, Beat? You seem to have the inside scoop on just about everything. Tell us,” he begged. “Who’s the guilty poetry-DNA-related scumbag in our almost-midst? Get ready, folks!” he shouted, turning to the rest of the room as he played the air drums. “You know Beater. He never disappoints.”

I shifted position on my folding chair, willing my heart to stop pounding. All eyes were on me.

“TELL THE BASTARDS WHO ROBBED US!” he shouted, extending his arm and pointing his finger at me. “GIVE IT YOUR BEST SHOT!”

I looked around the room. The editors looked back at me, relieved, the focus having shifted from them to the most inconsequential person in the

room.

“It was me,” I finally said. “I did it.”

. . . . . .

For a moment it was if I’d said nothing at all. There was no reaction: no gasp, no shout, no surprise. Everyone just looked at me as if waiting for whatever I planned to say next. But I had no follow-up to my confession, and only when my silence confirmed that I had nothing more to say did reactions unfold like a series of collapsing dominoes. Howard’s hand flew to his chest; Lou covered her eyes; Tang slammed her notebook shut; and Salton—Salton spun toward me, his eyes a chilling mixture of surprise and loathing.

“No,” Salton said, snapping his fingers. “Stop right there. Wrong answer. That’s not what happened.”

“It wasn’t intentional,” I said, in a voice that sounded as if it was coming from ten miles away.

“Batter, no,” Gupta gasped.

“I *knew* it,” said Mira.

“How much did they pay you?” Slater asked.

“I’m so sorry,” I said.

“I took you under my wing,” Tang said. “I helped you—”

“All I did was copy some poems. I only did it so I could take them home and read them again later. That’s all I’ve ever done. These were pieces *Peck & Peck* ultimately rejected, by the way. I don’t see what the big deal is.”

“Jesus Christ.” Sam laughed. “That’s all you’ve *ever* done? You don’t see what the big deal is? How long has this been going on?”

“A while.”

“Which poems?” demanded Lou.

“About thirty. The ones that ran right at the truth.”

“Oh *Jesus*,” cackled Sam.

“And what’s that even supposed to mean?” Lou asked.

“The best poets don’t lie.”

“Rich, coming from the Xing Xing Yao impersonator,” Dexter said.

I hated Dexter, but never more than when he was right.

“I take full responsibility,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

Salton hadn’t moved from his spot. I could feel his eyes locked onto my face.

“What now, Salton,” Sam said eagerly. “Tar and feathers?”

“Fire him,” Hernandez said.

“Beater’s confession is a joke, everybody,” Salton assured the angry editors. “He’s just funning with you. He didn’t do it.”

“But I did,” I said.

“But you *didn’t*,” he said sharply, his smile gone.

“But I *did*.”

“NO!” he yelled. “YOU DID NOT.” Blood rushed to his face like a flash flood, and small, foamy bits of saliva bloomed in the corners of his mouth. “You shut up. Shut up right now or I swear you will not get that promotion to Associate Editor!”

This, too, stunned the room. “*Associate Editor,*” I heard people buzz like wasps.

“Why are you protecting her?” Salton demanded. “How did you get mixed up in this?”

“Protecting who? I’m not protecting anyone.”

“Yes, you are!”

I thought about Declonius—his defiant expression as they loaded him into the police cruiser. For a brief instant he’d looked right at me and lifted his shoulders in what I thought was an apologetic shrug. Until I remembered. *Extremis malis extrema remedia—desperate times call for desperate measures*—those were the words he’d scribbled across the Xing Xing Yao review—words that were immediately followed by the incendiary message he snipped into the topiaries and that, I just now realized, was what he’d meant by his so-called editing job: he’d taken over Akio’s gardening work. *He’d* pruned shrubs. BURN IT DOWN, he’d demanded.

“ARE YOU LISTENING TO ME?” Salton shrieked.

“I’m listening,” I said. “But you’re wrong. The work was taken from the building because of me, and yes, there was a chance—I now understand this” I said, convinced that Declonius had surely made copies and given them away, “that some other publisher might take them on. But I don’t feel bad about it. At least they had a chance to get out there. *Peck & Peck* isn’t the only game in town.”

Which was not the best thing to say.

Salton swung his body away from me and began pacing the room again, his arms swinging wildly, his fury building until he was primed for a violent charge. He turned, coming at me full force. Instinctively I jumped from my chair, bracing myself for the attack, but instead of assaulting me, Salton reached behind me and tore a shadow box of quail eggs from the wall.

"SEE THESE?" he screamed, holding the box just inches from my face.

"Yes—"

I watched in horror as he slammed it down on the marble table, smashing the glass and releasing its contents to skitter across the surface like fragile marbles.

"I HATE EGGS."

"Salton," Lou said in a steady voice. "Please. Calm down."

"I AM CALM," he shrieked. Then he grabbed one of the speckled eggs and placed it in the palm of his hand, holding it out for everyone to see. "Know what's inside these things, people?" he shouted. "I'll give you a hint. It's not poetry, it's not wisdom, and it's certainly not POWER. Despite what the previous Peck brothers claimed, all anyone will find inside these eggs," he screamed, crushing the small egg in one dramatic snap, "IS NOTHING."

Outside it began to rain. I could hear the little droplets on the Aviary dome, increasing until the patter overtook the room. I was still standing, rooted in place by Salton's violent behavior. A single egg rolled slowly down the table.

"Now," Salton said in a weirdly serene voice, "before Beater ruined it, I was about to announce the name of the guilty party. I have photographic evidence, making Beater's ridiculous confession ultraridiculous."

He spun crazily to the head of the table, crunching a few eggs underfoot. He picked up the manila envelope he'd carried in with him and, tearing it open, extracted an eight-by-ten-inch photograph. Then he thrust it out at arm's length for everyone to see. At least half of us were sitting too far away to make out the two figures in the photo, but before we could move closer, Dexter reeled back, first in astonishment, then in fury.

"Salton, *no*," he said, his voice angry.

"Oh stop acting surprised, Dex," Salton said wearily. "You know what they say—the apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

"You can't do this," Howard insisted, blocking the view. "I won't allow

it!”

More editors got up, impeding my advance.

“Who is that?” someone said.

“It’s a *Peck*,” someone else said.

Around me editors jockeyed for a look, each leaning in to study the two women in the picture. “A Peck?” a junior editor asked. “Which Peck?”

Dexter reached in and tried to grab the photograph but failed, his anxiety matched only by that of Howard, who stood up so aggressively, he knocked his chair to the ground. “That’s it, Salton,” he said. “I *quit.* I’m *done*.”

“Uncanny timing, Howard,” Salton said, “I was going to put you out to pasture anyway.”

“Let’s go, Dexter,” Howard said, grabbing Dexter’s elbow to steer him through the shattered glass and toward the Aviary doors.

“Too late, boys,” Salton called, waving the eight-by ten glossy at their retreating backs. “They picked her up over an hour ago.”

“They picked who up an hour ago? Who *is* it?” a junior editor demanded.

I was finally close enough to make out the two figures in the photo. One I knew right away—Monica Davies, the Editor in Chief of the *Eastern Seaboard Poetry Review*. And the other—

“Declonius’s daughter,” Lou gasped. “I can’t believe it.”

And neither could I. Because it was Wren.

59.

Salton announced that the Crisis Meeting was over and demanded everyone get back to work. “Especially you, Beater,” he threatened, grabbing me in the doorway and blocking everyone else’s exit. “I’ve changed my mind. I want the Xing Xing Yao crap on my desk in an hour. Is that understood? Get it done and maybe—MAYBE—I will let you keep

your job. But if you cross me—if you fail me—let me warn you right now: you will never, I mean never, find another job again, in this universe or any other. That is my promise to you."

The other editors looked at me as if taking the measure of my character—or the lack thereof. Between my confession, my Xing Xing Yao assignment, and my briefly promised promotion, it was unanimous. They all hated me.

"Understood," I said loudly. "I'll get right on it."

Around me, undisguised disapproval filled the room.

"That's better," Salton said, warming to my sudden acquiescence. "Take Howard's office right now, this instant," he instructed. "And after you've completed the Xing Xing Yao assignment, throw Howard's personal effects into a box and toss them out the window. And Dexter's desk. Clean that out, too. As for the rest of you," Salton said, raising his voice at the other editors as they tried to escape past us. "Unless you feel like joining Howard and Dexter in the fruitless endeavor called Good Luck Finding Another Job, I suggest you get back to your desks and start calling your favorite poets and letting them know our circulation is about to triple, thanks to some maimed topiary and our forthcoming Xing Xing Yao sexy sonnet parade. Dig up some decent rhymes we can publish in the *next* quarterly. Poets are businesspeople, too—bad ones, sure—but they pray at the altar of high-interest-rate Visa cards just like the rest of us. They won't be able to resist our new circulation numbers—that's the carrot to dangle. Understood?"

Editors shifted uncomfortably. Even Mira looked ill.

"All right then, people," Salton said. "Get the hell out of my sight."

I made my way to Howard's office through a gauntlet of scorn, grateful to slip behind his curved door. Once inside, I sat in Howard's chair, looking around at what had been his realm for over three decades, wishing more than anything that I could talk to him. I picked up a framed photograph he kept on the corner of his desk.

A much younger Howard, probably in his thirties, was holding one of his two young daughters in his lap. The other sat cross-legged on his desk as he read to them from *If I Ran the Zoo* by Dr. Seuss. It was a good photograph,

honest, in the way people caught unawares are, their faces relaxed, their eyes dreamy, their mouths unsmiling as they concentrated on the story. I peered closely at the younger one to look for some sign that she would grow up and live in a tepee and sleep with a man named Moonstar and never call home. She did have braids.

I picked up his phone and called Xing Xing. I'd already left five messages with the hotel's front desk but still gotten no return call. "I'd like to leave a message for Xing Xing Yao," I said to the same voice at the reception desk. "It's an emergency. Please."

"Ms. Yao has requested that I give you a message," the voice said. "First, she has instructed me to tell you to stop calling. Second, she would like me to let you know that you're"—he hesitated as if this usually wasn't part of his job—"an asshole."

"*What?*"

"Don't call again. If you persist, she'll add harassment to her charges."

"*What* charges?" I asked. But he'd hung up.

I replaced the phone in the cradle, my hands shaking. What the *hell* was going on? I felt terrible about her notebook but surely, Xing Xing didn't think I'd set a fire or done anything illegal? I took a few moments to steady myself. Then, I finally did what my namesake would have done. I acted.

I took a clean sheet of paper from Howard's second drawer. Feeding it into the IBM Selectric I typewriter, I wrote the sort of thing Salton assumed Xing Xing might write. I hate to admit this, but imitating who she was—or who Salton thought she was—came easily. It's only originality that takes work.

An hour later, I knocked on Salton's door.

"It's about time, Paper Boy," he yelled, charging toward the door. "You are in humongously deep shit, you know that? Humongously deep."

He tugged me over to his desk and shoved me into a chair. "You don't know whether you're coming or going, do you? What was all that about in the meeting today? Are you insane?" He grabbed my file folder and started pawing through my typewritten pages as he walked back to his desk. "I thought about killing you in that meeting," he said. "Honestly. I thought about strangling you then and there. "*I did it. It was me*," he said, imitating me. "Jesus Christ."

He opened the file folder and began reading the fake Xing Xing Yao

poetry, holding up one poem, then the another. “Like it,” he started to purr. “Pure Xing Xing spun honey. Just right. I especially like the one about the leg warmers. Where’s the photocopy?”

“We don’t have copy machines anymore,” I reminded him. “There’s a copy shop just down the street. I’ll go there.”

“Don’t want this gone from the building too long; don’t like breaking the rule even in emergency situations like this. Makes me uneasy. And,” he said, his tone changing, “getting back to your little performance today. What the hell was that? Some kind of good cop–bad cop, keep ’em guessing stunt? Because if it was,” he said, “I’d appreciate a bit of notice. We’re a team—remember? Teams work together. Really pissed me off. Shot my timing to hell.”

“Salton, I was telling the truth. I *did* do it. I’ve been gathering poems since I started working here. I take them home. A few of them did go on to get published in our pages, but most of them didn’t—although they should have. I have more at home.”

“Here we go again,” he said, frustrated. “The I-did-it confession. Getting old now. Unless what you’re trying to tell me is that you actually *did* do it in order to set up my brother and take down his doting daughter. Is that it? Because if that’s what it is, do you know what I’m going to do? I’m going to give you another bonus and a big hug.”

“You’re not understanding,” I said a little more forcefully. “I know your brother.” And then I really dropped the bomb. “We’re friends.”

Salton stopped in mid-stride.

“I never gave him anything,” I said quickly, “not on purpose. And although some work did end up in his hands, he said he didn’t do anything with it and I believe him. As for Wren, I don’t know why she’s in that picture. She isn’t involved. It makes no sense.”

Salton didn’t move. It was as if he was paralyzed.

“Salton?”

I waited a moment.

Salton cleared his throat. “You and my brother are *friends*,” he said haltingly.

“Well. Sort of.”

“That’s not possible. I have a piece of paper that says he believes you to be a rude and untrustworthy liar, not very bright, and on top of all that,

homophobic. Tell me: what kind of friend does that?”

“It’s complicated.”

“How did this so-called friendship evolve?”

“The copy room. He’s come to see me.”

Salton whirled on me, his face suddenly sweaty. “He’s been in the *building* and you didn’t report it?”

“Yes.”

“You knew he was trimming our shrubberies?”

“Well, no.”

“Oh, I see,” Salton said sarcastically. “You thought he was just dropping by. Mr. Famous Editor paying a visit to Copy Boy. But in reality, he was only there to stake out a possible arson site, steal submissions, and use *you*. Because he’s a consummate people user. Same old song and you fell for it.”

I closed my eyes in resignation. He had a point.

“I bet he really impressed you,” Salton said. “Turned on the old Declonius charm, right? Easy to talk to? So earnest. So honest. Really ‘knows’ poetry. That about the size of it?”

“Well, he,” I began, “he—”

“Don’t tell me, let me guess. He regaled you with stories about how he thought poets should be paid a fortune. Speak in front of Congress, land on the moon, walk on water. How his only goal was to carry on the legacy of our father and uncle. How devoted he was to unearthing the next great poets. Not like me—he told you I was more interested in nonpoetic pursuits like stocks and bonds and making tons of money, and that when I was offered a junior editorship at this ridiculous rag, I took great pleasure in turning it down. Actually—that part’s true and what of it? I loved watching my father twist in the wind—loved watching his fear ignite as he weighed the consequences of turning Peck & Peck over to the favored son; the one who flunked out of college; who collected garbage from all over the world and called it ‘architectural verse,’ who, even in his teen years, dragged home scruffy poet after scruffy poet, insisting that Daddy Cusp read their work. There was this one guy—Jack something—Declonius used to bring him home so often, I thought he was campaigning for my father to adopt him. Thank god they both shipped out for the war around the same time—Jack was nuts. Even got kicked out of World War II on psychiatric grounds. Goes to show, even Columbia makes mistakes.”

This story bothered me. Jack? Columbia? Gone to war but was released for psychiatric reasons? He didn't mean Jack Kerouac, did he? *Declonius discovered Jack Kerouac?*

"Good old Declonius. I bet he ended his tale of woe with the grand finale: his poor wife and how she died and all that, boo-hoo, the entire tender tale, start to finish."

"No—"

"Interesting," he said. "I'd peg Declonius for a sob story man. His wife was a nurse. Billie. Nice woman. After Declonius was jailed, she worked double shifts at Columbia Presbyterian on the infectious disease floor. Let her guard down and got exposed to something. That's what happens when you work double shifts—you get tired and sloppy and make mistakes. A fatal one in her case."

"Oh my god, Salton," I gasped, "that's a horrible thing to say." I remembered the park bench in Declonius's loft—the D + B etched in thyme, the white, ghostlike orchids. His loft wasn't Rome in the process of being ruined. It was a cemetery.

"People die all the time," Salton said, but I thought I heard his voice crack. "I—I don't see what all the fuss is about." He looked away, but I swear his eyes held tears. He walked behind his desk, clearing his throat, then turned his attention to the shelf, pushing a few books aside to reveal a small panel with a button exactly like one I had always used to gain access to my bomb shelter office. But this button didn't spring open a panel; it receded into a closet, which held a large safe. He twiddled the dials.

"I *offered* to help her and the kids," he said, his voice trembling. "I knew my brother's mistakes were not her mistakes—but *oh no*—Billie wouldn't take a dime from me."

He reached in and grabbed a ledger, slamming it down in front of me.

"What's this?" I asked, shaking.

"Since I'm sensing you still have your doubts," he said, "I thought you should see the real Declonius. The one that isn't quite so noble. Enjoy."

60.

I’ve told you I took accounting, but what I didn’t tell you—probably because I thought it revealed a side of my personality I desperately wanted to hide—was that I was good at it. My plan had been to become a poet; a romantic; the kind of guy who didn’t part his hair and wore woolen scarves, even in the summer. Until I discovered I only liked to read and decode poetry, not write it. Same with accounting; I didn’t like math, but just as the course description had once claimed, I’d somehow fallen in love with columns.

At Salton’s insistence, I opened the ledger and took in Declonius’s last years of bookkeeping. One glance and I could see he’d used the time-honored double-entry accounting system of instant error detection, a simple approach that guarantees mistakes will be found and rectified before they can grow into bigger ones. The four standard columns were there: debits, assets; credits; liabilities, all neatly typed. I stared at the figures, trying hard to see where he’d gone wrong. To me the books looked clean and clear—the honest price of doing business, money in, money out, natural and steady like the tide. Unfortunately, that’s the troublesome thing about accounting. It can look honest even when it isn’t.

I remember my professor saying that dishonest accounting was like a riptide—largely undetectable and stealthily dangerous. “There’s only ever a very small hint of impending doom,” she’d said. “Maybe a bit of churning water, a slight change in color, a line of seaweed casually making its way seaward. Or maybe nothing at all, not a single sign that would shout danger. But if you know *how* to look, rather than *where* to look, you’ll see it.”

It was because of her that I learned to spot an accounting riptide. It was also because of her that, sitting there, my stomach in knots, I knew Declonius had done *exactly* what Salton said he had done.

He’d started out small, barely noticeable amounts of money dancing from column to column like shells in a shell game. But as I looked more closely, I began to see the carefully hidden reductions—in day-to-day costs, in month-to-month editorial salaries, in year-to-year pensions—which, as the months went on, bloomed into more obvious deficits: rent that had not been paid, paper that had not been purchased, health insurance that had not been renewed, printers that had not been compensated, and supposed honorarium checks to poets for upwards of three thousand dollars that had

never been sent. I saw Declonius's salary reduced to zero—just as he'd told me—later to be not only reinstated but *tripled* under the smoggy term "executive bonus." I flipped back to the beginning, then flipped forward again. There it was: a steady, certain leakage—first a drip, then a rivulet, and, toward the end, as I flipped ahead—a torrent.

Yet each man kills the thing he loves. Oscar Wilde knew it all along.

"Not such a saint after all, is he?" Salton said. "Mr. Perfect wasn't really what he seemed. No surprise his daughter followed in his footsteps."

He gently pried the three-ringed ledger from my fingers and returned it to the cabinet behind his desk.

"I'm the only one who's ever wanted to save Peck & Peck," he said, jabbing a finger at his own chest. "My father refused to see it; my uncle refused to see it. I told them, 'Make me CEO. I'll get this place in the black and then some.' But no. Instead, we all had to wait until Declonius lifted every dime before it was crystal clear the only business he was ever interested in was feathering his own nest. I used my own goddamn money to rescue this place, Beat—millions and millions—and not because I love poetry—I don't—but because at this point, I want two things and two things only: revenge and acknowledgment. After a lifetime of rejection from dear old dad and a never-ending, soul-sucking competition with my felon brother, I want it known that I bested both of them. And even though cash trickles out of here like a leaky hose, I still pay everybody, don't I? Even gave out raises."

"Leaky hose? But you said the quarterly was making money."

"It *is*. But you know how accounting is, a lot of columns. Pretty sure the problem is on the bank's end. Happens all the time; I'll find the issue eventually. Too bad my dad's dead—absolutely lived for my failures. You know that feature in *Highlights* magazine—Goofus and Gallant? Little known fact: it's based on me and Declonius. Dad's idea. And when I got kicked off the baseball team? Dad *hugged* the coach. And when my wife filed for divorce? He sent her congratulatory flowers. But please, continue to be blinded by Declonius's charms and my father's A-1 parenting. You're just like everyone else. Even Billie." The sadness in his voice surprised me. "Got a photo of her," he said, reaching back into the cabinet to grab a small frame. "That's her," he said, holding it out for me to see. "She was nice."

Wren—or rather a woman who bore a strong resemblance to Wren—

looked back as she applied a Band-Aid to the crook of Salton's arm. She wore a starchy white nurse's uniform, a small pin on the lapel, her yellowish Wren-like hair pinned back neatly in a bun.

"She used to help me out with some health issues," he said. "At the hospital. This photo was taken just before I enlisted," he said, his voice slightly hoarse. "Or tried. The Army rejected me, so I joined Wall Street. Marketed war bonds; created strategies to finance the industrial complex. Some people think that doesn't count—carrying a ledger on Nassau Street instead of carrying a gun on the battlefield." He snatched the photo back, snapping the frame shut, and tossed it in the safe. "They're wrong."

"Now," he said firmly. "From here on out, I would appreciate it if you would be a bit selective about what you blurt out in the Aviary. We're a team, and teammates support each other; they *stick to the game plan*. You surprise me like that again and there will be hell to pay." He pawed around his desk before plucking my Xing Xing poetry off the top. "Get this copied right away. Then call Xing Xing and tell her it's done, and no, she *doesn't* get to review it; we know best. And as for her *not* being nominated for Best Actress? You tell her to fix that *right now*."

"Look, Salton," I pleaded. "I'm not sure she'll even see me. That notebook of hers that was destroyed—"

"Stop it, Beat! I'm tired of this! People live with loss every day of the week. She's not going to care about her notebook, I promise. I know her type; she just wants publicity, and we're giving it to her. Now get out of here. I have work to do."

Five minutes later I was on the street headed for the copy shop, my imitation Xing Xing poems in my hand. I felt awful, beset by a foreboding that something terrible was about to happen—as if the fire and the ledgers and Wren being arrested weren't enough already. I thought back to what Salton had said—about how Xing Xing was a publicity hound. It wasn't true. But something about the way he'd said it nagged at me. As if I'd caught him red-handed. But at what, I wasn't sure.

61.

When I was eleven or so, my mother insisted showing me what joy looked like. I hoped she meant a puppy, but instead she pulled out a Rapidograph pen, grabbed a pad of paper, and inked an ‘I’ on top of an ‘o.’

“It’s the medieval Latin sign for joy,” she explained. “Joy is ‘io.’” But stack them like this, and look,” she said, pointing to her exclamation mark perfectly inked in Goudy Medium. “That’s the *visual* representation of joy. Isn’t it beautiful?”

That story came rushing back to me as I was making my way to the Plaza Hotel, caught by the sudden appearance of not one, but three exclamation points stretched across a tabloid headline.

Xing Xing Yao REVEALED in Diary Tell-All!!!

I felt no joy whatsoever.

I snatched the newspaper, sucker-punched by the accompanying photograph directly beneath the headline. It was the familiar black elasticized notebook—the one Xing Xing had handed me, but instead of the poetry we’d thought it contained, it was Xing Xing’s true confessions strewn across the page for the entire world to read.

The notebook didn’t even look singed.

A sickly, prickly heat crept through my veins. I thought I might faint and probably would have if I hadn’t been defibrillated back to life by another headline that ran across the bottom of the page.

Father-Daughter Duo Post Million-Dollar Bail!!

Just beneath that was a photograph of Declonius and Wren leaving the police station, their hands held straight out like stop signs, their faces cast downward.

I stood on the street, people brushing by me. The headline juxtaposition told me everything I needed to know. There was only one way Declonius could have posted that bail—only one thing that would have fetched a sum broad enough to offer instant release. *Desperate times call for desperate measures.* I know now he'd been referring to not only his topiary job but to selling Xing Xing's diary.

What a sucker I was. Declonius's dirty hands; his odd working hours; his statement about always being at Peck & Peck—how did I not add things up? I thought about the way he looked at me right after his arrest—the way he shrugged. I couldn't *believe* the guy. He'd taken the diary just as easily as he'd taken the poems. And he did it at Xing Xing's expense. And, as usual, mine.

.....

"Batter Gray?" said a man standing outside of Peck & Peck just thirty minutes later. Andy leaned in with interest.

"Yes."

"Consider yourself served." The man handed me an envelope. "Have a nice day, asshole."

Xing Xing Yao was suing me for invasion of privacy, slander, libel, trespassing, personal cruelty, fraudulent intent, and theft, and violation of copyright. But it was the last complaint I knew Xing Xing had selected herself—something that probably isn't punishable by law but should be. "For being an absolute and total asshole," it read in, of all things, twelve-point Times *Extra* New Roman, the very typeface my mother had created so many years ago in order to—this just about *killed* me—stop mistakes from happening.

"Got what you deserved," Andy said, looking over my shoulder. "Messing with a cop."

"She's not a real cop, Andy."

"She's a better cop than you'll ever be. And she's a poet. I've been trying to warn you people: you have no idea what a scorned poet is capable of. You keep rejecting them without offering a courteous I'm sorry, I know you worked hard, or a *Thanks, but please send us something in the future,* and guess what. One day they're gonna bite back."

62.

"Mom," I said, pressing the phone hard to my ear. "It's me."

"It's about time. I've been calling you for two days. Are you all right?"

"No."

"Declonius Peck. He tried to burn the whole building down? Why would he do that?"

I thought about the ledgers—and then about Xing Xing's diary.

"I—I guess I didn't know him as well as I thought."

"That happens sometimes," she admitted. "People surprise us. They do stupid, thoughtless, damaging things."

"Well," I said, suddenly angry. "He *really* surprised me."

"I'm sorry, honey. It's horrible every time we discover the people we thought *weren't* awful turn out to be even *more* awful than the awful people we already *knew* were awful. The important thing is, you're okay. You didn't get hurt."

She paused, waiting for me.

"But I did get hurt. I had that diary in my office—Xing Xing's diary—even though it was supposed to be a different notebook—her poetry notebook. She'd entrusted it to me. I was supposed to rewrite her poetry—"

"Rewrite her poetry? Why would you do that? It's her work, not yours."

"It was an assignment for Salton—I was supposed to— Oh never mind. But I didn't have the right notebook; she accidentally gave me her diary instead of her poetry notebook and now it's—" I couldn't go on.

"I was just at the store," my mother said, quickly filling in the blanks. "I saw them. The tabloids. In fact, I bought them—I bought *all* of them, despite the cashier's smirky smile. I had to say, *Excuse me but my son happens to be working with Xing Xing Yao and I am taking a direct interest in his work*. Awful people are usually judgmental, have you ever noticed that? Of course we all are to some extent, but awful people take such delight in others' misfortunes. There's a word for that—a German word. Anyway, do you know what the cashier said? She said, 'Xing Xing Yao is

going down!’ And then she laughed. It wasn’t nice at all. I don’t like that phrase, ‘going down.’ I really don’t care for some of the newer idioms—”

“Mom,” I interrupted, “I’m calling because—” I took a deep breath. “I’m being sued. By Xing Xing Yao. She thinks *I* leaked her diary to the tabloids.”

“Of course you didn’t. Where did she get that idea?”

“I was the last one who had it.”

“But you said you had it in your office. Which the papers say Declonius set on fire.”

“Right, but I think Declonius found it while I was in a meeting. He must have stumbled upon it before he set the fire. And it came in handy—that million-dollar sale to the tabloids is probably what got him and Wren out of jail.”

“Wren? That nice young nurse?”

“Declonius is her father.”

“That’s *your* Wren in the photo?” she said, alarmed.

My Wren. I could hear her rattling newspapers.

“Her face is almost completely covered!” my mother said. “But oh my god! It *is* her. It says so right here! ‘Father-Daughter Duo Post . . . ’”

“Mom. The point is, I’m being sued. I was just served.” I felt a catch in my voice.

“Batter,” my mother said. “First: don’t panic. You didn’t do this; a good lawyer will be able to prove that. Second: you need to let Xing Xing know you’re innocent. Clear that up right away.”

“I can’t. Xing Xing is the one suing me. I’ve called her at least a dozen times. At least, now that I’ve been served, I know why she never called me back.”

My mother was silent. She was so silent I almost thought our connection had been lost.

“Mom?” I said.

Nothing.

“Mom? Are you still there?”

“Schadenfreude. That’s the word. Taking joy in the misfortunes of others.”

“Whatever.”

“It’s really not nice to take joy in the misfortunes of others. Unless it’s

Hitler. Then knock yourself out."

"Can you have Dad call me? He must know lawyers."

More silence.

"MOM?"

"I'm thinking!" she said. "Hold on."

A few moments later she said, "Something doesn't make sense to me. Go back to the very beginning. To the part where you said Declonius really surprised you."

"*Why?*"

"Just do it."

"He really surprised me," I repeated, irritated.

"Because you thought you *knew* him," she said.

"*Yes.*"

"So, are you saying he *really* surprised you? I mean *really, really* surprised you? Two *really*s, or just one?"

"Jesus, Mom," I said testily. "Yes. Two. He *really, really* surprised me. I never thought he would do something like this."

"Like what?"

"Mom! Please! He set my office on fire! He stole Xing Xing Yao's diary and sold it to the tabloids!"

"But he also pruned the topiaries," my mother said. "Did you find *that* surprising?"

"Well, no," I said, thinking of how carefully they were done, then remembering his loft filled with ruined pillars and starburst orchids. "That's exactly the sort of weird thing Declonius would do. Make a statement through plants."

"And what about the way he helped you at work? With your copy assignments."

"Well, no," I said. "He liked to be helpful. At least I thought that's what it was."

"So when you said Declonius really surprised you, what *exactly* did you mean?"

"I *meant*," I said, gritting my teeth, "that he acted in a way I did not expect. I thought I knew him; I was wrong. You know what else I learned? That he really *did* cook the books. And now I find out that Wren is his

daughter. You'd think he could have mentioned it, seeing that Wren dates Salton's personal assistant, who happens to be my number one enemy."

Wren. Just thinking about her made me unsteady. What must this be like for her? Her mother had died; her father was a felon; she'd been publicly humiliated on the cover of a tabloid. And then it occurred to me. Maybe her father had set her up, too.

"Worse," I continued, "Declonius may have given Wren the poems I took out of the building. He may have insisted she give them to a competitor for pub—"

"Wait. What poems?"

"Oh god, never mind!" I said, in anguish. I glanced at the folder still full of the damning evidence. I may have saved the poems from incineration but, in the process, burned myself instead. "The point is, Declonius set me up. First with those poems, and second with the Xing Xing Yao diary. He even told me how I got the job at Peck & Peck. It wasn't based on my own merits, Mom, it was based on me being untrustworthy, unreliable, stupid, and homophobic."

"Homophobic? That's an odd thing to throw in the mix."

"The point is, Declonius set me up from the very beginning."

"But the homophobic reference is weird. I mean you lived with a gay man for four years. He's your best friend."

"Mom—how would you *possibly* know that? Paul literally just told me."

"You had to be *told*? It was obvious from the start. Someone that handsome? That smart? That nice? Gay."

"Mom, please," I begged. "Can we focus? I'm falling apart."

There was a long silence from the other end—the kind of silence that seemed to indicate she was having to come to grips with the fact that her son had amounted to something after all, but in the wrong direction. But instead, she sighed, "Batter, stop it. You're catastrophizing. You need to sit up and ask yourself how someone you thought you knew was able to surprise you as much as he did. When people *really, really* surprise us—not just really surprise us, but *really, really* surprise us—there's something fishy about that. People are usually what they seem, usually *exactly* what they seem."

"What do you mean?"

"Awful people in high school—the bullies, the opportunists, the

narcissists—they grow up and become the awful people at work. We can't help but be who we are most of the time."

"But that's what I'm saying. Declonius *is* exactly what everyone said he was. A con artist. I'm the one who didn't want to believe it."

She exhaled sharply, exasperated, as if I wasn't understanding. "If you had to describe Declonius Peck—before the diary and the fire incident—what words would you use? Would you say he was a good man or not?"

"I would have said good, but now that I've learned—"

"I'm not asking you what you've *learned*; I'm asking you what you *know.* Think about the first time you met him. What was he like? What impression did you come away with?"

From the other end of the phone, I could hear her drumming her fingers on the table. "I thought he was probably brilliant," I said. "Generous, and honest. Misunderstood. An idealist."

"What gave you that impression?"

"I don't know. My gut, I guess."

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I felt even worse. My *gut.* It had gotten me into more trouble than any other body part—including my mouth.

"And what does your gut tell you now?" my mother asked. "Ask yourself that. What does it tell you *now*?"

I closed my eyes. I saw Declonius being taken away in the police car. His defeatist shrug; his weary eyes.

"Batter? Are you there?"

Declonius had looked at me in the same way he'd looked at me when he argued with me in the copy room. *You've been accused of wrongdoing. Are you guilty?*

I wasn't. And now *I* was accused of leaking Xing Xing's diary to the press, and I hadn't done that either.

"Batter," my mother said sharply. "I need to amend my earlier statement—the one about the awful people in high school growing up and becoming the awful people at work."

I was barely listening to her. I was too busy thinking about how Declonius had done what everyone said he'd done. He'd trimmed the topiaries; I'd seen it with my own eyes—and he'd cooked his own books—I'd seen that with my own eyes, too.

“Awful people succeed because nice people *let* them,” my mother was saying. “This is the drawback of being nice. Nice people worry that it isn’t *nice* to take action against awful people because they don’t want to act awful themselves—they don’t want to ‘stoop’ to that level. But I think nice people have been stooping all along. The worst kind of stooping—because it isn’t stooping, it’s bending over. This is where Batter your namesake had an advantage. He couldn’t bend. He had arthritis. He was forever on the bottom, looking up. Never disregard the view from the bottom, Batter. There’s power down there. You just have to find the courage to use it.”

63.

“Not worth the paper they’re written on,” Salton assured me, when I showed him Xing Xing’s served complaints and a copy of the tabloids. “My brother sold the diary; you know it; I know it; he knows it; and after we get the official arson report, the entire world will know it, too. Don’t you worry, Beater,” he said, putting his arm around my shoulders in reassurance, “I’ll get my lawyers on it. This little subpoena will be up in smoke in no time. Consider it done.”

Then he handed me a thick white envelope. “Here. It’s Issue 324, late but finally complete. Now that Dex is gone, I’m entrusting you with it. Take a cab to the typesetter—no subways—and once there, *be sure* and ask for proofs. Give ’em two days; no more. The typesetters will bitch and moan and say they need the usual week; you tell them no. You tell them they either provide proofs in two days or we pull our business permanently. If they give you any trouble, tell ’em to call me—I’m famous over there. And stop worrying about this Xing Xing nonsense.”

I nodded and took the envelope from him. “The typesetters on Varick?”

“Right. Take a cab,” he reiterated. “And you know the drill: guard it with your life.”

The very same words Xing Xing had used when she handed me her notebook.

I hailed a cab as Salton had instructed, but as soon as the cabbie asked me where to, I gave him my address in the Bronx.

He gave me a wary eye. “I don’t like driving over there.”

“It’s where I live,” I said, “and I just need to run up to my apartment for one second and get something and then we can leave immediately for this address.” I showed him the typesetter’s card. “Manhattan,” I said. “Guaranteed fare in both directions.”

He frowned. “What are you picking up? It better not be drugs. I won’t be a drug courier.”

“It’s not drugs.”

“Lotta drugs over there,” he said, as we pulled away from the curb. “I don’t like trouble.”

“Me neither,” I said. But based on what I was about to do, that was a lie.

“Same old deal, right?” the typesetter said, looking over the copies. “Proofs in a week? On press by Thursday?”

“No proofs this time,” I said. “Just send it straight to press.”

“Peck *always* insists on proofs,” she said.

“Well, not this time.”

She studied my face. “Where’s the guy who usually brings this stuff?” she asked. “The blonde. The good-looking guy.”

“He was fired. Involved in some of the nasty Peck & Peck business. Maybe you’ve read about it.”

“Who hasn’t,” she said, her interest blooming. “Some pretty crazy things going on over there lately.”

“Pretty crazy,” I agreed.

“I still need authorization.”

“Sure. Call Salton Peck,” I said, tapping the main Peck & Peck number at the top of our job sheet. “He’ll confirm it. Probably won’t be very happy

to have you waste his time, but—”

Her face changed.

“I’m not calling that man. Who’s your boss?”

“Salton Peck.”

She opened the white envelope and sifted through the contents. “There’s not a single editorial mark on these,” she said. “That doesn’t seem right.”

“Don’t sweat it,” I said, although I was sweating profusely.

“Are these already in order? There’s no numbering system here.”

“Oh. Any order is fine.”

“This one has a note at the bottom. Should we typeset that too? Because it looks like a phone number.”

I recognized the number right away—it was for a take-out place in my neighborhood.

“Let me cross that out,” I said.

She studied my face.

“What’s really going on?”

“Nothing. We’re just behind schedule.”

She looked at me, and, without breaking eye contact, got out the authorization form. “No complaints,” she said. “If you find a few typos, too bad. We go as fast as we can. We make a few mistakes. You guys get what you get.”

“Typos pre-accepted,” I said.

“I barely survived the last Peck & Peck shitstorm, and I don’t want another. You guys are terrible clients, you know that? Never satisfied. What’s wrong with everyone over there?”

“Poetry,” I said. “It’s upsetting.”

64.

“What the hell do you mean you didn’t GET proofs?” Salton roared in

the Aviary meeting two days later. “What the *hell* were you thinking?”

I was sitting in Howard’s old chair, my freshly etched nameplate on the back. Salton had made good on his word: I’d been promoted. When all the editors turned to glare at me, it was just as Howard had once described: the table’s odd undulations blocked some of them from view.

“I made a judgment call. We were behind schedule, and I knew if we skipped the proofs, we could still make our original print date. It doesn’t take a genius to realize the sooner we’re out there, the better. Sensational news fades fast. By taking advantage of the current buzz, we’ll make extra bucks.” My heart was thumping so loudly, I was certain it was audible.

Salton’s eyes widened with astonishment.

“Are out of your *mind*?” Lou said.

“I can’t believe you authorized that,” Tang said, incredulous.

“I made a business call,” I said, hiding my shaky hands in my lap.

“All this and a Xing Xing Yao lawsuit, too,” Hernandez said. “Or was that another business call? You leaked her diary to the press? You’re an ass.”

“That was *you*?” someone else asked.

“She’s suing him,” Hernandez said.

“I didn’t leak Xing Xing’s diary,” I insisted. But no one seemed to hear me.

“What’s happened to you, Batter?” Lou said angrily. “Who have you become?”

Lou’s comment set off a small storm of people arguing aloud about whether anything *had* actually happened to me or whether I’d been scum all along. “Liar,” “cheater,” “brownnoser,” “thief”—these were the names that were batted around the room like beach volleyballs. A few editors said I was a disgrace to Howard’s chair; a few others even threatened to quit because of me. But when their empty declarations yielded a genuine look of interest from Salton, they instantly reverted to simple name-calling.

“We have to get on the phone and call the typesetter,” Sam Slater said, as ten heads nodded in agreement. “We can still order proofs; it’ll put us even further behind, but that’s the price we’ll have to pay.”

“Excuse me,” I said a little louder, trying to be heard over the din. “But it’s too late to order proofs. The quarterly’s already on press.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I needed to accelerate the schedule. Because of the quadruple run.”

“A QUADRUPLE RUN?” Lou shouted. “You authorized a quadruple run? WITH *NO* PROOFS?”

The room burned with outrage. Salton looked up briefly before returning to his calendar, where he was amusing himself by drawing little pictures of chipmunks tossing grenades back and forth.

“This is a disaster!” several editors charged.

“OH FOR GOD’S SAKE, EVERYONE,” Salton shouted, as he put the finishing touches on one of the tails. “We had to reprint Issue 323—otherwise known as the ‘I Read Page 33’ edition—nine times, remember?” The room instantly quieted.

Salton glanced at me, his initial expression of astonishment gone, replaced by something that almost looked like hurt. “I will admit,” he said, his voice low, “that the absence of proofs is a surprise I don’t particularly like. In fact,” he said, “*I don’t like surprises at all*. That’s why I want you to repeat what you just said, Beater. Repeat the so-called reason for your surprise. About why you skipped the proofs stage. Every single word. Slowly.”

My mouth went dry.

“DO IT,” he snapped.

“I skipped the proof stage because, in my opinion, by keeping to our original schedule, there were extra bucks to be made.”

“Extra bucks,” he said, sternly, pointing his finger at the other editors. “Did you hear that? *Extra* bucks.” He paused dramatically. “Who in this room knows what kind of bucks ‘extra bucks’ are?”

No one seemed to understand the question.

“WHO KNOWS?” he shouted. But when still no one answered, he sunk his head in his hands. “God have mercy.” Then he looked up. “Tell ’em Beater. Tell ’em what kind of bucks ‘extra bucks’ are.”

“Your favorite kind,” I guessed.

“MY FAVORITE KIND,” he repeated. “EXACTLY.” He slammed his fist on the table and turned to me. “Your answer is the only reason why I’m willing to overlook your misplaced initiative and not fire you for insubordination this instant.”

“*No*, Salton,” Tang said. “You can’t condone this. You have to fire him.”

“Agreed,” said Lou. To me she said, “I can’t believe I used to defend

you. Trust you."

"I've never really trusted him," Hernandez said. "White guy."

"I cannot respect him," Gupta said. "He cannot tell the truth."

"I've always *hate*d you," Mira said. "We all do."

You know that saying—sticks and stones can break your bones, but words will never hurt you? Not true. I was half-dead from the words people had slung my way; I could hardly breathe. I looked down at the table, at the gray veins scissoring through the pale marble like poisonous snakes.

"Beater," Salton said. "Mira says everyone hates you."

I nodded, my eyes flat on the table, trying not to cry. There are few things worse than being maligned by the people you most admire.

"Say something, Beat," Salton needled. "Tell us what happens next, you little upstart! Any other unauthorized tricks you got up your sleeve?"

I could feel everyone's eyes on me, their loathing boring right through the pores of my skin. More than anything I wanted to say *I quit; I'm leaving; I'm never coming back.* But that wasn't possible, so I wished for a meteorite to come crashing through the Aviary dome and kill them all. Except for Lou—although, on second thought, Lou had basically called me dishonest, so forget it—Lou would have to perish, too. But in the absence of meteorites, I had to sit there and take it.

"I'll tell you what happens next," came a loud voice I desperately hoped belonged to someone else. "I think we throw a Phone Book Party."

Me again.

The room erupted.

"A Phone Book Party?" Gupta gasped. "We do not throw Phone Book Parties anymore, nor should we, in honor of our worst issue ever. Salton, how much more of this must we take?"

"The parties were legendary," I said with as much conviction as I could muster. "It'll be good for our image."

"Good for our *image*?" Sam laughed. "You of all people? You're worried about our *image*?"

"I know why you want to throw a party," Tang said. "You want to do it to cash in even more. You plagiarized Yao's poetry, got a tidy sum from the

tabloids, and it's still not enough."

"I *didn't* leak Xing Xing's diary to the tabloids, Tang," I shot back. "And I think this would help redeem her. Help people see her in a different light."

At which point Salton exploded in laughter.

"Which poem did you like the best? Was it the legwarmer one?" he crowed.

"I think a party would help us get past the fire and the topiaries and, yes, Xing Xing's leaked diary," I continued. "I think people would come. I think a Phone Book Party would reset the clock, renew interest in *Peck & Peck*—the real *Peck & Peck*."

"The *real Peck & Peck*," Hernandez scoffed.

Salton leapt to his feet. "Stop being such born-again idiots. Beater's a loose cannon, and if you all want to hate him, have at it. But let me tell you something: he didn't do any leaking of any diary to any tabloid. Declonius did. Do you really think it was a coincidence that my brother and his dumb daughter were able to fly the coop within twenty-four hours of calling the Big House home? It's called bail! Paid in full. Put on your thinking caps!"

"Is that what the arson experts say?" Lou said tentatively, her voice distressed. "It was definitely Declonius?"

"That's what they *will* say when the arson report comes back," Salton stated confidently. "They already informed me his fingerprints are all over the building—including the copy room, where the fire started—not that any of you managed to look out your windows and actually notice that the guy in the dirty jumpsuit looked vaguely familiar. You people have short memories, you know that? My brother just tried to kill each and every one of you, which—now that I think about it—may be the only idea of his I've ever warmed to. He ruined this company once, and because you're all so blind, he almost did it again. I don't want to hear another word out of any of you. We skipped the proof stage, we're on press, and you know what? I like this idea. We're throwing a Phone Book Party. Xing Xing will be one of the featured poets; that'll bring in the rabble for sure. Clean up your offices. It's party time."

They all protested, but Salton would have none of it.

"And because none of you have the nerve to do anything on your own, I'm putting your hated Beater in charge of it. That's right: we're throwing a party and Beater's the king. You'll all report to him. A hundred random

names out of the Phone Book, Beat; that's the tradition," he said, shoving a phone book down the table.

Still, thirty-nine editors continued to argue, half of them pleading with Salton, the other half skewering me.

"WE'RE HAVING A PHONE BOOK PARTY AND THAT'S FINAL," he shouted. "I'll be in and out of the office for the week and a half—have to work with my attorneys 24⁄7 to make sure my brother, who managed to get paroled, gets back *un*paroled. When I get back, this party better be in party shape. Understood? If that's not understood, please raise your soon-to-be-unemployed hand."

No one moved.

"Good. Now get the hell out."

About an hour later, Salton summoned me into his office.

"What the holy hell, Beat—you're a terrible teammate. *Stop surprising me; I hate it*. Now, listen. You'll need to oversee the others—make sure they're getting their party jobs done. I've told you your promotion includes spying on people, and now that Dexter's gone, I need to know who's shirking their responsibility. I keep a list, and it hasn't been updated in over three days. Can't run a company like that. Understand?"

"Yes," I said. Although I already knew no one was planning on doing anything to help me. Hurt me, on the other hand—that was a given.

"Like I said, I'll be holed up with the lawyers. My latest case against Big Brother is time-consuming so I'm trusting you to get this Phone Book Party in major party condition. Here's the budget," he said, writing an impossibly small figure on a tiny scrap of paper while handing me the corporate credit card. "That should be enough for a hundred people to sip one half-glass of cheap champagne out of a Dixie cup. And for god's sake, don't let the editors or poets drink—you know what they're like. Also, no food and no music. The only kind of good publicity is the kind you don't pay for. You spend a dime over that and it's coming right out of your paycheck, understood?"

"Yes."

He leaned into me hard.

“No more surprises,” he said in a threatening voice. “You may be on my team, but I’m the captain. You can be cut at any time.”

“I know.”

“Cut,” he emphasized. “*Done.*” And then he looked at me in the strangest way, as if resigned—as if he knew I wasn’t any different from the others. Destined to let him down.

65.

Just as I thought, not a single editor offered any party assistance, although a few of them did find time to stand outside Howard’s office (I was still encamped there; I hadn’t moved a thing) making loud comments about what a jerk I was. But it wasn’t until Sam Slater made a crack about my job experience, changing the heading on my résumé from “Meaningful Job Experience” to “Menial Job Experience,” causing one of his cronies to practically asphyxiate from laughter, that I found my footing.

I picked up the phone and called my coworkers at the Gap, Copy-a-Go-Go, and the Just Okay. “I need your help,” I said.

“Name the time, date, and location,” they all said without hesitation. “We’ll be there.”

Fueled by and grateful for their support, I put my so-called menial experience to work.

“Give me your best price on fifty cases of good champagne,” I told the manager at Morrell & Company—“best price, not just wholesale”—a haggle that lasted twenty minutes but resulted in a savings of sixty-eight percent and a last-minute comp of two cases of plastic champagne flutes.

“I need this invite typeset and printed in two days,” I informed the typesetter on Varick Street, the same place where Issue 324 was being printed. “Two-color; no bleed, embossed, folded. And matching envelopes. At cost.”

“*At cost?* Let me take a look.”

Congratulat

ions. You have been selected at random

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eck&Peck's **latest poetry issue: #324**

Under no circumstances should you *not*

attend. June 30, 1983 7p.m. sharp. Com

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“Wow,” she said. “Sounds amazing. But no, not at cost. We’re not running a charity here.”

“What if one of these invites had your name on it?”

She hesitated. “You’re bribing me?”

I inserted her name on the guest list. “You’re in.”

She took the copy from my hands. “You’re on.”

.....

“I know *exactly* how long it takes to fold a napkin,” I said to a woman at a party rental place. “Forget the folding. You provide the napkins plus fifteen

serving tables and matching tablecloths for half that price and we have a deal."

"Cheese, crackers, seedless grapes, ice," I heard myself instruct a caterer I'd found in the Yellow Pages. "Enough for a little over two hundred people."

Deciding on which poets should read wasn't easy—the limit was three—but in the end I finally chose those names I thought best represented rising talent, supplementing each of their special invites with a blatant call for mercy. *Please come,* I begged. *Please come and revive a famous Peck & Peck tradition*.

But would they? Would anyone? Salton had demanded that my guest list be limited to the time-honored one hundred. But I'd broken that rule, too, doubling it, plus adding twelve extras just to be on the safe side. Two hundred and twelve invitees. Because what if people didn't respond to the invitation? What if they didn't even bother to open the envelope?

Agitated, I stood up and opened the doors to Howard's balcony. The topiaries were long gone—destroyed per Salton's orders—the graceful Baskerville ditched in a landfill somewhere, the outside of the building, for the first time in eighty-three years, unreadable.

That's when it occurred to me—the invitation—whether or not it got opened—would largely be determined by one critical detail: the typeface. My mother had always insisted that typography had the power to make anything seem better than it really was. Well, if there was ever a time to make Peck & Peck seem better than it really was, it was now. I picked up the phone and called Calligraphy Studios at 106 Franklin. "Of course," the woman said. "Our calligraphers can hand-address every envelope in Zapf, an elegant script designed in 1944 by Hermann Zapf, all at the bargain rate of full price, plus forty percent for the rush."

The results were as stunning as their bill.

The only thing left was music. The night before the party, I still hadn't found anything suitable. But then I discovered the city was teeming with high school students in town for a summer school national jazz competition and, even better, a top quintet from Garfield High School in Seattle had been kicked out of the running thanks to their successful pot-buying mission in Central Park. They'd been released on their own recognizance,

and I found them playing on a street corner in the Village. “Take them,” their grateful teacher said. “How much do I owe you?”

66.

Two weeks ago in the Aviary, I’d rashly proposed the idea of a Phone Book Party, and in just one hour—at 7:00 p.m.—that party would start.

I’d been dealing with deliveries most of the day, including the last one: the quadruple run of the quarterly’s Issue 324—and in all that time not a single editor had emerged from their office to lend a hand. It worried me. There was no way I could possibly host 212 people on my own. How would I answer their questions about the history of the company? What would I say if asked about North African poetry? How would I respond to people who spilled their drinks on the stone wall?

Part of that worry dissipated with the arrival of my ex-coworkers. I found them at 6:00 p.m. sharp, oohing and aahing at the lobby’s majesty while Andy checked their IDs and patted them down. “Jesus, Batter,” one of them said. “You didn’t mention you worked in a palace.” I was never so glad to see them in my life.

After a short tour, they all got to work. Without a word from me, my Gap colleagues snapped tablecloths on tables, restacked quarterlies in fanned formations, and transformed white cloth napkins into origami swans—“to complement the aviary theme,” they explained. The Just Okay fry cook snipped small clusters of grapes into polyhedron pyramids, then set up towers of champagne glasses, while two of my waiter friends arranged cheese and crackers in patterns that made geometry look like an underdeveloped math form. The three of them were occasionally bumped by my ex-Copy-a-Go-Go colleagues who huffed past without complaint, lugging champagne bottles, water, and ice from floor to floor like Olympic

weight lifters. “What’s with the dead trees?” they’d ask. “Can I take one of the type mobiles home?” “How do I get a job here?”

Despite the noisy activity, the editorial doors remained closed. Not a single editor ventured out, nor was Salton anywhere to be seen. I entertained the smallest hope that he’d forgotten.

Foolish.

At 6:30 I returned to the lobby to welcome the nervous young musicians, but Andy wouldn’t let them in.

“I don’t know anything about a band,” he told me, shoving a sixteen-year-old carrying a saxophone out of the door. “No one said anything about music.”

“It’s okay, Andy. I hired them. You know what a music fan Salton is—Gordon Lightfoot. Others.” I gestured to the five teenagers. “Set up over there, near the elevator.”

“Another thing,” Andy said. “I don’t like the looks of this crowd.” He drew me to a window and pointed down the street at a sidewalk beginning to swell with guests holding invites. “Phone Book Parties are limited to a hundred. This looks like more.”

“Salton doubled the guest list,” I lied. “You know how he loves a party.” But the crowd worried me, too. None of them looked like *Leaves of Grass* fans. “Open the doors at seven exactly,” I said. “We’ll be ready.”

But would we? I made my way back upstairs. “The guests are lining up,” I called as I knocked on editorial doors. “And there’s alcohol,”
I tempted.

Nothing.

67.

Seven p.m. came and, with it, the opening of the double doors. The quintet, nervous at first, quickly settled down, their music filling the

awkward gaps like sand between pavers.

From my perch on the third floor, I watched nervously as strangers filled the lobby, their eyes sweeping the honeyed walls with curiosity, their faces pointed skyward at the blues and greens and violets above, the music sweeping them forward like a broom. It was strange, as if what we did at Peck & Peck during the day was nothing compared to what it could do—without us—at night. The building *lived* for a party.

Soft summer light bathed the interior in a golden glow, joyfully introducing the guests to its domes and petrified trees, its coal-black railings and rounded doors, its bright white marble, its letterforms raining down from the ceiling, its succession of radiant egg editions. Within fifteen minutes, the building began to throb with chatter and excitement.

It was that throbbing, backed by the steady percussion of champagne corks and a persistent soundtrack of oohs and aahs, that finally drew the editors from their offices.

Encouraged by their awestruck guests, Hassan, one of the Junior Editors, planted himself in front of the glowing egg covers and fielded questions about the company's history. From another floor, Tang explained that the bits of framed trash were actually easels for the world's most important poetry, a potent reminder of the struggles—including persecution—that writers have always faced to tell us what we need to know.

Everywhere I looked, people were swept up in the moment. Despite the Xing Xing Yao movie, despite the pickets, despite the fire, despite what Peck & Peck had become, it was the memory of what it once had been, and still could be that awed the guests. It was obvious that Peck & Peck actually stood for something—that it had a reputation, a good one, and that our guests, many of whom had probably never read a poem in their lives, had come to see how we'd earned it.

I know we all tend to lose appreciation for what we have—we stop seeing those things to which we've become habituated. But that night, the employees of Peck & Peck—me included—saw our work through the reactions of others. And it left us soaked in gratitude for those who'd come to hear what it was we do.

"When we say we've learned something by heart," Hernandez explained to a rapt circle of guests, "we're referencing the natural poetic rhythm of language. Poetry and the heartbeat are inextricably tied."

“Women’s voices have been consistently buried,” Lou said, handing a guest a quarterly from four years back. “But not here. Poetry has always broken boundaries—it won’t settle for convention. It refuses the rule. It rejects the standard.”

From every corner, editors opened old quarterlies and showed their guests, just as all the Pecks had done before, why our work mattered now more than ever.

And then there was Sam Slater. “Sure, sure I’ve met our Poet Laureate,” he bragged to an adoring clutch of twenty-somethings. “I’ve even met Pakistan’s Poet Laureate.”

As I made my way down the Senior Editor hallway, a few of the editors on their second glasses of champagne gave me the smallest of grudging acknowledgments—nods that implied maybe a Phone Book Party hadn’t been such a bad idea after all. But only Lou actually spoke to me.

“Batter,” she said, “despite all your objectionable behavior lately, I have to admit, it’s nice to have this back.” She waved at the people milling around. “It’s like the good old days. This is exactly how Declonius would have done it.”

“Thanks.”

She paused. “I know I was no help,” she said. “But I was angry. I don’t understand the things you say. It’s like you have an evil twin. You weren’t here when Declonius was running things, but it was a very different place—a very—well—let’s just say I used to love working here. But then Declonius did what he did, and then Salton took over, and now there you are, occupying Howard’s office.” She clenched her jaw, then changed the subject. “Salton must have given you quite the budget. The champagne quantities alone. Although I’m not looking forward to the reading. I can’t imagine who, out of our current poet selection, I’d want to hear. At least I know—despite Salton’s wishes—that you *didn’t* select Xing Xing. Since she’s suing you. Thank heavens for *that* small favor.” She put her hand on my arm. “Sorry,” she said again. “But I *don’t* believe for one second that Declonius leaked her diary to the press. That’s just not like him.”

“I know,” I said. My gut had told me the same thing.

“So who is—”

Just then a tremor of excitement erupted from the hallways.

“No,” Lou breathed. “*No*, *no*, *no*. Tell me this isn’t happening.”

Dressed in black pants and a black sweater, her hair swept up in a wild chignon in deliberate disarray, all at once athletic, sexy, and smart, like a well-trained martial artist who could easily take on a hundred people without breaking a sweat, Xing Xing Yao strode up the staircase. Flanked by her agent and her producer, her black-heeled boots snapping on the marble, she nodded at the other guests, who eagerly pressed themselves against the walls to make room for her, their astonished faces full of unmitigated worship. Xing Xing Yao!

I heard her murmur a few thank-yous and you're too kinds, her attention creating a small army of new devotees. I was in awe myself. For someone who'd just a week ago confessed her fears and inadequacies to me—who'd confided that she was still waiting to become someone—Xing Xing Yao looked like she'd managed to become not only that person but several others, too.

I watched as she caught a stray hair and brushed it back, her eyes exploring the building's interior with interest until, like a hawk sensing prey, she turned her face sharply, scanning the upper railings. When at last she zeroed in on me, she paused. Then she instantly narrowed her eyes into little slits.

"I can't *believe* you invited her," Lou choked.

"Me neither."

"*Why would you do that?*"

"I—"

"Just don't tell me she's one of the readers."

"Uh—"

"Batter. She's *not* one of the readers, correct?"

Thankfully, about twenty steps behind Xing Xing, an anxious-looking man with a clean white shirt and oil-stained slacks was making his way up the stairs.

"Mr. Raley," I called, with relief. "Mr. Raley. Up here."

"Alex?" he called back, searching for me.

"*Alex?*" said Lou.

"I'll explain later."

"Mr. Raley," I said, as he approached. "I'm so glad to see you."

“Thanks for the invite,” he said. “Surprised the heck out of me. Guess this means you did it. You made the job instead of it making you. Proud of you,” he said, clapping me on the back. Then he turned to Lou. “What do you think of our Alex?” he asked. “Did he surprise you, too?”

“You have no idea.”

“This is some place, Alex. Sort of thing you see in *National Geographic*.”

“So, are you a poetry fan, Mr. Raley?” Lou asked.

“God no,” Mr. Raley said. “Are you?”

“I’m a Senior Editor here. Lou Higgins. What do you do?”

“I run a restaurant.”

“Sounds stressful.”

“Life is stressful,” he said, shrugging.

“I used to work for Mr. Raley,” I contributed. “As a waiter.”

“Not his calling,” Raley said. “He tried to convince me it was, but I knew better.”

“A calling. I’ve always wondered if I have one—or had one,” Lou confessed. “Especially lately.”

“Of course you have a calling,” Raley said. “Be productive. Clean up after yourself. Make something. Love somebody.”

She looked taken aback. “I meant ‘calling’—as in career opportunities.”

“Same thing.”

She gave him a dubious look.

“‘Calling’ is just another word for common sense. You know, like don’t take a dangerous job if you’re afraid of danger. Don’t become a doctor if you hate the sight of blood. Don’t assume a high-paying job means you’re a success and a low-paying one means you’re not. Don’t waste time dreaming of marrying a royal or winning the lottery. Most important, don’t aim low. You know what’s left? Things that, with practice and sweat, you could be really good at—maybe great at—maybe even the best in the world at. You’re a senior editor at Peck & Peck, Ms. Higgins—you picked something based on your common sense, then rose to the top with practice and commitment. As for opportunities, if you’re breathing, that is your opportunity.”

“Mr. Raley,” she said, looking at him in awe. “I wish I’d met you years ago.”

“Lou Higgins,” he said, looking at her as if something long-dead had been reawakened. “It’s entirely mutual.” Without breaking eye contact, he slid his arm through hers while his free hand grabbed a bottle of champagne. “Show me around?”

I made my way down the staircase, my heart beating like a just-caught trout, nervous, anxious, dehydrated. Every time I took the slightest pause, I heard strangers confessing their aversion to poetry. “I just don’t get it,” I heard at least a dozen guests admit. “Me neither,” said a dozen more. And yet they’d all come.

“Excuse me,” someone said, tapping my shoulder. I turned to see the librarian from the New York City Public Library—the one who’d helped me research Peck & Peck. “I knew it was you,” she said. “Inviting me back. You’re not supposed to do that; you’re supposed to invite a hundred strangers. I’m not a stranger.”

“I know. But I wanted to thank you—you spent hours helping me and—”

A man joined us. “And now you’ll see how I rewarded you for your kindness,” she said. “I brought a plus one. Not allowed, but I had to. This is Jakub,” she said, reaching for the man’s arm. “This is the fella I met the first time I was at Peck & Peck. Met. Swooned. Married.”

“That’s me,” he said. “Fell in love with her at first sight. Look at her. Can you blame me? And it’s all because of Peck & Peck. I don’t know what it is about this place, but things happen here. Brave, foolish things.”

I nodded. *Foolish.* My entire life summed up in one word. I had looked away, trying to calm my stomach, when I spied the two people I least expected to show but most wanted to see.

“*Mom,*” I said a minute later, wrapping my arms around her in relief. “Thank god. What are you doing here? I can’t believe you came.”

“Batter,” she cried. “This,” she said, pointing to the type that danced just above her head, “the geometry, the weight distribution, the Bézier curves—it’s genius. This is an original Cooper Nouveau Swash,” she said, pointing at an “E.” That’s Dave’s ‘E.’”

“Who’s Dave?”

“Dave West. He designed Cooper Nouveau Swash.”

“I can’t believe this place,” my father said, coming up behind. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“I’m so relieved to see you both,” I said, wrapping my arms around him,

too. “I didn’t think you’d actually come.”

“The invitation was very clear,” my father said. “Don’t *not* come. Although I was under the impression that the quarterly hadn’t been getting any quality work lately, what with the movie and the pickets. Strange that Peck & Peck would decide to throw a party in honor of the latest issue. Why would management do that?”

“Well, the party was sort of my idea.”

“*Your* idea?” my mother said. “Well, at least we can be certain the new issue won’t include any Xing Xing Yao poetry. Not after what she’s accused you of.”

“But isn’t that her? Right over there?” my father asked, pointing. Xing Xing was standing amid a throng of fans.

“That’s rude,” my mother said. “She shouldn’t be here. Whose brilliant idea was it to invite her anyway?”

I hesitated. “Mine.”

“Are you *out of your mind*?” my father asked.

I thought about my upcoming plans for the evening. “Yes.”

My mother crossed her arms. “Well, now that I think about it, inviting her took guts. Good for you, Batter. *You* haven’t done anything wrong. Absolutely nothing illegal.”

My stomach twisted violently.

“Anyway,” my mother said, “this is some party. You should be proud of what you’ve done here.”

“Which is what, exactly?” a voice said. “Besides lying and cheating and not being able to make copies with any consistency?”

It was Dexter in his customary state of textbook handsome, his bronzed body set off by a flawless white button-down shirt and sharp slacks, his yellow hair perfectly combed and parted. “And who have we here?” He gestured carelessly at my father.

“I’m Batter’s—”

“Father. Ah, so I see how it is, Bat. You didn’t stick to the random phone book selection process. Worried no one would show?”

“What are you doing here, Dex?” I said. “You quit, remember?”

“We’ve met before,” my mother said coldly. “At the movie preview. You were there with Wren.”

“How nice of you to remember me, Mrs. Gray. And Wren, too. She’s

around here somewhere. Insisted on coming. Guess our invites got lost in the mail. You *did* invite us, right, Batman?" He tossed me a look, but I ignored it. *Wren? She was here?*

"Did you call him Batman?" my mother asked.

"It's a pet name," Dexter said dismissively. "We call each other all sorts of things, don't we, Bat?"

"Because Batman was a hero," my mother clarified.

"I've heard of him," Dexter said. "Xing Xing Yao also has some pet names for you, Batter," Dexter said, turning to me. "I was just speaking with her, and I'm pretty sure she used all of them."

"She shouldn't be here," my father said. "She was wrong to accuse Batter—she has no evidence."

"Right," Dexter said, nodding his head thoughtfully. "Anyway, let's all look on the bright side. With all that money from his big tabloid sale, maybe he can finally stop shopping at T.J.Maxx."

"Are you *accusing* my son of leaking her diary?" my father said, his voice filling with fury.

"No, no," Dexter said. "I'm *indicting* your son."

"Even though your girlfriend and her father are the main suspects?"

"*Dad, drop it*."

"*What is that even supposed to mean*?" Dexter said angrily. "*My girl—*"

"Dex," someone else said from behind. "Stop talking."

Wren.

I felt a rush of heat followed by a wave of dizziness. Would I ever feel normal in her presence?

"I'm sorry," she said, flustered. "Dexter's not really himself right now. Please ignore whatever words came out of his mouth." She looked straight at me, embarrassed. "Really sorry," she repeated.

She was wearing a tawny brown dress with a thin olive-green striped belt and knee-high brown suede boots. For a moment it occurred to me how aptly named she was, not only because she dressed like a bird but because of her guard. She was skittish. I had the horrible feeling she might fly away at any moment.

"I'm Wrentitis Peck," she said, extending a hand to my father. "But everyone calls me Wren." Before she could offer a hand to my mother, my mother engulfed her in an enthusiastic hug.

“It’s great to see you again, Wren.”

“You *too*, Mrs. Gray—Rainey, I mean.” And then she turned to me, smiled, and said, “I understand you’re responsible for all of this,” motioning to the crowds around us. “I wasn’t invited, but I wanted to come. I hope that’s okay. It’s really nice, Batter.”

“Oh, come *on*,” Dexter said. “It’s *NICE*?”

“I think it’s nice, too,” another voice boomed from somewhere off to the side. “Which is saying, something because I hate poetry.”

Paul!

He swept into our circle, pipe in hand, suit glowing with power. He slung his arm around me and pulled me close. “Next time I tell you to quit,” he whispered savagely, “*QUIT*.” He pulled away. “Paul Acheson,” he said, shaking hands. “I’m Batter’s attorney. Haven’t we met before?” he said, holding on to Dexter’s hand. “You look familiar. I’m sure we have. A party at Columbia?”

“No,” Dexter said pointedly. “And smoking’s not allowed in here.”

“Got it,” Paul said, waving his pipe around.

“Thank god you’re here,” I said quietly over his shoulder. “I stopped breathing an hour ago.”

“Save up your remaining oxygen,” he whispered. “My PI’s latest discoveries will require the rest of it.”

He turned back to the group and explained we had to go, please excuse us, all of it delivered with a reassuring smile, then took my arm and marched me down the hallway. But before we could get inside an office, I felt a hand grip my forearm.

“*Didn’t I explicitly state no music?*” Salton hissed, his saliva landing on my neck. “And what’s *this*?” he said holding up a plastic champagne flute. “What happened to Dixie cups? And the one-hundred-person limit? Think I can’t count? Also, there’s a *kid* here. And a *hippie*. What did you do? Visit the local homeless shelter and grab the sorriest-looking bunch of nonreaders you could find? Where’s Xing Xing?”

“Upstairs.”

“Well, congratulations, Beat; you got *one* thing right.”

“Hello,” Paul said, his hand extended. “I’m Paul Acheson—Batter’s—” But just then a well-dressed woman, fiftyish, her face pink from champagne, barged in.

“Excuse me,” she said. “Are you Salton Peck? I recognized you from the papers. I just wanted to say what a wonderful event this is. Thanks for inviting me.”

“I didn’t invite you.”

“Oh—” She took a small step back.

“Mr. Peck?” Another guest approached.

“What *now*?” snapped Salton.

“Tom Blake. Huge fan,” he said, holding up a copy of the quarterly.

“A *fan*? Really?” Salton mocked. “Do you spin around?”

I looked up to see an agitated Sam Slater jogging down the hallway. “Salton,” he said breathlessly, “have you *seen* this?” He wagged the quarterly in my face, then bent toward me, his voice low. “You’re a *traitor*.”

“What do you mean, have I *seen* this?” Salton said, snatching the quarterly out of Sam’s hands. “Of course I’ve *seen* this, Slater,” he said, aware of his admiring fans. “Who’s Editor in Chief? You?”

“No, Salton—” Sam started.

“Sam,” Salton said. “These are our guests. Say hello. Then escort them to the Aviary. Because the sooner you shovel them in there, the sooner I can toss them out.”

“You’re so funny!” the fiftyish woman said.

“What’s the Aviary?” the man named Tom said. “I’m allergic to bees.”

“Good god, man,” Salton said. “It’s an AVIARY, not an APIARY.”

As their discussion continued, I spied Wren off in a corner. She was talking to Xing Xing Yao, their heads tipped together as if sharing intel. It was horrifying to watch, not only because of what Xing Xing believed I’d done to her but because I’d told Xing Xing how I felt about Wren. To make matters worse, when Andy joined them, Wren seemed pleased, as if what they really needed was someone with a gun right now. I watched as Wren introduced Andy to Xing Xing, Andy fawning in obvious adulation while offering even more intel that made Xing Xing shake her head in fury. In response, Xing Xing dug in her bag and pulled out one of those huge Motorola phones. As she punched at the keys, the three of them stared in my direction, their faces stony. I looked away.

“Beater,” Salton whispered, lunging at my ear, “Wren Peck is here. How the hell did that piece of jailbait get in here? And where’s Andy?”

“Salton,” Sam insisted, tapping the quarterly. “You *must* take a look at

this—”

“*Batter*,” Paul urged. “Come with me—now.”

“*Beater*,” Salton warned. “*Teammates, remember?*”

“This way,” I announced to the partygoers lining the railings. “The Aviary is this way.”

68.

By the time I reached the Aviary, partygoers in tow, Paul whispering a terse but completely inaudible summary of my legal problems, the room had already begun to swell with guests. Those who’d followed me spilled into the room, chatting nervously, but as it had done with its earlier arrivals —just like it always did with every newcomer, and even old hands like me —the Aviary stunned them into reverent silence.

I’m not exaggerating when I say it was extra beautiful that night. An enchantment of light washed down from the dome, blanketing the guests in a pink-hued awe. Some stood completely still, their eyes fixed on the sky above; others examined the wall of eggs, marveling at their colors, which dazzled like jewels; a few sat at the grand table, tracing the marble’s milky veins with their fingertips.

I looked across the room, to the spot on the wall where the quail eggs had once been. It was one of those apt and visible reminders of how I was about to end my own poetry career. In pieces.

I took a deep breath, Paul at my side, then pressed my way to the front of the room, where some of the editors were examining Issue 324.

“Guess it’s pretty clear why you insisted on skipping that proof stage, Batter,” Tang said quietly. “So much for the ‘extra bucks’ story.”

I ignored her.

“I *meant* good for you, Batter,” she said, passing a few quarterlies to guests who hadn’t picked one up yet. “That’s what I’m trying to say. You’re

a regular revolutionary. Like Declonius."

Some of the other editors reluctantly joined us, a few of them giving me hesitant nods, and one patted me briefly on the back, although I wasn't sure if it was out of approval for what I had done or in sympathy for my impending doom. "Salton was right. He doesn't disappoint," I heard someone say from behind, but in a tone that could have gone either way. Even Andy approached me. "How did you know?" he asked incredulously, enveloping me in a hug. "My god, Batter—*how did you know*?"

"Know what, Andy?" I asked, but he was blocked from further contact by more editors—they all seemed to want to be near me. It wasn't until Lou gave me a pat on the back and Hernandez took an armload of quarterlies from me, saying, "You're a rebel. That makes you twice the editor I'll ever be," that I realized the editors of *Peck & Peck* were actually on my side.

From behind I heard Sam Slater trying to engage Paul with details of my treachery, but I ignored it. I looked across the room to my parents, who were staring up at the dome, their faces bathed in wonder. Just behind them stood a gratified Xing Xing Yao, alone, unsought, the Aviary granting her anonymity as it gently extinguished her star power with its own. To her left was the guy from the convenience store, the one who'd drawn me a map that snowy night when I was lost, his eagerness so welcome, his helpfulness so cheery, his demeanor *so New York* that despite my initial qualms about his revolver, he felt like a friend. He looked up, then gave me a quick salute. I smiled back.

But my smile vanished when I spied Howard.

I'd sent him an invitation. Stupid, I know, but I hadn't expected him to come. He was just past Paul's shoulder, his hands gripping the back of his old chair—the chair Salton had made mine—looking hard at the nameplate, his eyes filled with tears. He looked up; I looked away. That's when I saw Wren. She was standing alone, near the robins' eggs, a small aura radiating about her yellow hair. Even from a distance, I could see that she, too, was fighting back tears.

Ever since I'd learned Wren was Declonius's daughter, things had fallen into place. Obviously, Dexter had gotten his job through her. That explained why Declonius was always defending Dexter—why *everyone* was always defending him. Not because they liked him, but because they loved Wren. Because Wren was a Peck. An important part of royal literary history. This

was her home; she'd grown up here. More than any of us, she belonged. This Aviary—it was hers.

I walked toward her, hopelessly in love, waiting for her to feel my eyes upon her, waiting for her to understand how deeply I'd fallen, but I was beaten to the punch by Dexter, who appeared at her side like a heat-seeking missile. I watched as he took her hand and gave it a supportive squeeze. I felt ill.

"Beater," Salton hissed at my elbow. "What the hell? What's the holdup? Having all these people in here makes my skin crawl. Did you find Andy? Who's the first reader? Is that the list from the editors? Give it to me." He yanked the short introduction I'd written out of my hands and, before I could stop him, leapt up to the dais. Holding a copy of Issue 324, he tapped the microphone. "May I have your attention," he demanded. "For those of you who don't know, I am Salton Peck, Editor in Chief of *Peck & Peck*, and this is *my* party. As you may or may not know, Peck & Peck used to throw these parties all the time. I put an end to it because they're too expensive. You people drink too much."

The crowd laughed and held up their glasses.

"So stop drinking right now," he commanded. "Give your glass to a server and make sure they pour whatever's left back into the bottle."

People laughed again, entertained by his strange sense of humor.

"What is wrong with these mammals?" Salton hissed to me. "Don't they know I'm serious? Who's our first reader?"

"Eduardo Jones," I said, pointing to the first name on the list. "You know him. You picked this piece yourself." Which wasn't true, but I was positive Salton wouldn't remember. I glanced to the side. A few of the editors were watching our exchange like spectators on the brink of witnessing a major accident.

"Our first reader is Eduardo Jones," Salton shouted into the mike. "EDUARDO JONES."

From across the room, Eduardo, his too-large sleeves rolled up to his elbows, nervously pressed his way through the crowd.

"Couldn't believe it when I got the invite," he whispered to me, his hands trembling. "Howard did this, didn't he?"

"The decision was made in Howard's office," I said, thinking back two weeks ago to when I'd sat there alone, hatching my foolish plan. "Everyone

in the room that day voted for you. It was unanimous. Page thirty-two," I whispered. "That's you."

Visibly relieved by the word "unanimous," Eduardo faced the audience. But before he read, something changed. I think it was the air, the way it became charged with the scent of champagne and the light of the Aviary and the words and the eggs—as if setting the stage as it prepared the guests for an experience they would recount over and over again in the years to come. Eduardo read with power, his words punctuated with a clean, vibrant ferocity. There was no lilt, no ladled-on drama—just a story told exactly the way it needed to be. If you thought you didn't need poetry, Eduardo had just proven you wrong.

"All right, all right," Salton said, taking back the mike as the applause thundered. "Let's move this along. PORTIA GREENE," he shouted into the mike, "PORTIA."

A kid in a blue dress moved purposefully toward the dais. "Hello," she said to Salton's astonished face. "Where do I read about my hippopotamus?"

Salton swung his head at me. "*What the holy hell?*" he whispered, covering the mike. "What the hell did you do?"

As an editor told Portia to stand on a chair and read, Salton left the dais and grabbed a copy of the quarterly. I watched as his face took in the breadth of my betrayal. Was I afraid? No. I was petrified.

As Portia read, Salton looked me full in the face. He was angry, but there was something else there, too. Disappointment. Desolation. He stared at me for a few cold seconds, then gave me a look I will remember until my dying day. The look of revenge.

Portia finished and the audience rewarded her with the same zeal, but before the clapping subsided, Salton jumped back up to the microphone. I'd expected him to call the rest of the evening off, but instead he shouted, "XING XING YAO," his hands shooing Portia off the stage. "XING XING IS OUR LAST AND FINAL READER."

The crowd turned to watch as Xing Xing stalked toward the dais, her black hair, now loose, coursing like a river down her all-black attire. She refused to acknowledge my presence. Keeping her eyes on Salton, she grabbed the quarterly out of his hands.

"Page seven, Xing Xing," I said softly from behind. "Yours is the first

poem. You know this one—it's the one we discussed. I didn't rewrite it—it's yours. I'd memorized it that day—that's how good it is." But she ignored me.

"I *don't* perform live," she told Salton, her voice low and threatening. "Nor have I given you permission to publish more of my work. As far as I'm concerned, you can go to hell."

"Interesting," Salton said as the crowd shifted noisily, waiting for something to happen. "Seeing as how that first contract you signed gives me permission to publish whatever I feel like. I could publish your worst and call it your best and see what your new tabloid fans think then."

"Ignore him," I whispered from behind.

"Xing Xing Yao!" the crowd called. "Xing Xing!"

I watched as Xing Xing opened the quarterly and saw her words in print. She flinched.

"Xing Xing!" the crowd called again.

"You're an actor," I whispered from just behind her shoulder. "No one reads better than an actor. Don't listen to him. It's good work. Read it. Show them who you really are."

She turned briefly and gave me a strange look. I couldn't tell if she hated me as much as she hated Salton, or if she hated herself for having written the poem in the first place. All I know is that when she turned back toward the audience, she did something I could not help but admire. She gathered herself, looked out, and from the first perfectly delivered word, owned the room.

The poem was already good, but her voice transported the words in a way even I hadn't anticipated. She was sad, vulnerable, honest—completely unlike the cops she played in movies—and the crowd loved her for it. The poem was short—twelve lines—sixty syllables total—but the applause was endless. She seemed to enjoy it at first, but as it kept going, her face took on a look of worry, the crowd pressing in even closer. Andy must have seen it, too, because he jumped up to the dais and escorted her off, guiding her through the packed Aviary, straight out the doors, and—I suspected—directly to a waiting cab.

From across the room, Howard caught my eye and placed a hand on his heart in shock over the quality of Xing Xing's performance. He tapped the quarterly. "Bravo," he mouthed, holding up a fist. "Good job." And then he

tipped his head at the young woman on his right, her arm linked through his. She flashed me the peace sign.

So Howard's hippie daughter *had* gotten the invite.

"I saw what you did," Lou said. "To Howard's chair. Putting his name back." She said something else, but I didn't hear her, distracted by Salton, who was busy waving his arms and whispering violently to Sam Slater. He tapped his watch again and again.

"Jesus," Paul said, tugging at my arm. "Xing Xing was something else. But we really need to get the hell out of here. Come with me."

"Batter," Tang said urgently, "I just noticed the masthead. Are you out of your mind?"

"What now?" Paul asked, worried. "What else will I have to defend?"

"Howard Gadley, Senior Editor," Tang read. " . . . Hassan Aziz, Associate Editor . . ."

"He gave a few people promotions," Lou explained to Paul. "On paper at least. But he also cleaned house. Sam Slater's name, gone. Mira's name, gone. And these poems—they're good but not authorized; we didn't send the author a yes—there's no publishing or payment agreement."

"Batter Gray . . . Copy Room." Tang read, giving me a look. "Under Editor in Chief," she continued, "it now reads Declonius Peck."

"Oh Jesus, *no*," Paul said. "You can't do this sort of thing, Batter! That's tampering, fraud by false representation, maybe even trademark infringement. And no, you can't publish without the author's permission! That's intellectual property theft! What were you thinking? Please. Don't do or say anything else. *Promise me*."

I nodded. But you know what I'm like.

"I sent out the YES postcards—" I said.

"You can't DO that—"

"And I scheduled their payments—except for one poet, because I didn't have his address. As for the masthead, I don't regret a thing." Then I grabbed the mike. "Excuse me, everyone, one last announcement. Peck & Peck Phone Book Parties always conclude with three readers, but tonight we're breaking a few rules—"

"The understatement of the year," Paul whispered angrily. "*Stop it*."

" . . . and I'd like to invite one more poet to come forward . . ."

The crowd roared its approval, but Salton, furious, spun on his heel and

came at me, thwarted only at the last second by a cadre of editors, who encircled him like a human fence.

“This poem you’re about to hear isn’t in the quarterly, although it should be,” I said, speaking quickly. “We couldn’t publish it because we didn’t know who wrote it. And when I say ‘we,’ I’m referring to myself and to Declonius Peck, the true Editor in Chief of *Peck*—”

“*How dare you*—” Salton attempted, but his words were lost in the tight cage of editors around him.

“Declonius Peck has been accused of many things,” I continued quickly. “But the one thing that no one can *ever* accuse him of is publishing work that doesn’t matter.”

I looked out at the audience, thinking—just for a moment—that I’d spotted him. A tall man with bent wire frames stood in the shadows, his head down, the quarterly in his hand. But when I scanned the shadows again, he was gone.

“The piece you’re about to hear is the first poem Declonius Peck ever asked me to read,” I said, holding up a poem he’d handed me the first day he’d appeared, uninvited, in my copy room. “He said he didn’t know who wrote it—he only had a hunch. As time went on, I developed a hunch, too. Declonius and I never compared our hunches, nor do I have any idea if either of us was right. But I do know I can’t let you leave tonight without hearing these words. I’d read the poem to you myself, but I think you must hear from the person who wrote it. Especially since my hunch says that person is here tonight.”

This created a small stir.

“If the poet who wrote a piece called ‘Posture’ is in this room, could you please come forward.”

The room grew agitated. Everyone turned this way and that, anxious to see who might claim credit.

I looked over at Wren, who looked directly back at me, her eyes widened in surprise. Dexter had left her side to join Howard. It looked as if they were arguing. A minute passed, then two. The room grew impatient.

“Looks like your hunch is wrong,” Tang whispered in my left ear. “If it’s that good, just *read* it.”

“Get on with it,” Lou insisted in my right ear. “I’m not sure how much longer we can contain Salton. I’ve never seen him like this.”

“If the poet is out there,” I said one last time, “please come forward.”

Finally, off in the far corner, there was a bit of movement. The poet approached. And just as my hunch had told me, the author of this brilliant work sliced through the room, his stupid blond hair, his outrageously crisp shirt, his disgustingly fit body, like a blade freshly sharpened.

“Batter,” Dexter said awkwardly, as he reached me. Together we turned our backs on the audience.

“Shit,” I said, resigned. “So it really *is* your work.”

“How did you know?” he asked incredulously.

“I heard you read one night. Unfortunately, that piece was the second-best poem I’d heard. This one,” I said, pointing to “Posture,” “was the first. Don’t get a big head about it.”

“But how did you—”

“They’re related—the two pieces. The cadence, the line length, the tone, the content. I knew.”

We stood looking at each other, saying nothing. Still enemies.

“Are you going to read or not?” I challenged. “We don’t have all night.”

“Listen, I know it’s good, but—”

“Well. *There’s* the modest Dexter we all know and love.” I was really starting to regret my hunch. Having a gut. Still overrated.

The crowd’s impatience grew.

“It took me over a year to write that piece,” he said defensively. “I couldn’t get it accepted by *Peck & Peck*. I couldn’t get *anything* accepted by *Peck & Peck*.”

“Oh,” I said brightening. “Rejected, were you? That’s gotta hurt. Especially considering your gold-plated godchild connections. Sucking up to Salton; sleeping with Declonius’s daughter—”

Just then Paul shoved himself into our whispered dispute. “I figured it out,” he said to Dexter. “We *have* met before—it wasn’t at Columbia. It was at NYU.”

Dexter ignored him. “*What is wrong with you, Batter? What kind of sick sonofabitch are you?*”

“Here’s my card,” Paul said, handing it to Dexter. “Maybe we can—”

“What the hell do you think *you’re* doing?” I said to Paul in disbelief. “I hate this guy, remember?”

“Read *now*,” Tang insisted, cutting in. “The audience—”

“*Sleeping* with Wren,” Dexter said, infuriated.

“Sleeping with Wren?” Paul echoed worriedly.

“Sleeping with *Wren*,” I confirmed angrily.

“Batter,” Dexter said, looking at me as if he was about to tear me limb to limb. “You realize Wren is my *sister*, right? My *twin* sister.”

I froze just like the petrified trees out in the hallway.

“*That’s* the thing I wanted to tell you,” Paul said in a rush. “They’re twins. Do you believe that? Fraternal twins.”

“Last chance,” Lou warned. “Salton isn’t going to last much longer.”

“*You’re damn right I’m not going to last much longer,*” Salton shouted, breaking free from the editors encircling him. He jumped up on his chair, then the table.

“THAT’S IT,” he screamed at the top of his lungs. “THIS PARTY IS OVER. EVERYONE OUT.”

He swung his head back at me, pointing his finger like a gun. “Except for you, Beater. Don’t you dare move. For *you* the party is just beginning.”

But the audience seemed to think either that he was threatening them, too, or that this drama, along with my mysterious poem announcement and subsequent argument with Dexter, was part of the evening fare. In any case, no one moved.

“I SAID,” Salton shouted again at the audience, “THE PARTY’S *OVER*. IF YOU INSIST ON STAYING, I WILL HAVE EACH AND EVERY ONE OF YOU ARRESTED FOR TRESPASSING. THAT GOES FOR THE KID, TOO. I KNOW LAWYERS AND COPS. I MAKE THINGS HAPPEN. IF YOU WANT TO BE ARRESTED, THEN BY ALL MEANS, STAY.”

And as if to prove his point, the doors of the Aviary flew open, and three police officers rushed in.

That did it. The room went wild. From every corner, people pushed and shoved and yelled as they tried to make their way to the exit. But it was no use. The exit was blocked by at least ten more uniformed officers.

“OFFICERS,” Salton shouted, checking his watch, “YOU’RE EARLY. NEVERTHELESS, GOOD TIMING.”

The three police made their way to the front of the room, their voices barking out instructions. “Nobody move. Everyone stay exactly where you are.” But the crowd continued to jostle in panic.

“Salton Peck?” the biggest officer asked, striding toward Salton.

“Yes! Of *course* I’m Salton Peck,” Salton snapped from atop the marble table, “and that’s a demerit right there for even having to ask. The one you want is right there,” he said, pointing at me. “Batter Gray. Cuff him,” he instructed, “and feel free to cuff anyone else you can grab. Start with the editors—they’re the intellectual-looking ones wearing boring clothing.”

The police officer, his biceps exploding through the sleeves of his uniform shirt, his thighs thick with muscles that pressed against his rayon-blend pants, said, “Salton Peck. I have a warrant for your arrest.”

The room had been wild before, but those nine words were like water thrown on a fire. The room sizzled with gasps.

“*What?*” Salton said, his face regaining its purplish tint. “No, no, no! Not me, you idiot. THEM. HIM,” he shrieked, pointing his finger at me.

“Get down from the table, Mr. Peck.”

“What the—!”

“Or I will have my men remove you forcibly.” The officer nodded to the other two. One of them looked vaguely familiar.

Salton stomped his foot. “You are making a grave mistake,” he threatened as the officers stepped forward, cuffs in hand.

“Did you do *this*?” Paul hissed worriedly in my ear.

“Are you *kidding*?” I whispered back, equally shocked.

“I SAID *HIM*!” Salton demanded, as the officers forced him off the table. “HIM!” he said, pointing at me.

“You have the right to remain silent,” the big police officer said as he slapped the cuffs on Salton. “If you give up that right—”

“WHERE’S ANDY?” Salton shouted.

Where’s Wren? I thought.

“—anything you say can and will be used against you—”

“SAM!” Salton called. “*SAM SLATER!*”

“—in a court of law.”

Salton lunged at me. “*You*,” he said. “*I trusted you! I promoted you!*”

I watched, stunned, as the three officers dragged Salton from the room. “This is a mistake,” he shouted. “And you people aren’t welcome here. I will have every last one of you arrested. This party is a fraud and so are each and every one of you.”

“Sorry for the disturbance,” one of the officers said. “We’ll take it from here.” And then he shut the doors to the Aviary, returning everyone to their

original silence, frozen in place in an egg-filled room that had grown dark with the sudden and unwelcome absence of moonlight.

69.

Some people think poetry is theatrical, and I suppose some of it is, but I don't like theatrics. I just like words. Which is lucky, because words are small—so small that thousands of them can fit between covers of books. Which is important when one's room is very small. Like mine is now. Because it is a cell.

Salton was right. The cops *were* early—at least the first ones, who hauled him away. The second set was right on time.

About twenty minutes after Salton was taken from the building, leaving behind a confused audience, half of whom still believed we were putting on some sort of dramatic production, two more police officers walked into the Aviary, tired from their long day, their belts squeaking like old saddles, their faces in a permanent grimace from having the kind of job that rarely brings joy. "Batter Gray?" they called, looking at a clipboard. "Is there a Batter Gray here?"

I was arrested, just as Salton had implied I would be. Taken away in handcuffs, just like Declonius had been, my picture snapped on the sidewalk by reporters who already seemed to know I'd be there, head pushed down into a cruiser, my mother crying, my father shouting, Wren looking on in horror. And Dexter? He just looked confused.

"On what grounds are you arresting my client?" Paul shouted all the way to the cop car. "Where's your warrant!"

"Sorry," one of the cops said, shoving some paperwork at Paul. "It's arson with intent to kill and a few other things. Hard to be heard over that

crowd."

"*Arson with intent*—" Paul gasped.

My mother collapsed.

As the cops took me away, I looked through the window at the crowds, spying the tall, bespectacled man I thought I'd seen earlier. As if to compound my misery, the look on Declonius's face was the one I could not bear to see. Relief.

70.

People accused of arson with intent to kill aren't usually offered bail. I know this because everyone—my parents, Declonius, Mr. Raley, Howard, even Xing Xing Yao— tried to help me make mine. It was Xing Xing—she hadn't left the party after all—who followed me in her limo to the police station, where, standing beside Paul and my parents, she informed the desk sergeant that a terrible mistake had been made.

"It was Salton Peck who leaked my diary to the tabloids," she explained to the astonished Sergeant Gant, who sat, openmouthed, listening to the famous actress as she put on an impromptu performance. "He tried to pin it on his brother, Declonius Peck, and when that didn't work, on Batter. But thanks to the honest security guard at Peck & Peck, I found out the truth. By the way, *I* was the one who had Salton Peck arrested, so there's no need to hold Batter Gray. I've already dropped all charges against him. Could you let him go? I'd really appreciate it."

"*Xing Xing Yao*." Sergeant Gant took a deep breath and blew it out. "Wow, wow, wow."

"Officer," Paul said. "These charges are ridiculous."

"We hear that a lot," Gant said almost sympathetically. "But first-degree arson with intent to kill is a big one." And then to Xing Xing, he said, "I'm

sorry, Ms. Yao, but that's a Class A felony. Remember the arsonist in your third movie? It's like that."

"Right," she said, "but the guy in the movie hadn't committed the crime, remember? That's the case here as well. Batter didn't do it. Andy did it. He *told* me he did it."

"Who's Andy?"

"The security guard at Peck & Peck."

"Ah. But the security guard turned out to be dirty, remember?"

"Right, but that was in my first movie, not the third. Anyway, Andy isn't dirty. He's one of the good guys. And he wasn't trying to kill anybody. He was just trying to keep the peace between the Peck brothers. You know what families are like."

If you're wondering where I was during this movie recap, that's easy: I was being booked, fingerprinted, and fitted for a navy jumpsuit. Paul recounted the whole thing to me hours later. "It was amazing," he said. "Xing Xing knows *a lot* about the law."

Sergeant Gant sifted through the paperwork, frowning.

"You mentioned a different arrest, Ms. Yao, but I have no record of this so-called arrest."

"That's because it wasn't a real arrest. Not yet, anyway—but it will be by tomorrow. I called my attorneys on the way over here; they're already drawing up the complaint."

"I'm not following—how was it not a real arrest?"

"They were actors."

"Wait," my mother said, her eyebrows arching. "The officer with the big biceps."

Xing Xing nodded.

"He played the rookie in the tire salesman movie."

"That's right," Xing Xing said. "I'll tell him you recognized him. He'll appreciate that."

"You *staged* a false arrest?" the sergeant said, worried.

"Hold on," Paul said. "The other cop—the one in the orange running shoes—wasn't he also in your last movie?"

“No,” Xing Xing said. “He was in my second. Came as soon as I called—rounded everybody up and came right over. The orange running shoes were an unfortunate oversight. Cops don’t wear orange running shoes.”

“Ms. Yao, you *can’t* stage a false arrest,” the sergeant said under his breath. “There are rules about these sorts of things.”

“Really?” she said. “I’m sorry. It’s just that Salton Peck leaked my diary to the tabloids and I wanted to publicly embarrass him just as he’d embarrassed me. I didn’t know it was illegal—honestly. Last Halloween a bunch of us dressed up as cops and fake-arrested people all night and no one seemed to mind. I apologize, Sergeant Gant,” she said. “I’m sure your arrest tomorrow will be far more authentic—and legal. But I would really appreciate it if you could release my friend before then. I don’t want him to spend a night in jail. He’s innocent. I give you my word.”

.....

“Despite Xing Xing’s explanation, that’s why you’re still here,” Paul told me weeks later as we sat in a prisoner-attorney conference room. “If we were only dealing with the fraud and intellectual property theft charges, you’d have made bail. But arson—no way. There is some good news. Remember those photographs Salton had of Wren Peck with Monica Davies—the editor of the *Eastern Seaboard Poetry Review*? Turns out Wren was there trying to sell her on Dexter’s poetry. She does that all the time—believes in her brother’s talent and schleps it to anyone who might consider it. The only reason any of this turned out to be a legal problem is that *you* happened to insist Dexter read the very piece Davies had already accepted.”

“Oh shit,” I said, worried. “How much trouble am I in?”

“Huge trouble,” he said, shaking his head. “Huger than huge.”

“*Seriously?*”

Paul looked at me, his face grim. “Batter, honestly, after this is all over, you have to promise me something. You have to promise me you’ll give up on the poetry crap once and for all. I’m sick to death of your little fairy-tale world where tiny people walk around speaking in rhyme and the woodland animals think it’s cool.” He sighed and looked through the barred windows. “*No,* it’s not a big deal. Jesus. Dexter called Davies and explained you’d insisted he read “Posture” at the Phone Book Party; then the newspaper

published it with their story about that night. Her response: ‘No problem’ and ‘Congratulations’ and ‘Please return the twenty-five-dollar honorarium.’ Twenty-five dollars, Batter. God, you poetry people are cheap.”

“That’s not news.”

“But this is: the charges against Declonius and Wren have been dropped. And although the tabloid hasn’t disclosed who sold them Xing Xing’s diary, they have gone on record saying it wasn’t Declonius or Wren. Still no clues on who posted their bail. It went through a bail bondsman, so it’s anonymous.”

I sagged back in my chair, relieved to hear Wren was out of danger.

“Anyway,” he continued, “you know how Xing Xing told the sergeant that Andy told her *he’d* set the fire? He said he did—not on the record, but he did. Apparently, Salton was so sick of everything—Dexter, the topiary, the pickets—just running a poetry publishing company in general—that he instructed Andy to burn the building down. Makes Salton sound kind of sane in a way. This was while you and everyone else were outside admiring Declonius’s topiary redo. Salton only got the idea to set a fire because Declonius used the word ‘burn’ in the shrubs. I guess if he’d used ‘flood’ Salton would have told Andy to open all the taps.”

“Then why am I here? Why isn’t Andy under arrest?”

“Because it’s hearsay. Salton is not about to let Andy make a formal statement for obvious, indictable reasons, and Declonius won’t either. They both love the guy. And Salton is *furious* with you. According to him, you’re a terrible teammate.”

“But—”

“—you took his name off the masthead, embarrassed him at the Phone Book Party, committed fraud, and abused the company credit card; he’s right. You’re not the dream. The only good news: Declonius is on your side. Unfortunately.”

“*Why?*”

“Because if I put him on the stand, he’d have to confess that you *did* steal work from the company, an act he witnessed by violating his *own* restraining order, and which he only managed to get back by having you professionally mugged. Honestly—the Pecks. Not my favorite family.”

I didn’t want them to be my favorite family either. But Wren was a Peck.

As was Dexter.

"One thing I don't understand. Dexter's last name isn't Peck—it's York."

"He took his mother's name after she died. Partly to honor her, partly to divorce himself from his father's malfeasance, and partly, for the most obvious reason of all: because he wanted to be a poet on his own merits—you know—without feeling like his last name helped. So he's Dexterous Peck York." He riffled through some notes. "Ah, here it is. Says he didn't speak to his father for *seven* years. Claims his father was so callous, he couldn't even be bothered to come to their mother's funeral."

"That's not true," I said, leaping, without wanting to, to Declonius's defense. "The prison was on lockdown. He wasn't allowed to leave."

"I'll check on that," Paul said, making a note. "But what I was getting at is this: Wren still believes her father is innocent and because of it would never work for Salton. On the other hand, Dexter believes his father *is* guilty and *did* go work for Salton. Somehow, despite this major area of disagreement, which I'm assuming is off-limits at Thanksgiving, they remain extremely close. Salton's sibling rivalry response is more standard: if you can't kill your brothers and sisters, the next best thing is to turn their own children against them and burn down the family business." Paul waved his hands impatiently. "You wouldn't know; you're an only child." And then he softened, realizing his gaffe. "Sorry. Anyway, Dexter went to work for Salton, and sure enough, the quarterly came roaring back. In the black and *then* some, according to Salton. But about two years into this magical turnaround, a terrible thing happened."

"What?"

"*You* got hired." He laughed and shook his head. "Thanks to a 'recommendation letter' Declonius had written Salton begging him *not* to hire you. Because you were a liar and a cheater and homophobic. You know about that, right? Fucked up, right?"

I heaved myself back in my chair, sick to death of a description of myself I could not seem to shake.

"What you didn't know was that, right around this time, Dexter was beginning to doubt Salton's magical corporate turnaround."

"The fact that it took him *two years* to sense this tells you what kind of ass he is. A *dumb*ass."

"Come on," Paul insisted. "Be fair. Dexter loved Peck & Peck. He'd

been raised there. He wanted the place to regain its former glory and stature, plus erase the black stain of his father's malfeasance. Can you blame him? I think it's nice. So when Salton insisted on hiring this total loser—that's you—simply because Declonius said *not* to, Dexter became suspicious. Even though his dad was an accounting deviant, Dexter knew Declonius had a sixth sense about people. In other words, if his dad had gone out of his way to write a letter about what a terrible person you were—a liar *and* a cheater *and* homophobic—then you were most definitely a liar and a cheater *and* homophobic. That's why Dexter tried to get you fired all the time. It was that letter of recommendation. He's read it about a thousand times." He looked up at the ceiling. "What's that called anyway? When someone writes you a false letter of recommendation so damning you can't get hired anywhere?"

"Illegal."

"Exactly. For what it's worth, hating you was the first positive sign that Dexter was starting to believe in his dad again. If you look at it that way, it's really kind of touching."

"He tortured me!"

"But for the right reasons."

I exhaled in frustration, then got up to pace the room.

"You're the reason Dexter finally called his dad," Paul continued. "He hoped their mutual contempt for you might lead to something bigger—a reconciliation, maybe. But unfortunately, he called Declonius from his work phone. Salton monitors the phone records."

Ah, so *that* was the reason Dexter's tiny raise had been accompanied by a drawing of a firing squad.

"I'm sure you can imagine why Salton would fear their reconciliation," he said. "Yet another reason to burn the building down. But Andy wasn't about to destroy the building. He loves both Salton and Declonius. Told me he's spent his entire life trying to get them to see the good in each other. Insists it's partly *his* fault that they argue all the time. I guess he still feels guilty about his affair with their mother. Honestly, I feel for the guy—he's always falling on his sword—always trying to set things right. 'I'd never let Peck & Peck burn to the ground,' he assured me. 'Without those boys, I wouldn't have a dime.'"

"So it was Andy who let Declonius in all the time."

“Yes—there’s a little door near your office; Andy gave Declonius a key. And because he liked to keep his favors even, he set the fire for Salton—an easily contained fire, by the way—no intent to murder anyone or destroy the premises. He lit a match, counted to ten, called the fire department. Wanted to give Declonius enough time to finish his topiary manifesto and get out before Salton had any idea who had done what. But Andy is no gardener; he has no idea how long pruning takes.”

“I see. So it was Andy who took the diary.”

“Right,” Paul said. “He’s a *huge* Xing Xing Yao fan. Worships her because she always plays a cop. So when he discovered her diary in your office just before he lit the match, he was certain you’d stolen it, especially since you were a ‘known’ liar and cheat. He took it to Salton later that day. He believed that Salton, who obviously ‘respected’ Xing Xing because he’d published her poetry, would return it to her straightaway. Poor Andy,” Paul said, shaking his head, “he feels *terrible* about the whole thing. And then you were so kind to as to publish one of *his* poems and—”

“What poem?”

“In Issue 324.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Andrew Smith,” Paul said, exasperated, digging for the quarterly in his briefcase. “Here,” he said, opening to the page.

I stared down, not believing. Andrew Smith—was Andy? In front of me was the poem I’d rescued from a café counter years ago. I’d read it three times, folded it in half, then taken it home. Eventually, it was joined with other poems I’d saved and then published without permission. So that’s why Andy hugged me at the Phone Book Party. He thought I’d done it out of kindness, but instead I’d done it out of respect. Andy was *really* good.

“I have a massive headache,” I said, rubbing my head. “How did you learn all of this? From Wren?”

“No, from Andy. And, uh, Dexter.”

“You’ve spoken with Dexter?”

Paul shifted in his chair.

“Some.”

“Some?”

“We’re dating.”

You’re *DATING*?” I shouted.

“Dexter’s gay, you idiot. That recommendation letter stated you were homophobic—remember? We gay guys tend not to like homophobes.”

“*But I’m not,*” I said vehemently. Of all the things I’d been accused of, this one felt especially low.

“I know,” Paul said. “I’ve told him.”

“But I am *Dexter*-phobic. He’s an ass.”

Paul looked back at me, shaking his head. “Don’t talk about him that way.”

“I know him a lot better than you do.”

“The thing is,” Paul said, his voice, chilly. “I don’t just like Dexter, I’m in love with him. I first saw him at a lecture at NYU, and then, bingo, there he was again at your stupid poetry company party. Goddammit—why does it always have to be poetry? I fucking *hate* poetry. You should have gone to law school.”

“But I don’t *want* to be a lawyer, Paul,” I said. “I’m the guy with an ear; the one who knows that an anapest is a metrical foot consisting of two unstressed syllables followed by one stressed syllable, which, when written as a tetrameter, makes the sound of galloping hooves, and which is sometimes mistaken for a reverse dactyl even though they’re slightly different. And which, when read out loud, *usually* incorrectly, results in the kind of slipshod meter that gives people like me ulcers. This is not knowledge that yields a high-paying job, Paul. And worse, the art form itself, despite how essential it is to our survival, will die unless the Peck & Pecks of the world fight for it. That computer that plays chess? It can write poetry, too. Like we’re all supposed to be impressed. Except the computer isn’t actually writing poetry; it uses an algorithm based on someone else’s work. This kind of plagiarism has been in vogue since 1959, when a German mathematician named Theo Lutz ripped off Kafka’s unfinished *Das Schloss* to create a series of lines excreted by a computer. Poems are partly based on mathematics—that’s the pattern Lutz was imitating—but what Lutz didn’t understand is that what gives a poem actual power is human experience. Still, people love shortcuts, and because of that, they’ll trade substance for speed and knowledge for convenience. Lutz’s poem is terrible. It’s a fact. But I’m certain the day will come when we can no longer distinguish how bad it really is because people like Lutz are trying to get us to stop thinking, inventing, imagining, and feeling, too. Does no one

remember *2001: A Space Odyssey*? *Open the pod bay doors, Hal.* It didn't end well."

From down the hall came the sound of rattling keys followed by heavy footsteps.

"*When* am I getting out of here? And where the hell is your pipe?"

"Dexter wants me to give up smoking," Paul said, taking in my raised eyebrows. "I'm in love, Batter," he explained, as if he was just now realizing my single status meant I still lacked a certain knowledge. "As for getting you out of here, I'm working on it. It takes a long time to get this done; the depositions; the briefs, the running down to the courthouse every two seconds. I passed the New York bar about five seconds ago; I'm moving as quickly as I can. And the prosecutors are killer. Not as killer as me, but still—killer. And you're accused of arson *with* intent. That's not minor."

"I really need to get out of here," I said, suddenly filled with fear. If Salton wouldn't let Andy talk; if Declonius felt a kindred allegiance toward his old scoutmaster, where did that leave me? "We've got to get Andy on the stand, Paul. He's an ex-cop—he won't lie."

"Cops don't like to testify if it means they might implicate themselves. Which probably explains why Andy has disappeared."

"*Disappeared?*" I grabbed his hand. "This is bad."

"It is," he said, frowning. "It couldn't be worse."

71.

You're probably wondering why I'm not telling you much about jail itself. It's because I don't want to, because it was worse than I could have imagined, every corner filled with hopelessness and fear and shrouded in a sharp, antiseptic odor that pierced my jumpsuit, my flat pillow, the few

sheets of paper I was allotted, even—I swear—the ink in my pen. Just like Declonius, I was slowly becoming invisible.

My broken-hearted parents moved into my awful studio apartment to stay close, their futile offers of bail consistently refused by the court. I tried not to imagine them attempting to sleep on my thin pullout sofa, their careers on hold, their savings account dwindling. Mr. Raley came several times, too, although I'd never seen him, probably because every time he filled out the visitation form he said he was there to see Alex Gray. Xing Xing Yao, however, came every Friday, each time bearing celebrity gossip or a poem she was working on—anything she could think of to keep my mind off the wretched place I was in.

It was because of Xing Xing that I remained safe behind bars. The moment she stepped out of a cab, it was like she tripped a silent alarm; anyone who was anywhere near a window lined up to watch her walk in. The fact that she was there to see me gave me unbelievable status.

Declonius, however, did *not* come. As an ex-con himself, he was prohibited from visiting. To make up for his absence, he sent poems, ending every letter with a command to "hang in there," but I never responded. When it came to him, I was done. I was relieved that it wasn't Declonius who'd leaked Xing Xing's diary, and I meant what I'd said in the Aviary that night about his past leadership at Peck & Peck. But behind his obvious goodness lay some badness I couldn't overlook. He *had* cooked the books; he'd put in writing that I was rude and homophobic and a liar. And he'd never admitted that Dexter was his awful son.

My dismissal of Declonius probably explained why Wren didn't visit me either. That was the worst blow of all; not seeing her devastated me to my core.

As for Dexter—I saw no hope for his rehabilitation.

Meanwhile, jail worked on mine. I was required to attend group therapy twice a week. Other than being incarcerated, hating my job, not being in a healthy relationship, owing Sallie Mae, lying consistently, and never returning phone calls, I didn't think I had that many issues. Oddly, the therapist disagreed.

Apparently, he knew of my single-twin status—it must have been in my file—because that was how he chose to introduce me to the group: not as an accused arsonist but as a man who'd lost his identical twin brother at birth. I braced myself for the usual indifference, but instead, the other guys shook their heads and murmured things like "That's sad, bro," "That sucks, man," and "Sorry to hear that."

In jail, losing is the name of the game, and these men seemed to understand that losing my brother—the first person I'd ever been both literally and physically close to—was a big deal.

Still, I didn't like going to the therapy sessions. I'm not a huge sharer, and the number of boxes of Kleenex scattered around the room made me nervous. But a couple weeks in, after listening to how someone's dad used to hit him with a crowbar and how another's mom fed him PCP, the therapist switched things up by asking us to remember a good day from our past.

I'm embarrassed to say this wasn't hard for me. I had tons: my first home run, the Aviary's eggs, the day I read Baldwin's "The Giver," the first time I saw Wren. But what really stuck with me turned out not to be about me. It was about Batter, the dog. His stories. And maybe because I'm in jail and have nothing left to lose, I can admit it now. I clung to every one of them.

"Who wants to start?" the therapist said.

The guy next to me, a huge beast of a man who went by Motherfucker II, something I didn't understand—was there a Motherfucker I?—raised his hand politely. The thing I kind of admired about Motherfucker II, besides his manners, was this huge tattoo he had on his neck that read ***I will fuck you up*** in ITC Bolt. Call me my mother's son, but whoever inked it nailed the kerning.

"I was maybe five years old," Motherfucker II said, his voice soft, "and my grandmother took me to Central Park and bought me a Popsicle. I'd never had a Popsicle before. My first and last." His eyes grew watery. "She died later that year."

We all nodded, waiting for more, but that was it.

As Motherfucker II dried his eyes, I shrunk down in my seat, calculating how many Popsicles I'd had in my life. Fifty? Two hundred? I know we all think we have problems, but when you're in jail you discover a scale you

didn’t know existed. Here, my problems were only situations, short-lived, fixable. Unlike most of the other inmates, I’d spent my life being fed, sheltered, cared for. I’d gone to a good college. I had a best friend. I’d fallen in love. Which meant—unfortunately—that maybe my biggest problem was me.

“When I was nine, I got a cat out of a tree. For an old man,” another inmate was saying. “It was a big fucking tree, and I had to climb practically all the way to the top. No one thought I could do it, but I did, and the old man tried to give me five bucks, but I said, ‘No, mister, it was my pleasure. You ever need me to do it again, I will.’ And he hugged me. So that’s why I remember it.”

Oh *Jesus*. This story made every head bow, tears fall, the room sprinkled with a few murmurs of “’Way to go, bro.” I took a deep breath. I wasn’t sure I would survive everyone’s good times.

“Something special happened to me,” another inmate said slowly. “But I don’t tell people anymore ’cause no one ever believes me.”

“We’ll believe you,” the therapist urged. “Go on.”

“No,” the guy said. “You won’t. Because no one ever does. Because it was strange and unexpected, and no one ever believes in the strange and unexpected, even though it happens all the time.”

“Get to the point,” the therapist said.

“When I was a kid, a dog gave me a hundred-dollar bill.”

I looked up sharply.

A moment passed; a few people tried to stifle a laugh.

“Fuck you,” he said. “It fucking happened.”

“Go on,” the therapist urged.

“I was eight years old—this is when I was living in Minneapolis—and there was a dog on the school playground. A little guy; scrawny thing, kind of ugly. Some of the kids tried to catch him, tried to tackle him and shit—one kid even threw rocks at him. But he was uncatchable. Which was weird, because he had a bad leg, you know? I mean he was a gimp—”

“Wait,” I interrupted, my heart springing back to life. “Did you say Minneapolis?” My mother was from Minneapolis.

“Don’t interrupt, Batter,” the therapist said.

“It was the end of the day and the playground had emptied out. The gate was open, and I thought the little dog would hightail it out of there. But he

stayed. Like he was waiting for someone."

The therapist looked down at his clipboard to hide an exhale.

"But when he saw me," the inmate said, "he came over like he'd known me all his life. Stopped dead in front of me. It was weird, man. I just stood there. And then the little dog held up his paw, you know? Like dogs do when they want to shake. So I held out my hand and that's when it happened. He dropped a crisp one-hundred-dollar bill right in it."

"It couldn't have been crisp," someone said. "If it'd been in his mouth, it would have been wet."

"Was it counterfeit?" someone else said. "Were you being set up?"

"It was play money, right?" Motherfucker II asked.

"No. It was real. A hundred bucks."

"Hardy," the therapist warned—the man's name was Hardy—"no need to exaggerate."

"I knew you wouldn't believe me," Hardy said. "But that's what happened. And because of that dog, ten years later, I was able to go to college—"

"Jesus," someone said, rolling his eyes.

"—where you majored in grand theft auto," someone added sarcastically.

"No," he said. "That's *not* what happened—"

"I forgot," a third said. "You're innocent. Like the rest of us."

"*Minneapolis?*" I whispered. "*It was definitely Minneapolis?*"

"Fuck you, man," another inmate said. "Five bucks—maybe I would have believed that. But a hundred? No way? Hundreds are rare."

"Was it a five, Hardy?" the therapist asked gently. "Maybe it was a one. Maybe you found a one-dollar bill on the playground. That's still special."

"*What color was the dog?*" I asked. "*Was he black and white with—?*"

"You went to college?" someone said. "Fuck you, man."

"All right, that's enough," the therapist said, holding up his hands. "Let's —"

"I believe you."

Everyone's head snapped in my direction. "It *happened*," I said with so much force, the room was stunned into silence. I felt Hardy's eyes on mine. But all I could see was a small dog dropping a hundred-dollar bill into a child's hand on a playground, my mother in the background, her hands cupped, calling his name.

72.

"All rise," the court clerk intoned.

That statement was immediately followed by a stern look from the prosecutors. The most threatening of them stood and laid out my guilt so decisively *I* nearly believed her. Her spectacular monologue was followed by Paul's opening statement, which basically refuted everything she'd just said. But his argument didn't sound as good—it was too much like those fights on a playground where one kid says, "You're a liar," and the other one says, "Am not."

The opening statements were immediately followed by the prosecution's case, which opened with a series of character witnesses—or rather those tasked with proving my lack of character. Sam Slater was first, and he did a pretty good job. Lying, he said, was what I was good at, and he gave tons of examples. Plus, he implied I was definitely trying to hide something from him in my copy room that morning—besides Xing Xing Yao's diary. Everyone read his implication the same way: that I'd hidden the accelerants—ridiculous, seeing as how every copy center in the world keeps accelerants in plain view—they're called toner cartridges. Do people really not know this? Toner cartridges are flammable.

Then Mira got up and basically said the same thing, minus the part about the accelerants, her tight little curls vibrating in anger. The only good part was when it was revealed through cross-examination that Mira had lied herself—her SAT scores were not nearly as high as she'd claimed. They were still better than mine, though.

The hit parade continued, with damning confirmation of my lack of virtue thanks to Mira and Dexter's cowritten memo, which, when it was entered into evidence, made at least six people on the jury shake their heads, repulsed by my sloppy work ethic. Other witnesses made cameo appearances, including the typesetter I'd instructed to skip the proof stage; the same one I'd bribed with a Phone Book Party invite—she brought up the bribe, too. There were so many people—Salton included, of course—lining up to testify about how much I lied that I half expected an old

customer from the Just Okay to show up and insist I'd also lied when I said his order would be coming up soon.

So that's how the first few days went—badly. And when we reconvened on the fourth day, it was clear things were about to get worse. This was because it was time for people to speak in my defense, and there weren't many of them. Mr. Raley, Xing Xing Yao, Lou—only a handful of people willing to step up on my behalf. According to them, I was a normal guy with excellent photocopying skills who would never set a fire on purpose. Although Xing Xing was forced to admit that she, too, had once found me morally revolting and mendacious, filing a suit against me, though she had recently withdrawn it.

Through all of this, Paul—despite his less-than-convincing opening statement—was pretty impressive. He cut through the prosecution witnesses with precision, constantly reminding the court that not one person was able to provide eyewitness testimony that I had set any fire—in fact, I was outside with everyone else when the fire started. But the idea that I'd somehow preset the fire became a given, thanks to the expert testimony of some guy who was apparently a toner cartridge expert. Imagine *that* being your specialty—toner cartridges. Anyway, as the day wore on, the room turned against me; Paul knew it, I knew it. So when he finally called the one witness we both agreed might do me the very most harm—not because this witness wanted to appear but because that's just the way he was—I knew we were grasping at straws.

That witness?

Me, of course.

Remember that day in the Aviary when all the editors called me names and Mira announced that everyone hated me and no one wanted to work with me and I started having trouble breathing? It was like that but ten times worse.

After Paul had done his best to prove my worth and innocence, the prosecutors came in with a wrecking ball, and within ten minutes had me blurting out things like "Yes, I may have implied Gordon Lightfoot was a liar" and "Yes, I never informed security of a felon's illegal presence in the

building” and “Yes, I lied to the typesetter.” Which, by the way, resulted in the immediate appearance of Issue 324, the one with the charges I was actually *was* guilty of: tampering with company property and intellectual property theft.

But then there was the fact of Xing Xing’s diary. The tabloids still refused to name their source—they would only admit that it had come from someone within Peck & Peck who knew Xing Xing *personally*—and yes, my fingerprints were all over it. According to the prosecutors, my motive for setting the fire was revenge. People had called me names in a meeting. I couldn’t handle it. They insisted Declonius and I were cut from the same cloth—maybe he’d even put me up to the whole arson idea—I certainly seemed to hate everyone in the building. And what about Declonius’s topiary message? *BURN IT DOWN?* Didn’t that prove we were both not only liars and cheaters but *partners*? How *did* Declonius and Wren Peck get out of jail so fast anyhow? Had I provided them with the cash after my tabloid sale?

By the way, he was there. Declonius. He sat in the very back row. I nearly didn’t see him, not because he was invisible, but because I didn’t recognize him. He looked horrible. Ragged in a way I hadn’t expected. Wren sat beside him, her yellow hair pulled back into a ponytail, her face a mask of stone. Declonius looked straight at me and shook his head—in sorrow? In apology? In disbelief? I wasn’t sure which. I glared back at him, furious.

“We enter into evidence Exhibit Sixteen,” the district attorney said.

The previous fifteen exhibits were mostly blueprints of every inch of the Peck & Peck building, a few leaky toner cartridges, and of course, Mira’s blockbuster memo. But Exhibit Sixteen was—oddly enough—Declonius’s financial ledgers. The ones that had sent him to jail.

“Do you recognize these books?” the attorney said to me, pointing at the pages rife with Declonius’s wrongdoing.

“Yes,” I said.

“And when did you first see these records?” she asked.

“In Salton Peck’s office.”

“On what day?”

“I can’t remember.”

“Was it in May?”

“I don’t recall.”

It went on like that. Little annoying questions that never really got to the point.

I looked back at Declonius. He lifted his head and returned my stare, and in it was the same look he’d given me in my copy room over a year ago.

You’ve been accused of wrongdoing. Are you guilty?

He placed his hand into his pocket, retrieving something small, which he then raised and perched between his thumb and index finger, just high enough so I could see it.

A quail egg.

“Isn’t it true, Mr. Gray, that you took accounting in college?”

“Yes.”

“And that you excelled at it.”

“I did okay.”

“You got an A, Mr. Gray.”

“Yes.”

“You were the only student who did, Mr. Gray.”

Which surprised me. Really? The only A? I hadn’t known that. For a brief instant I felt a flicker of pride.

“So when you examined these financial records, you knew—because you’re a minor accounting expert—that Declonius Peck had, indeed, purposely stolen money from Peck & Peck. Isn’t that right?”

I glanced at Salton. “Come on, Beat!” he said loudly. “Tell ’em!”

“Quiet, Mr. Peck,” the judge warned.

“I object to this line of questioning,” Paul said. “My client is not accused of a financial crime.”

“Overruled,” the judge said.

“Mr. Gray,” the attorney continued, “please answer the question.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, flustered by Salton. “Could you repeat it?”

The attorney exhaled loudly. “Mr. Gray, did you see the pattern or not? Did you recognize the way in which Declonius Peck had stolen money from the company? This man you called your friend?”

I stared at the attorney.

“Answer the question, Mr. Gray,” the attorney demanded.

“The books were off,” I said to the attorney. “I could see the pattern.”

I looked back down at the numbers only because I didn’t want to look

anywhere else—not at the jury, not at the attorney, and certainly not at Declonius.

“And this is the same man you met with in the Peck & Peck copy room. The man who cooked these books.”

“I—”

And that’s when I saw it.

Something.

Maybe it was the light in the courtroom. I don’t know. But I saw something. It was only a brief flash—a stab—a frustration—like when a word is right on the tip of your tongue but you can’t get at it.

“Mr. Gray!” the attorney shouted. “Do you plan to answer my question?”

“I’m sorry. What?”

“I *said*, even though you knew Mr. Declonius Peck had been tried and convicted and sent to jail for embezzlement, and even though you knew he was not allowed in the Peck & Peck building, you met with him on numerous occasions in your copy room. Isn’t that correct? The man who falsified these books was in your so-called office. And he was the one who told you to set the fire. Isn’t that correct?”

I stared down at the numbers. What was wrong here? Besides the embezzlement?

“Mr. Gray, answer the question!”

I turned to the judge. “Could I ask a quick question? Is that okay?”

“*We’re* asking the questions, Mr. Gray,” the attorney admonished me.

“I just wondered—”

“Judge!”

“Answer the counselor’s question,” the judge instructed me. “And then we’ll see if you still need to ask a question.”

The attorney adjusted his tie as if he’d had just about enough. “Again,” he demanded. “Was the man who falsified these books— Was he in your copy office on numerous occasions? Despite your knowledge of his restraining order? Was he there?”

I looked at the columns again. Something wasn’t right. *But what was it?*

“Well?” he said, checking his watch. “Are you planning on answering the question?”

“*Never,*” I said before I even knew I’d said it.

“Excuse me?” the attorney said. “You’re *refusing* to answer? Judge!”

“No,” I said. “He was never there,” I said a little more loudly. “The man who falsified these books was never in my copy room. Not *once*.”

My unexpected answer resulted in a surge of gasps and whispered conversations that didn’t stop until the judge banged his gavel.

“Quiet!” he shouted. “Everyone, quiet!”

“Do you know what happens to people who perjure themselves, Mr. Gray?” the prosecutor threatened me. “You’ve already testified that—”

I interrupted. “I testified that Declonius Peck was in my copy office, and he was. But I never said Salton Peck was in my office.” I looked Salton right in the eye. “And I believe it was Salton who falsified these books.”

That really did it. Salton jumped from his chair. “I did no such thing!” he cried, his face wounded. “You know I didn’t, Beat!”

“Sit down, Mr. Peck!” the judge demanded as he, too, rose from his chair. “You’re out of order!”

“*YOU* SIT DOWN!” Salton shouted back. “YOU’RE A BAD JUDGE.”

“Bailiff!” the judge thundered. “Escort Mr. Peck to a holding cell. “Contempt,” he explained to the jury. Then he patted his chest as if feeling for cigarettes. “Thirty-minute recess,” he added.

73.

“I’m positive,” I said to Paul as he paced our small conference room. “Salton did it. I don’t know how exactly, but I’m sure.”

“Oh, that’s great, Batter,” Paul said, exasperated. “You’re sure, but you can’t prove it. Wonderful. You made a serious accusation in there *and* you changed your testimony. Huge problem.”

“I think we need to put Salton back on the stand,” I said. “Just for a quick question or two. And then follow him with an expert witness.”

“We don’t *have* an expert witness,” Paul said. “I don’t even know what kind of expert witness we’d call. For what, exactly?”

I realized he wasn’t exasperated. He was scared.

I tried to explain it again, but what I’d seen in that ledger that was so slippery, I *couldn’t* explain it. And every time I tried, Paul threw up his hands in despair.

“Court’s back in session,” someone said, rapping on our door.

Paul’s hands shook as he gathered his papers. “I could ask for a continuance, but I don’t think the judge will go for it. He’s pissed enough already.”

“You don’t need to prepare,” I said, trying to keep the worry out of my voice. “Just put Salton on the stand. Ask him those basic questions—about the office equipment. Then follow up with the expert witness. I’m pretty sure.”

“You’re pretty sure. That’s great, Batter. As long as you’re pretty sure about that, who do you think we ought to get for an expert?”

I grabbed him by both wrists and held him steady. “Promise me you won’t freak out.”

He did anyway.

74.

Once back in the courtroom, I had to return to the witness chair. Luckily, the prosecution seemed to believe my outburst had only helped their case, and they were done torturing me. “No, Your Honor,” the prosecutor said. “Believe me, we have no more patience for this witness.” I stepped down, gratefully sliding into the chair beside Paul.

“Now what?” the judge snapped. “Anything else, Defense Counsel?”

“Yes, Your Honor,” Paul said. “The defense would like to call Salton Peck back to the stand.”

The judge squeezed his eyes shut. “Mr. Peck is indisposed at the moment, Counselor,” he reminded him. “For *contempt*. I find it a bit

contemptible that you would recall him."

Nevertheless, ten minutes later, Salton stalked back into the courtroom, glaring at the judge and tugging at his sleeves as he unbuttoned his jacket and climbed into the witness box. "I'll expect your apology on my desk in the morning," he informed the judge.

"And I'll expect your presence in my holding cell for a week if you keep this up," the judge warned. "Now sit down and *shut up*, Mr. Peck."

Salton shrugged as if he didn't take the judge's threat seriously, then looked about the courtroom with such commanding authority I could feel my unsubstantiated accusation dry up and blow away like an old candy wrapper.

"Mr. Peck," Paul said, "I'd like to know about the type of equipment you people use at Peck & Peck. Typewriters—that sort of thing. Do you know?"

"Of course I know; I'm Editor in Chief." He checked his watch as if planning to keep track of the exact number of seconds my attorney intended to waste. "We use typewriters and red pencils. That's *all* we use—we're a publishing house. *All* publishing houses use typewriters and red pencils. Obviously, I am aware that some places are beginning to move to computers, but I believe it's a fad. Editorial work does not require gadgetry."

"What kind of typewriters?" Paul persisted. "Smith Coronas? IBMs? Some other brand?"

"IBMs," he said. "Of course, IBMs. IBMs are what real businesses use. Had 'em for decades. They're huge, like boulders. A piano could drop on them and they'd still work."

"Decades ago? Aren't they out of date?"

"What did I just say? I just said a boulder could drop on them and they'd still work. I'm not like my brother—I don't waste money. Not planning to fix what isn't broken." He looked directly at the jury, and several of them gave him sensible nods in agreement.

"So everyone at Peck & Peck has the same typewriter?"

"Yes, an IBM Selectric I. I use what the peons use. A typewriter is a typewriter. IBM came out with a new version a while back—I know this because the secretarial pool at my brokerage firm threatened to go on strike if they didn't get it. So we upgraded—and guess what? Same damn thing. Someone ought to sue IBM for pretending to improve."

“I think I understand what you’re saying,” Paul commented. “So many companies claim the latest version of their product is new and improved when it really isn’t. Correct?”

Salton rolled his eyes as Paul returned to where I was sitting and whispered, “I don’t have a good feeling about this. We’re flying blind. I haven’t even spoken to our—” He hesitated. “Expert.”

“I know.”

“This is serious, Batter.”

“*I know*.”

He moved away from me and turned back to the courtroom. “That’s all I have for this witness,” he said.

The judge told Salton to step down.

“That’s *it*?” Salton said. “Get your money, back, Beat. Your attorney’s a loser.”

“What now, Counselor?” the judge asked, ignoring Salton as he glanced at the clock.

“I’d like to call an expert witness,” he said. “To rebut Mr. Peck’s testimony. I’ve added the witness to the list, and if the prosecution is amenable—”

“An expert on typewriters and red pencils?” asked the judge, bored. “Really?”

“Yes,” Paul said, his voice heavy with worry.

“Are you onboard with this so-called expert?” the judge asked the prosecutors. “You haven’t had much time to review the qualifications.”

The prosecutor—the one I feared most—looked over at us and smiled. “We reviewed the qualifications,” she said. And then she laughed as if she couldn’t believe how desperate we were. “And no objection from us.”

.....

“Do you promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, Rainey Gray, so help you God?”

“Of course, I promise to tell the truth,” my mother said. “Although I don’t understand what God has to do with it. I think people who depend on religion to shame them into telling the truth lack personal courage. So yes, I plan on telling the truth, but not because of God. Also, can I ask? What if I

were Muslim? Or a Buddhist? Would you still make me swear to God? Are there any other options?”

“Just swear and affirm,” the judge said tersely. “Skip God.”

“In that case, I swear and affirm,” she said, sitting up a little straighter.

“Mrs. Gray, you’re a calligrapher?” Paul asked her. “Is that right?”

“No, *Mr. Acheson*,” she said, visibly annoyed. “I’m a *typeface designer*.”

“I’m sorry. A typeface designer. You design alphabets.”

“No, *Mr. Acheson.* Not just alphabets; numbers, too. Plus, all the punctuation marks. It’s a lot of work—in English it’s about eighty-eight characters. She looked at the judge. “It’s *a lot* of work,” she repeated.

“Mrs. Gray,” Paul continued, “I’m going to show you Exhibit 16—the same pages introduced by the prosecutors from Declonius Peck’s bookkeeping ledgers. I’d like you to comment on them. Not on whether the financial records make sense, but rather on the typeface itself. Can you do that?”

“I will do my best.” She donned a pair of reading glasses and peered down at the pages. “Courier,” she tossed off a second later.

“Are you sure? Both pages?” Paul said. “The same typeface?”

“Yes, of course, I’m sure. This is no surprise; almost every typewriter in the United States is outfitted with Courier. Courier is a monofaced slab serif typeface offering excellent readability,” she explained. “Although I have a few issues with the serif on the ‘f.’ To my eye, the serif is a quarter of a millimeter off. Nevertheless, Courier does offer excellent number alignment. See how neatly these columns line up? You can thank Courier for that—or you can go one step further and thank my colleague Howard Kettler, who designed Courier in 1955.”

The judge exhaled in boredom.

“So these two typefaces are exactly the same?” Paul asked, trying to mask his disappointment. I felt the same disappointment. I’d promised him my mother would be able to pinpoint and articulate the difference between the typefaces in a flash. I’d thought if there’d been something there—no matter how small—she’d pick up on it without hesitation. But what if I’d been wrong? What if there was no difference?

“Again. These pages were both typed in Courier. The typeface is exactly the same. No difference.”

“But—”

“Courier is uniform. The stroke widths are uniform. Kettler was a stickler for uniformity. Minus that serif on the ‘f.’”

“I see—” Paul said, casting me a look of panic.

“But,” my mother said, shaking her head in disapproval, “having said that, obviously the pages are not exactly the same.”

“I’m sorry?” Paul said, perking up.

“I said the pages are not exactly the same. Not even close.”

Paul looked down at the papers in his hands. “I don’t see a difference, Mrs. Gray.” He offered the pages to the jury to examine. “Do you see any difference?” he asked them.

Twelve people shook their heads no.

“I can’t say I’m surprised,” my mother said, a note of disapproval in her voice. “Most people don’t notice type. Most people,” she said, looking directly at the judge, “take type for granted.”

“Could you—” Paul started to ask, but my mother cut in.

“Are you familiar with the Selectric I? It’s an excellent typewriter, which uses the pivoting type ball technology introduced by IBM in 1961. Howard Kettler—friends like me called him Bud—designed the Courier typeface for IBM. IBM even let him name the face,” she said. “A rare opportunity. As Bud put it, *A letter can be just an ordinary messenger, or it can be the courier, which radiates dignity, prestige and stability*. I also submitted a typeface design for IBM’s consideration,” my mother said, turning to the jury. “A typeface where all the serifs were perfect, *including* the ‘f.’ But they chose Howard’s design over mine. Women on the jury—you know what I’m talking about.”

Every female head nodded.

“What about the other page?” Paul said, trying to steer her back.

“Oh, well, that one was created on two different machines: the IBM Selectric I,” she said, holding up one finger, “*and* the IBM Selectric II,” she continued, adding another finger. “The latter was introduced in 1971. The Selectric II was an excellent typewriter and really not wholly different from the Selectric I.” She turned to the judge. “Some companies like to come out with new and improved products even when the new products are neither new nor improved,” she said, echoing Salton’s assertion. “Except IBM wasn’t like that. The Selectric II *was* improved, although not in a way *I* approve of. To be clear, not in a way *any* professional typeface designer

would approve of. But a typist—especially a bad typist—would want the Selectric II. Definitely."

"And that is because—?" Paul asked hopefully.

"Dual pitch option."

"Dual pitch—"

"—technology that gives a typist the ability to switch between ten and twelve characters per inch. The Selectric I had no such option. It was a fixed pitch."

"Could you be more—"

She turned to the jury. "Let's say you've typed a very important letter, but instead of typing the word 'fellow,' you've accidentally typed 'felon.'" A psychiatrist would call that a Freudian slip, even though it was Freud who did the slipping. Penis envy? Really?" She shrugged in disbelief as the women on the jury laughed. "Now obviously you would fix your mistake with a dab of Liquid Paper—which used to be called Mistake Out—which was invented by a terrible typist named Betty Nesmith. Little-known fact: Betty's son, Michael, would go on to become one of the Monkees. Isn't that amazing? Betty, I mean. She created Mistake Out in her blender. Made millions."

"Mrs. Gray," Paul said, trying to get her back on track. "The typing error."

"Right, now after you've dabbed on a bit of Liquid Paper—or if it was *after* 1973, used the built-in correction tape which IBM had just introduced and which very neatly covered your mistake with a Wite-Out type of powder—a trained eye like mine could tell that was what was used here—you would then use the silver lever on the left to change the pitch from ten to twelve, typing in the nicer word, 'fellow,' in exactly the same space. Never mind that 'fellow' is *one* letter longer than 'felon.' Thanks to IBM's dual pitch technology, 'fellow' still fits. This is what is commonly referred to as 'breakthrough technology.'"

"So you're saying—"

"There's more."

"Go on."

"Half spacing," she said, pulling the jury further in. "Another feature of which I don't approve. Let's say you reread your letter again and find yet *another* Freudian slip. This time you've typed the words 'a crook' instead

of ‘a book.’ Well, after you’ve made a personal note to contact a good therapist, you would again use Betty’s Liquid Paper *or* the correction tape to eradicate the word ‘crook.’ Then, using the half-space lever, you would type ‘book’ into exactly the same space. Note: this time you’ve *lost* a letter. Normally such a loss would stand out like a sore thumb, but thanks to IBM’s half-space technology, you can make a word one character longer or shorter in place of a deleted mistake and no one is the wiser. Unless you are a professional type designer, like myself. In which case you throw up your hands in despair.”

“What? Why?”

“Because both dual pitch technology and half-spacing levers are work-arounds for people who don’t give a damn about kerning.”

“Kerning—”

“The art of space alignment. Between two letters.”

“So the kerning—”

“Courier’s kerning was already clunky—but at least it was *consistently* clunky. But I’m warning you, once people start disregarding kerning, tracking can’t be far behind.” She shook her head. “Tracking,” she informed the jury, “is the uniform placement of all letters in a specific selection of text—”

“So the tracking—?”

“There’s also a small issue with the leading. But let’s not split hairs.”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Gray—I’m getting a little lost. You’re saying that the dual pitch mode on this page—”

“I’m saying,” she said, gesturing to get the pages back, “that on that one particular page—oh, thanks so much,” she said as the page in question was placed back in her hands—“that here”—she tapped a column with her finger—“someone made very good use of both the dual pitch mode and the half-space feature. Someone had a regular heyday with these so-called breakthrough technologies. Someone inserted characters where there hadn’t been characters before, and deleted characters where there *had* been characters before. In other words, this page was originally typed on a Selectric I, but it was modified on a Selectric II.”

“But. Mrs. Gray, Peck & Peck only used the Selectric I,” Paul said.

“Correct,” she said. “One would need access to a Selectric II in order to make these changes.”

Turning to the jury, Paul said, “Mr. Peck testified that at his investment firm, they had upgraded to the Selectric II. Do you think it’s possible that when Mr. Peck reviewed the ledgers of Peck & Peck at his brokerage firm—a task he took upon himself when he learned the company was in trouble—he might have modified those ledgers using their Selectric IIs?”

“Objection!” shouted the prosecutor. “This witness has no idea what Mr. Peck did or did not do.”

Salton gasped. “Do I look like the kind of man who *types*?”

“Stop talking,” the district attorney commanded.

“Let me rephrase,” Paul said.

“I am a multimillionaire!” Salton shouted. “I do not type!”

“But you have a typewriter on your—”

“FOR GOD’S SAKE, WHAT DOES TYPING HAVE TO DO WITH ANYTHING? DECLONIUS WAS *RUINING* THE COMPANY!” Salton shouted, leaping to his feet. “He cooked the books, went to jail, got out, and flew right back to the nest. Why is this so hard for everyone to see? The man is a menace! Ever since he was let out of jail, he’s been letting himself into the Peck & Peck building illegally—with our security guard’s help, no less—despite a *legal* restraining order. So what does Andy, our security guard, do when *I* ask him for a little quid pro quo? Well, I can tell you what he *didn’t* do. He didn’t burn the building down as I’d instructed. He only lit it. Then called the fire department about two seconds later.”

“Dad, no!” Mira hissed.

“And then—here’s the real capper—Andy actually scolded *me* for using the money I made from selling Xing Xing’s diary to the tabloids to post bail for my thieving brother and niece. As if my largesse *didn’t count* since I was only doing it to make it seem as if *they* were the ones who sold it. Which I was, but what of it? They got out, didn’t they?”

The room detonated. People in the audience leapt to their feet, and the prosecution attorneys began shouting at each other, one of them grabbing Salton in an attempt to quiet him while the judge banged his gavel.

“What about what my brother stole from me? Why doesn’t anyone punish him for that?” he yelled. “My father fawned over Declonius. Billie, my favorite nurse, married him. Dexter was the only one who saw through him—at least for a little while. But then Wren had to keep harping on how their father was a hero. Jesus Christ. *I’M* the fucking hero! *I* was the one

who invested my own money to save Peck & Peck! And yet, despite my MBA and experience and millions, even I can't save the damn thing. That place leaks money faster than a broken fire hydrant. Take my advice, jury—never put your money in poetry. It's a racket."

From my seat, I watched Salton pace back and forth, oblivious to his own voiced confession, and looked for the traces that would tie him genetically to Andy—and once I looked, I swear they appeared. The short, stocky legs, the wide forehead, the meaty earlobes.

"Bailiff," I heard the judge bellow over the noise, "take Mr. Peck into custody."

"Is that all?" I heard my mother ask calmly. "Am I excused?"

"Judge!" Paul shouted. "Judge!"

"Mistrial!" the prosecution demanded.

"I call for an immediate dismissal," Paul shouted. "Salton Peck is still under oath!"

"Do you have any idea how hard it is to use that half-spacing feature?" Salton continued to rant. "You practically have to be a brain surgeon. All this bullshit about how technology makes everything easier. Sick of it."

The gavel sounded over and over.

"CASE DISMISSED," the judge shouted over Salton's ravings, thanking the jury for their service and excusing them as quickly as he could. "As for you, Batter Gray," he said, addressing me quietly as one of the prosecution's attorneys stood by. "By summary judgment I find you guilty of illegally tampering with your company's quarterly—specifically, the *Peck & Peck* masthead as well as the contents found within. You have been cleared of intellectual property theft; all poets have signed affidavits clearing you of wrongful publishing. But for the previous charge, I'm sentencing you to six months in jail."

"*No*," I gasped.

"But I am hereby commuting that sentence to time served," he said. "Call it early parole. If I ever hear another word about poetry, it'll be too soon. Go. Never come back."

75.

I know what you're thinking. A happy ending.

And it would be, too, especially if I told you the days that followed were a final and just reward for all the mess of the last few years—that Declonius Peck was reinstated as Editor in Chief of *Peck & Peck*, that Dexter and Paul lived happily ever after, that Salton went to jail for life, that Xing Xing Yao finally got a serious role, that the only reason I stopped by the bomb shelter these days was to help out the new person we'd hired. I'd definitely add that Andy was writing poetry again, that my mother was recognized for the creative typographic genius she was, that my father was awarded an honorary Ph.D., and that the Sutter Buttes grew.

But as much as I want to tell you all of these things, none of them happened. Believe it or not, it's better that some of them didn't.

Three days after the judge told the bailiff to take Salton into custody, he was freed on his own recognizance. He instantly relocated to Andorra while his lawyers drew up pretrial motions that would clog the courts for the next decade.

Declonius Peck was diagnosed with cirrhosis of the liver and given a year to live.

Xing Xing Yao was no longer the sexiest woman alive.

My mother was told she would get a free Selectric. It never came.

My father. Still no Ph.D.

And the Sutter Buttes—no growth whatsoever.

As for Andy, I wasn't sure whether he was writing or not—he'd long since stopped coming to work. None of us blamed him for it. Andy was not the

problem; if anything, he'd only ever tried to be the solution, a balm for the sting of rejection. His own; Salton's; every poet's on earth.

Back then, we treated his insistence that we should "watch out for poets" with eyerolling, but with Andy gone, the lobby was jammed. Several poets had even made it up to the editorial floors, where they brazenly knocked on doors or, worse, trapped editors in bathroom stalls, reading to them from memoirs they'd written in sonnet form.

I never told anyone about Andy's possible paternity. Like Paul said, there was no definitive proof. A shared blood disorder, a pair of meaty earlobes, and short stature, while compelling, didn't verify fatherhood. Nor did Andy's poetry, which described his all-consuming love for his best friend's wife, Daisy—poems that her husband, Cusp Peck, had read and very much hated because, just like that guy in my college writing class, Xing Xing Yao, Ted Hughes (Sylvia Plath's husband), and thousands of other poets, Andy hadn't bothered to change a single name.

"You *can't* change the names," Andy had explained to Paul. "Poets tell the truth."

"Poets are idiots," Paul explained back.

I found it impossible to blame Cusp Peck. Andy had broken his best friend's trust, destroyed his marriage, then written about it for possible publication. Worse, Cusp had to deal with the fact that whenever he looked at Salton, somehow it was his former best friend who looked back.

Nevertheless, when Andy failed to show up to work even after the trial, I worried. I knew what it was like to be in the middle of a Peck brothers shitstorm. What if he'd done something foolish?

.....

"Excuse me," I said to a woman behind a large mahogany desk. "I'm betting I'm in the wrong place." I looked around at the impressive foyer. I'd gotten the address from an old pay stub, but it made no sense at all. "Is there a resident here by the name of Andy Smith? I mean, Andrew."

"Andrew Smith," she repeated.

"Yes."

"Your reason."

"Andy—Andrew—and I work together."

She studied my Devo T-shirt in a way that indicated she doubted my veracity.

“Does he live here?”

“I am not at liberty—”

“He hasn’t been in to work. I’m worried about him.”

This seemed to catch her off guard.

“He’s a hemophiliac,” I added.

Her eyes flickered with concern.

“He was involved in that whole Peck & Peck business—you may have read about it. I’m worried he may have fallen or had a stroke or— He’s not young,” I emphasized. “Can you at least tell me if he—”

“I’m not at liberty—”

“He may have fallen,” I repeated. “What if he’s bleeding out?”

She studied my face again, then quickly removed a key from under the lip of her desk. “I can’t leave my station, and the security guard is at lunch. I’ll give you five minutes. It’s Apartment 2B—the pied-à-terre. Leave your backpack and wallet here. I didn’t know Mr. Smith was a hemophiliac. My uncle was a hemophiliac. If you’re not back in five minutes, I’m calling the police.”

76.

Apartment 2B was not what I would call pied-à- terre. It was more like a small palace—the sort of place with the kind of detail that screamed wealth, the most obvious being the huge double-aspect windows that lined the west wall like well-trained soldiers before turning ninety degrees to continue a shorter march to the south; all affording sweeping views of Central Park, all curtainless, all separated by hundred-year-old moldings that drew the eye up toward a broad box-beam ceiling. A single ray of sunlight blazed through

the southmost window with such intensity it lit the hand-waxed parquet floor and coaxed a coppery gleam that took my breath away.

I stood in the doorway, uncertain.

“Andy?” I called.

No answer.

I took a step in, mindful of the time I had left before the receptionist called the police.

“Andy?” I called again. I tipped my head into the hall bathroom, its walls papered in a floral pattern and complemented by a delicate marble tile floor. A small towel hung neatly next to a bar of soap, the latter, bone-dry.

“Andy?” I repeated before making my way down a hallway lit by a twinkly chandelier, convinced with every step that I was in the wrong place. Smith was the most common name in the country—even more common than Jones. Obviously, there was more than one Andy Smith. There were probably millions.

When I reached the only bedroom, it was cloaked in darkness thanks to a drawn curtain and, behind that, a fully extended shade. Yet despite the lack of light, I could still make out an unmade bed, a small lamp, an empty glass on the nightstand—and one other thing that filled me with an eerie dread. Hundreds of *Peck & Peck*s strewn about the floor in haphazard stacks, some open, some shut, most dog-eared. A few looked as if they’d been flung in fury.

“Andy?” I whispered.

Noticing a closet door ajar, I picked my way through the quarterlies and pushed it open. Five threadbare security guard uniforms hung in a neat row. Just beneath lay three pairs of identical black shoes—the kind old men choose. Thickly cushioned. Worn out.

I closed the door quickly, ashamed. What right did I have to be here? To go through his personal things? I didn’t know Andy’s backstory. Maybe he’d come from money. Or maybe he’d inherited the place from a relative—the kind of gift that seems great at first but quickly becomes a burden given the astronomical building fees and heating bills. In any case, he wasn’t here. Maybe he was on vacation. I shouldn’t have come. The woman at the front desk never said he’d left for good.

I turned to go, relieved my mission hadn’t ended with the coroner. But as I picked my way across the piles of quarterlies, the aggregate glow of the

covers' quail eggs pointed me to a well-traveled path. Following it, I peeked my head into the darkness. It looked like an office; small, cramped, populated only by a modest desk and humble folding chair. Please, I begged silently, as I flicked on the light, don't let me find Andy's dead body in here. But what I did find was far more horrifying.

NO, the walls screamed.

NO NO NO

Blanketed with notices, hundreds—maybe even a thousand—each taped one after another in every direction—north, south, east, west—running like a pack of wild dogs from floor to ceiling, the walls were a continuous, unrelenting rebuke.

NO NO NO NO NO NO

NO NO NO NO NO NO

NO NO NO NO NO NO

NO NO NO NO NO NO

I knew them instantly. The *Peck & Peck* rejection notices, the 158-point Bauhaus Extra Black Bold so cruel in its assessment of the poet's lack of talent it made my chest constrict. There were scads of them, *decades* of them, each tacked close to the last in tight columns that stretched ten feet high in an endless chorus of repudiation, a final judgment of *not you, never you. **NO.***

I knew some writers did this—displayed their rejections as a way of defusing their power. But in Andy's case, it was obvious the walls of notices had fueled something else entirely.

For on his desk sat an IBM Selectric II. And in its carriage, a Peck & Peck ledger sheet.

77.

I know I've mentioned this before—Peck & Peck has a mailroom. Its only entrance is in the alley, next to the garbage cans, where the mail arrived in huge sacks in the late afternoon. The sorters—typically three of them—were parolees, each hired and managed by a prison temp agency, a community service Cusp had arranged long before he knew his son would be one of them. Like many, Cusp and Declonius had a fondness for jailed poets—Marlowe, Jonson, Defoe, Cummings, Pound, Ginsberg, Chaucer, Thoreau, Kerouac, Jack London, Lin Po, Denise Levertov, Milton, Marilyn Buck, Etheridge Knight, Cervantes, Wilde, Dostoyevsky, Voltaire—people who had a bad habit of telling the truth.

The parolees, who reported for duty at 5:30 p.m. five days a week, worked until 1:00 a.m. or so to get through the latest mountain of submissions. They never opened any of them; their job was to sort by return address only. The work wasn't hard, only dull, and accompanied by the worst kind of soundtrack; an incinerator that crackled with heat while an old fan tried to cool things down.

Whatever hadn't been rejected by return address was dumped into large sacks and deposited in a double-sided cabinet that opened out to the Peck & Peck lobby. Every morning, Junior Editors would open the cabinet from their side and haul the bags upstairs to begin their initial sorting. At the end of the day, they returned the sacks, via that same cabinet, but now filled with rejected work ready for incineration.

Incineration sounds harsh, but that's the way Peck & Peck protected the authors' work. And, if they were being honest, it also allowed them to ignore the ever-present self-addressed, stamped envelope, not a single one of which, in the history of querying, had ever displayed the right amount of return postage.

As I stood there, a parolee myself, I'd found the simple sorting instructions tacked to the wall.

Toss anything with a return address which

includes the following words:

- **Internal Revenue Service**
- **Law Offices**

- **Union**
- **Final Notice**

Send automatic rejection notices to the

following return address names:

- **F. Scott Fitzgerald**
- **Dorothy Parker**
- **Andrew Smith**
- **William Butler Yeats**
- **Anyone from Bloomsbury**

According to the date and signature at the bottom, the instructions, handwritten by Cusp and Rye Peck, hadn't been updated in fifty years. I stared at the list, dumbfounded.

Andrew Smith.

.....

Take my advice; avoid the mailroom. It's chaos.

That was the warning Dexter had given me on my very first day, and that's what I'd done—avoided it—just like everybody else at Peck & Peck. We all had our reasons: Andy had no desire to run into the very people he'd put behind bars; Declonius knew his restraining order would spell trouble for the other parolees; Salton wasn't what anyone would call the mingle-with-the-riffraff type. But not a single editor went in either—probably because they couldn't bear to imagine there were even more submissions than the ones they already had to deal with.

.....

Two weeks into my post-jail mailroom job, one of the other parolees tossed me an envelope. "Attn: Batter Gray," it read. "So-called copy editor." Andy.

Dear Batter:

Watch out for poets. **Isn't that what I always told you? Push 'em too far and they'll go rogue. Although when it comes to the Pecks and all their goddamn**

rejection notices, I wasn't pushed; I was pecked to death. But I never meant for you to get hurt, especially after what you did for me.

Cusp and I were friends. I didn't mean to fall in love with his wife, I just did. That's what poets do—fall for the wrong people—this is *not* news. After Daisy left (she left us *both* by the way; I was heartbroken, too), I knew Cusp would need a lot of help. It's always the kids who get harmed by their parents' actions, and even though I wasn't a parent (although don't you think Salton looks a *little* like me?), I felt responsible for everything. That's why I kept stopping by his house: to make dinner, to make amends. I'd find Cusp in a horrible mood, the twins screaming, and I'd take one and he'd take the other, and we'd march around the room, boys bouncing in tired arms, and argue. This went on for years. Children mimic what they see, Batter. As soon as Salton and Declonius could talk, they argued, too.

I was a cop; I could handcuff five criminals and read them their rights in under a minute. I was a scoutmaster; I could build a campfire and cook beans in ten. But what I couldn't do was undo the poor example Cusp and I had set.

As for me and my poetry, yes, I (now) understand why no man wants to publish an ode to infidelity about his own marriage. Fine. But all this "poetry is genetic" crap is nonsense. If Declonius and Salton actually had ears, they would have published mine. You did. (Thank you, Batter. THANK YOU.)

Anyway, after five decades of begging for forgiveness, enduring rejection, and trying to get those boys to see the good in each other, I finally threw in the towel. Just before I was kicked off the police force, I overheard a bookie mouth off about how he'd been swindled by a better bookie using a certain typewriter. And that's when it came to me: how to stick it to the Pecks.

Getting hired by Declonius as security was easy. Locating the ledgers, obvious; cracking the safe's code, child's play; becoming an expert at the Selectric II's dual pitch option, ridiculous but doable. From there it was just as that bookie had described. Column by column, sheet by sheet, slowly and carefully, using the time-tested strategies of the people I'd once arrested, I drained the company of its funds.

Where the money is and how it got there, I'd rather not say. But I will tell you this: now that your mother (please give her my regards!) has single-handedly ruined the Selectric II scam, us creative accounting people will have to look elsewhere. Luckily, computers are the future. I see a lot of potential there.

I know all of this makes me sound like a bad guy, but here's the truth: As a scout leader I was trained to bring out the best in people; as a cop, to see the worst. But there are more than two sides to every story; it's never as simple as right or wrong, black or white. We're all gray, Batter, every last one of us. Salton didn't have it easy; Declonius wasn't perfect. But you gotta believe me when I say, all I ever wanted to do was fix my mistake: to make a friend out of a foe, a brother out of an enemy. But neither love nor ruin made them allies. I failed those boys, and for that, I will never forgive myself. My only wish is that they'd forgive each other.

Your friend, Andy

P.S. I still can't get over how anyone could believe Salton or Declonius was capable of setting a decent fire. Of course I had to do it! Those kids wouldn't know an accelerant if it walked up and shook their hand.

"You planning on working anytime soon?" one of the parolees asked as I stood staring down at a few poems Andy had included.

They were excellent. Of course they were.

78.

I hadn't heard from Wren while I was in prison, nor in any of the three months I spent in the Peck & Peck mailroom as a parolee. I tried not to care. Lots of people had given me a wide berth—or maybe it was me who'd done that. Spend time in jail, and even if you're innocent—which I wasn't—you accept shame as a permanent part of your record.

But Paul was always there to talk, and my old coworkers rallied around me just like before. Mr. Raley offered to make me Assistant Manager at the Just Okay; the Gap offered me a midlevel position in Human Resources. Copy-a-Go-Go called about a Shift Supervisor opening. But you know me: old habits die hard. When I heard Peck & Peck had an opening in the copy room, I did what I always do. I followed my gut there.

I tried not to think about Wren as I walked down that dimly lit hallway leading to the bomb shelter. The shelves were new and stocked with alien things like floppy disks and dot matrix paper, but the still-blackened walls reminded me of the past. I didn't want to think of a future without her, but what choice did I have? I'd doubted her father, hated her brother, defied her uncle, stolen work from her company. Very few relationships survive that kind of beating. And since we didn't actually *have* a relationship, continuing to pin my hopes on one seemed immature at best, hopeless at

worst. I vowed—just as I'd done several times with poetry—to put my love for her aside.

But like a one-hundred-dollar bill dropped into a child's hand, or two dozen roses delivered by a dog to a high school classroom, the impossible has a way of tugging at our hopes.

That first day back, after I'd cleaned the platen's glass of dried mustard, checked the toner cartridges, refilled the paper trays, and cleared the jams left by inexperienced temps, I reached for the first pneumatic tube that had come roaring down at 8:00 a.m.

Inside was a memo with copying instructions.

MEMORANDUM:

Quantity: Forty-one copies.

Editors: All.

Delivery time: ASAP.

Double-sided copying: JESUS CHRIST, *NO.*

TO: All Peck & Peck Employees

FR: Dexter Peck York

RE: That guy in the copy room

Editors, please join me in welcoming back Batter Gray.

Batter, do us all a favor.

ASK HER OUT.

From the doorway, I heard a slight cough.

And there she was.

Do you know how it feels when you get your heart's desire? *Do you?*

Because I'd never known that feeling until that very second. I went to Wren, cupped her face in my hands, and kissed her as if my life depended on it—which it did. "I'm in love with you," I told her. "I've been in love with you since the day I first saw you and I will not ever stop loving you. There's nothing you can say or do that will change my mind. Even if you walk away now, I—"

"Batter," she interrupted, flustered, her face pink, "do you really *not* know by now? I'm in love with *you*. I've been in love with you ever since that first night at the slam—I—I—was nervous—not just because I had to go read my stupid poem, but because of you—*you* made me nervous. I don't know what it was I felt, I only knew I'd never felt that way before. But then you left so abruptly—"

"*Because I thought you were Dexter's girlfriend*," I implored. "*That's* why I left."

"And I thought you probably had a girlfriend," she said. "That's why I didn't stop you."

"But you've stayed away, Wren. You never came to see me in prison; you never wrote me a single time!"

"Batter—you never wrote *me*. After all you'd been through I figured you felt like Andy did: done with the Pecks. And who could blame you? Salton had you arrested, my father had you mugged, my brother tortured you, my cousin lied about you. You went to jail because of us—you saved the quarterly *in spite* of us. But here you are. That makes you either the bravest person I've ever met or the—"

"—don't say it—"

"—the person I can't live without. It's both." And then she kissed me for a very long time and I didn't want it to end, but one of the copiers jammed.

"You really fell in love with me that first night?" I asked, finally pulling away. I was dumbfounded by her declaration. She'd loved me for *that* long?

"I did. It was right after you said, *Performanceislard*."

I tell you this only to spare you the same mistake. Next time you doubt

there really is such a thing as love first sight, do yourself a favor. Don’t.

80.

“We’ve decided to get married,” Paul told me eight months later. “It’s not a legal marriage, but Dexter says the Pecks have a history of thinking of the law as only a suggestion anyway. We’d like to do it soon.”

Soon—or even better—now—was my new time frame for everything. I was done with hesitation, done with overanalyzing, done with leaving the most important things unspoken. I wanted to live my life the way Dexter and Paul did: out in the open.

When I announced their upcoming union to the editors in the Aviary, everyone cheered. Howard, who’d been voted in as one of the two new Editors in Chief, suggested we dedicate the next issue to love poems in their honor, and Lou, the other new Editor in Chief, immediately agreed. And for the first time in Peck & Peck history, no one argued.

To this day, I’m not sure if the contents of that issue—which went on to become our most popular issue of all time—reflected what Dexter and Paul had achieved, or if it was the other way around—that their love had inspired the poets. What I do know is that their bond exceeded my original understanding of what love really is. And I don’t mean the average stuff like “when fighting, use ‘I’ words not ‘you’ words,” but the real stuff—the meaningful squeeze of a hand; the eager “Tell me about your day,” the reassuring “Whatever it is, we’ll see it through together.” The cement that sets two people up for life, then holds them there. Through them, my two brothers, I learned not only how happily ever after looks, but what it takes, what it asks, what I had to be willing to give. Because their happily ever after was damaged by the burden of doubt.

Paul was HIV positive.

One night, as I sat with Paul, a few days after he'd gotten the news, he said, "Brother, two things keep bothering me."

"What things?" I said, my heart heavy, thinking he might regret his past lovers or feel anger at his father's swift rejection. He'd finally told his dad he was gay, and, in response, his dad had hung up the phone.

"I don't think I'm going to be a senator after all. That kind of pisses me off—law school sucked."

I laughed a little. "Of course it sucked. I could have told you that. What's the other thing?"

"Well," he said. "I can't believe you never got that guitar."

I choked with pain. "Paul," I said, fighting and failing to keep myself together. "How can you not know this by now? You *are* my guitar."

81.

Sometimes I don't know how any of us get through life. Because of its unfairness. Because of the way it punishes us for crimes we haven't even committed. Between Paul and Declonius, I wasn't sure my heart could take much more.

Despite being on the list, Declonius had not won the transplant lottery. "I guess some coping mechanisms work better than others," he said, his voice weak, as I sat beside his hospital bed. "Should have done push-ups instead of gin." But when I didn't acknowledge his joke with a smile, his voice changed. "I've lived my life among the poets," he said softly. "I can't ask for more than that." He reached over and took my hand. "Wren told me you're a twin—I didn't know. And you lost him in such a tragic way. I lost mine, too. I know how much it hurts." He coughed a little. "I'm so glad you

and Wren found each other. The two of you moving into my loft, making a home together with the birds and the orchids. It makes me so—”

“Declonius—I’m—I’m so sorry I doubted you.”

“You had good reason to doubt me.”

I shook my head. “No—”

He coughed again and closed his eyes. “Promise me something,” he whispered.

“Of course. Anything.”

“Keep following your gut. You’ve got a good one.”

That was the last thing he ever said to me. I went to see him again and again, sometimes with Wren and Dexter, but sometimes alone. We begged him not to go. He did anyway.

82.

Grief is suffocating; worry is torment. Just when you think you might catch a break, they threaten to stay forever.

But I had Wren. And like those who fall in love during the worst of times—a war, the Great Depression—our love, tested by tragedy and colored by loss, made us lucky. We had no time for petty arguments, no room for games. We recognized what we were fortunate to have and from there, built devotion. But it wasn’t until a year later that something unexpected happened—something that lifted our depression and reminded us that even pain has an expiration date.

I’d gone to pick up Wren at work and run into one of the night nurses who’d taken care of Declonius. I hadn’t seen her since he died, but the way she waved me over suggested I was about to endure another set of clumsy condolences.

“Batter,” she barked, as I tried to disappear down a hallway. “Batter Gray—hold up a sec. I’m sorry to do this, Batter,” she said, catching up to me, “I don’t mean to reopen an old wound or anything, but I just found this thing I feel like you should have. I’d put it aside; then forgot about it until I was cleaning out an old purse and there it was. I didn’t want to give it to Wren in case, you know, it might be upsetting. You never know with this rhyme-y stuff.” She pressed a tiny, tightly folded slip of paper in my hand.

“What is it?”

“I think it’s a poem,” she said with some aversion. “I found it the night Declonius Peck died. I’m sorry it’s taken me so long to turn it in. It wasn’t on purpose or anything. But I thought you might want it.”

“Okay,” I said wearily. “Thanks.” I turned to go.

“A man came to see him. The night he died.”

“You mean a family member.”

“No. Sorry. I should have probably reported all of this—I hope I haven’t done something wrong. But the night Peck died—I mean just before he died—a man showed up. It was late; two a.m. or so. *Visiting hours are over,* I told him firmly. *You can’t be here. It’s family only.* But the man insisted he *was* family even though he wasn’t on the list. He pushed right past me, then bent over Mr. Peck and whispered something in his ear.” She lifted her shoulders in defeat. “I tried to stop him,” she said.

“Go on.”

“The man talked to Mr. Peck in a low voice; I could tell he was upset. He mentioned someone named Andy but also weird stuff like ‘white-out,’ and at one point he shouted, ‘Fucking IBM!’ He was crying—overwrought, but still—the man *wasn’t* family— and I said that was enough, I was calling security. For some reason, that made him laugh. ‘Perfect,’ he said. ‘Call *security.*’ And then, out of the blue, for the first time in days, Mr. Peck opened his eyes and laughed, too. ‘*Watch out for poets!*’ Mr. Peck roared hoarsely, and the two men whooped like it was the funniest thing in the world. But the laughter wore Mr. Peck out; he took a deep breath and reaching for the rude man’s hand, he closed his eyes, and tears escaped, and he said, ‘I love you, Sal.’ And the rude man whispered back, ‘Me, too. Same. I love you, brother.’

“I’m only telling you this,” she said apologetically, “because I don’t think they *were* brothers—they didn’t look a thing alike. Later, when I was

preparing the body for the morgue, I found that slip in Mr. Peck's hand. Take a look at it—tell me it's not weird."

I knew it immediately. T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

"I don't know what to make of it," she apologized.

But I did.

Andy hadn't failed after all.

83.

Poetry is problematic.

First, it's not easy. It forces you to think and sometimes thinking hurts. Also, poetry can make you feel stupid, like you don't *get* it. And if you do *get* it, then it's only because it just revealed something about yourself that you were hoping to keep hidden.

Second, it's honest, and honesty is never in vogue. We are all so overly fond of the adage that the truth will set us free, but there's a reason so many poets end up in jail. The real truth is, each of us lives in a cage, but poetry is a key. It reminds us that unless we unlock our own doors, we're probably not going anywhere.

Third, and I say this with some revulsion—poetry has roots in math. If you're anything like me, you'll get over it. Maybe.

Fourth, reading poetry out loud takes skill, and not everyone has it. You either see past the performance or don't. But if you do, you're going to discover a world you didn't know you needed. I swear it. And just to be

clear, while I know I've stated that not all poets can read their work out loud and make it work, many can. If you've never heard Maya Angelou, dig up a recording right now.

Fifth and finally, poetry is subjective.

Everybody has an opinion, and because of that, nobody's officially right or wrong. So even though I struggled with Rod McKuen, it doesn't mean you will; millions did not. Rod got beat up by the critics for being accessible, which, in my opinion, makes no sense. Like being able to understand what's he saying without consulting your therapist and three academics is proof of his work's inadequacy. Still, I struggle with Rod, and here's why: remember that horrible song "Seasons in the Sun"? Terry Jacks released it in 1974. Rod wrote the lyrics. I rest my case.

84.

As you know, I'm an identical twin who never met my other half and, I'm embarrassed to say, I sometimes used that as an excuse; the reason I did not know what I was to be or do or become. We humans are pretty good at finding someone else to blame. But unfortunately for me, Elvis had suffered the same loss and he'd done just fine. He got to live; his brother didn't. But instead of creating a hurdle where there wasn't one, he chose to live a life big enough for two.

Still, finding your own way isn't easy. We live in a society that rewards conformity. Follow this path, get this result. "Land," as Doug Payne would say. But what I've learned is that for many of us, it's just the opposite. We have to do something for which we feel unequipped—we have to break the shell and learn how to fly. Test our wings and follow our guts. We have to swoop, dive, plummet, change course, and ascend again. We have to make mistakes. We have to accept those mistakes. Because it's only through acceptance that we can take off again—and eventually soar.

And yes, I realize my employment of this strategy led me to a bomb shelter in Lower Manhattan and, in my case, the bomb actually went off. But I survived and so will you. It's only when we do nothing that we fall to the ground.

Speaking of the ground, the two new Editors in Chief of *Peck & Peck*—twins, of course—were arguing again.

"On what grounds can you possibly defend this piece?" Dexter was saying. "Free verse isn't automatically granted the right to be formless. It lacks discipline."

"There's a structure here, Dex," I said. "You're just missing it."

This is five years later, by the way—after Howard and Lou had retired from their places at the luminous white table as Editors in Chief, and, Dexter, whose husband's AZT treatment was working, and I, who'd managed to marry the love of my life with our own twins on the way, had been voted in as the new leaders.

"Somebody help me," Dexter pleaded. "Somebody talk my brother-in-law out of his legendary blindness."

And with that, the thirty-nine editors—some with advanced degrees but just as many without, each one hailing from a different corner of the world, each a supposed expert in "something," all of them—the *Peck & Peck* staff—forty-one in total, got to work. And they did so in a room filled with eggs, beneath a dome that demanded equality, in a building that refused to budge, in pursuit and protection of three things. Originality. Beauty. Substance.

It doesn't take a shadow box full of dodo eggs to teach us—anything less is extinction.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I find writing a novel is like setting out on a long hike with an outdated map and not nearly enough food. The entire thing is uphill, the trail is badly maintained, the weather is terrible, the shoes aren't really waterproof, the socks don't wick, the blisters don't heal, and that middle toe no longer looks quite right. There's a lot of backtracking and self-doubt; a lot of time spent in the woods. There are only ever two choices: turn back or rewrite. But only one leads to the lake.

Thanks to the brilliant people who, in completely different ways, all helped me find that lake: Diane Arieff, Stephen Kiss, Reverend Thomas Eoyang, Mary Ann Chaussee, Claire Sandberg, Diana Garmus, Nancy Greenlee, Carol Turley, Joannie Stangeland, Daniel Balbes, Susan Biskeborn, Susan Tarpley, Mike Williams, Felicitas von Lovenberg, Nan Graham, Marysue Rucci, Daniel Cuddy, Thomas Tebbe, Maya Rutherford, Clare Maurer, Todd Doughty, Kim Ingenito, Madeline McIntosh, Nicole Winstanley, Sarah Benton, Sophie Orme, Jennifer Joel, Felicity Blunt, Sophie Baker, Tanja Goossens, Katie Harrison, and Flo Sandleson.

I read a lot of poetry and poetic theory along the way, but I'd like to single out the Poetry Pharmacy in London, The Poetry Foundation in Chicago, Poets.org, and Ben Lerner's *The Hatred of Poetry*, for showing me, a non-poet, what I've been missing. I'd further like to thank Stephen Marche for his brilliant essay, *On Writing and Failure*, which every writer should read before throwing in the towel, and every non-writer should read to better understand that there's nothing clinically wrong with the writer in your life.

My biggest thanks are reserved for my family. Sophie Erb, you know this particular territory better than anyone, and because of it, you made me laugh at the moments I needed it most. But you also always inspire me with your abundantly creative mind and your well of compassion for the

unpredictable artistic process, two opposing forces which somehow result, at least in your case, in “getting shit done.”

Zoë Erb, we all believe you have a sixth, possibly seventh, sense which allows you to state with authority that everything will turn out all right in the end—*more or less*—which *also* makes me laugh all the time. But it is your wisdom, kindness, and inherent joy, all so rare, all so appreciated, that make the rest of us ask the eternal question—WWZD?—at least three times a day. May more of you rub off on me eventually.

David Erb, you’re not only my first reader, but my one true love, partner for life, personal chef, *Jeopardy!* champion, hiking companion, brilliant mathematician, sounding board, and best friend. To you I owe more than I can ever repay. But if you let me, I will happily spend the rest of my life trying.

Finally, here’s to the poets and type designers, too often unsung. For you guys, Phone Book Parties for life.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bonnie Garmus is a coffee-dependent American novelist. Her debut novel, *Lessons in Chemistry*, was a *Good Morning America* Book Club pick, a Goodreads Choice Best Book of the Year, spent nearly two years on the *New York Times* bestseller list, and was named by *Times* readers as one of the 100 Best Books of the 21st Century. Translated into forty-four languages, *Lessons in Chemistry* was honored with sixteen international literary awards and made into an Apple TV limited series. *Peck & Peck* is her second novel.

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First Scribner hardcover edition October 2026

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Interior design by Silverglass

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Control Number: TK

ISBN 978-1-6682-5106-5
ISBN 978-1-6682-5108-9 (ebook)

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