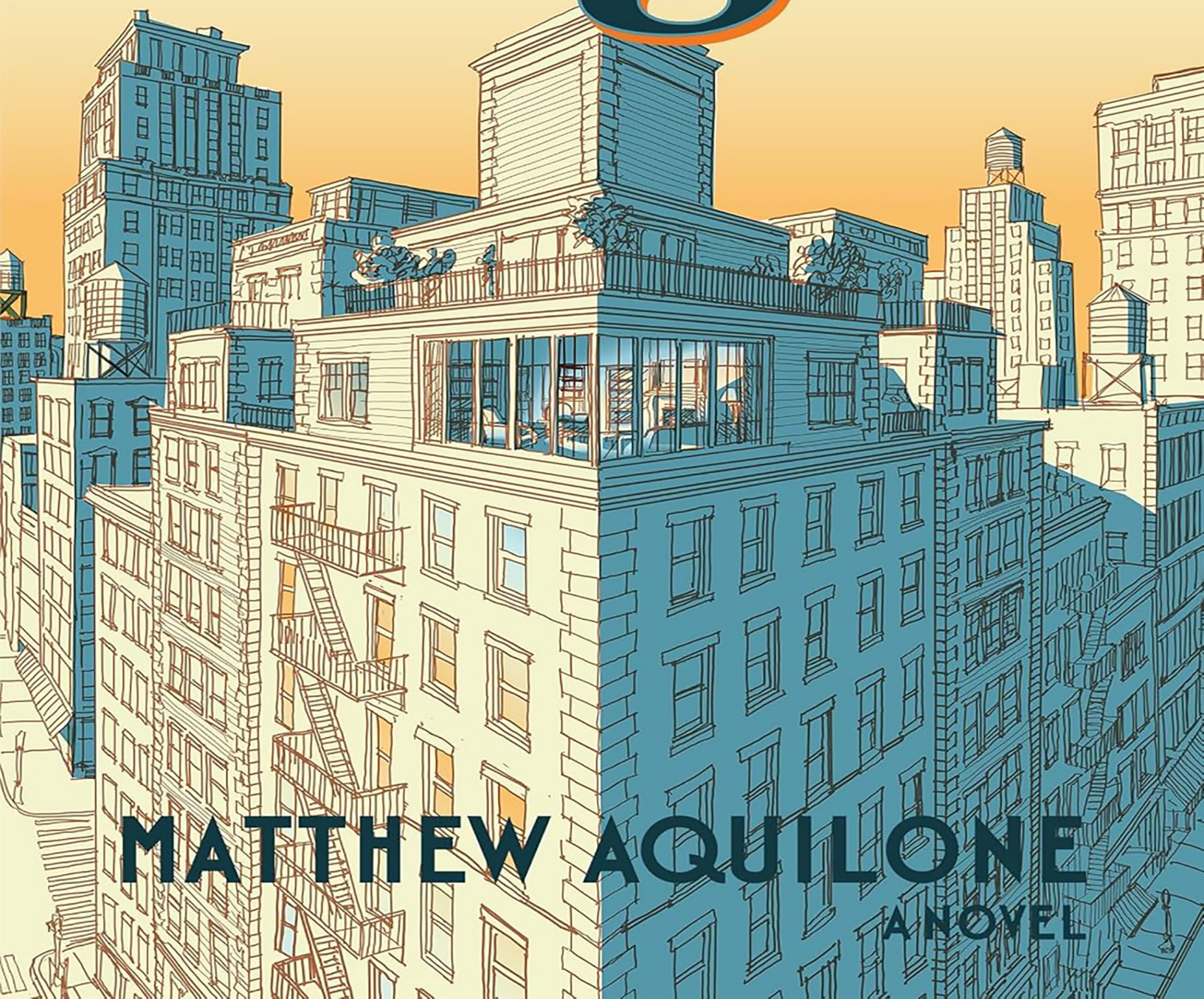
THE Stager



MATTHEW AQUILONE

A NOVEL

THE STAGER

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For the believers

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Chapter 1

The Incident at Work

The saying goes that you should always start a room with a rug, but I say: Why not start with a story?

Case in point: Those two, casually rolled, waffle-knit neckties in the linen-lined top drawer of the walk-in dressing room reveal a man as relaxed as he is refined, in control but not a control freak. The shy little boy who has a museum-store tipi on his bedroom floor will move to Berlin and invent vaccines. His older sister, with those silver sneakers peeking out from under the bed in her ironically pink room with its milk crate of old-school punk classics on new-issue vinyl, is on her way to Princeton and a doctorate in global affairs. The sophisticated soaps on Mrs.'s vanity, finally, suggest a creature as sensual as she is serious. By the tub, *Eat, Pray, Love* (and not, as *I* wanted, *In Search of Lost Time*, in the original French).

Don't get me wrong. Rugs, of course, *are* very important. A rug is the heartbeat of a room. It is the first metronomic note of a symphony on which a domestic drama unfolds. It is affirmation as much as aspiration. In the end, belief is what is for sale. Not apartments. Not multimillion-dollar views. What do we do, we stagers? Well, our business is nothing less than storytellers in service of the propagation of the faith.

(I will take a thoughtful pause here because I'm not really sure if I believe anything that I'm saying. It wasn't faith that drove me here in the middle of the night. That made me a thief. An adverse possessor. A squatter. An occupier. I didn't come upon this penthouse through belief. I took advantage, because that's what advantages are for. When opportunity knocks, you don't shut the lights and hide in the bathroom. You don't, say, smash the door handle with a small but surprisingly heavy modernist bronze figurine so that no one else can get in. Let

me just say that I couldn't really be a thief if I knew all along that one day I'd have to give it back.

But if you *are* going to steal something, it might as well be something like this. Can you blame me if—on the eve of that awful lockdown—I instead wanted to be free, to climb right up into the sky? Although it's been so empty, lately, the sky. You get used to the barren streets and closed storefronts, the dark restaurants full of unused tables, the disappearance of taxicabs and hot dog vendors, of garbage and cigarette butts. You no longer find strange the streetlights changing with patient futility. But not the empty sky. . . Do you ever wonder where the sky begins? Being here these months on the fifty-fourth floor, I still cannot conclusively say. Maybe the sky begins at the point you can no longer reach it, at the point it becomes unattainable. If that's the case, I think you hit it pretty fast.)

Anyway, let's just start at the beginning.

"Name?" the doorwoman, Sheila, asked me after I strode across the big, black and brass lobby to her desk. My feet squeaked with every step. I was wearing cute and very brand-new sneakers. They looked like kitty cats, and I pretended the squeak was a tiny bird on my shoulder, chirping and keeping me company on the long trek to Manhattan from my apartment in Queens. I hadn't really landed anywhere after art school. I transferred from one bad job to the next, one terrible roommate situation to one just as bad. I sublet and house-sat and tried an "intentional living situation" in Bed Stuy that gave me bed bugs. Finally, by miracle, and an ever-enlarging circle of acceptable locales, I found a place of my own in a neighborhood I'd never heard of—Sunnyside. My apartment was admittedly dark-ish, a little crooked floor-wise and almost unaffordable, but it was my name on the doorbell, and I was, finally, my own woman.

Queens, however, despite the tree-lined sidewalks and semi-detached houses, was a lot like the other affordable places I had lived. It had its charms, but it was uneven, like the broken voice of an adolescent boy. One front yard on my block was a masterpiece of potted gardening, complete with birdbath and a mirrored gazing ball. Another was filled with overflowing trashcans and rat traps. Yet another had a half-assembled, or disassembled, motorcycle chained to the stoop. That homeowner had invested heavily in ornate white wrought-iron gates that left no aperture unprotected, and an American flag for each. I'd already identified certain sidewalks as favorite places to walk one's dog and leave the evidence behind—clusters of tiny colored plastic bags like blossoms blown off by a strong

wind. The real estate listing I'd found had described it as "emerging," though in some ways you could say the worst thing about it was that it was a little boring.

My new life—my subway stop on the 7-train was Bliss Street by the way!—came with two deadbolts on the apartment door, a wide array of cheap international cuisines within walking distance and, most importantly, a new perspective on things now that I was just over the crest of my mid-twenties. It was a point of view not unlike the gleaming Manhattan skyline excitingly visible along my new home's nearly suburban streets—this brand-new, very tall building where both Sheila and I worked included.

"Penthouse A," I told Sheila with a smile.

"Name?" she asked, again, as she did every time I stood at her desk, knowing full well that I was staging the model unit on fifty-four, as I had been for weeks. She had, for some reason, decided not to like me, I can now admit. I was in such a good mood that Monday morning, though, it didn't matter. I'd brought a beautiful bouquet of scent along with my squeak, my backpack filled as it was with delectable French milled soaps for all the *en suite* baths. Their fragrant cloud infused the subway car. You're welcome, fellow riders. Birdsong and flowers for your early commute!

"Maya," I said with a little burp. Dinner the night before had been homemade chili. I'd decided I would improve my skills in the kitchen, as tiny as it and the rest of my apartment were. I'd expand beyond toast and waffles, move past an interminable procession of scrambled omelets and frozen pizzas. Curse of the single gal, I guess. The freelancer, the starving artist, twenty-six years old just last month. The chili, candidly, was a work in progress, *emerging* if you will. The texture, which is central to the success of the dish, was passable, albeit nothing like some stock images I found online for reference with their colorful, well-balanced diversities of bean and vegetable, glossy and proud. Mine tilted monochrome and indistinguishable, muddy even from certain angles. But it had real spirit—so much it made my eyes water as I ate it on the sofa from the one bowl I owned. I fell asleep sated, teeth unbrushed, and woke to the pot still stubbornly soiled despite soaking in the bathtub overnight.

Sheila checked her screen, or pretended to, then gave me her wordless nod, hair in a cruelly tight bun, that I was cleared to board the elevator, express all the way to the top. Another big burp later, I arrived at the penthouse where Athena, my boss, was in animated conversation with the client, Rogan. Athena is one of the city's most talented designers. She's really a very nice person once you get to

know her. She's Greek. Ageless. Went to convent school. She has amazing taste, along with long straight dark hair and, by her own declaration, zero body fat. She has implied that she comes from money, but most of it I suspect is gone. I can't say why I suspect that, except that perhaps I am acutely attuned to situations involving loss or, especially, humiliation.

"How fucking much?!" Rogan asked her, glaring, enraged, at the freshly papered walls of the private elevator landing, a caramel metallic raw silk, absolutely *stunning*. He stomped off with his phone to his ear, not bothering to wait for Athena's answer or say hello to me. He was a real estate developer and, thus, a busy man. In meetings Rogan referred frequently not to, "The Owners" but to "Ownership," not a person, or persons, but rather the depersonalized *state* of owning. (Which was always up his ass apparently.) Ownership's aim, however, was to undo itself, to finish the building and sell all the apartments, and thus transcend that state. In effect to no longer *be*.

In that sense, capitalism, for lack of a warmer word, describes not just a theory of economics, but a process of transformation. As an artist, my M.O. is totally metamorphic, even if what I produce is largely unmarketable. It is, however, always personal, if sometimes, you know, too much. That's Maya. Personally, now that we're on the topic, Rogan was tall, broad, and bald as Mr. Clean. He wore expensive jeans and untucked French cuff shirts with no cufflinks. He wore status sneakers (that didn't look like kitties) and clutched two smartphones.

"Rogan," he answered one of them. "What? No, fuck *no.* Do! Not! Postpone! Everyone needs to take some damn Tylenol and shut the fuck up!"

Anyway, staging, what Athena did so beautifully, and what I was so lucky to help with, was a crucial part of that universal process of transformation, at least in how it related to the New York City luxury real estate market. She made a point of striding away from Rogan in the opposite direction to plant a pair of kisses on my cheeks.

"Hello, Baby," she said to me. Athena's kisses were a good barometer of her mood. She was winning this argument with Rogan. Athena spent a lot of money, a suitable amount to stage a penthouse in the tens of millions of dollars, give or take, but for Rogan it was always too much.

"What you do, it is too much!" Rogan called over. Athena ignored him and winked at me.

"Here, Maya, let me show you the art. It's absolutely fantastic," she said,

waving her iPad and leading me through the twinkling foyer into the enormous living room. Floor to ceiling windows, fifteen-feet tall, faced west and south over the city. In front of us, the Hudson River and the blue vagueness of New Jersey in the distance. To the left, the great gridded sweep of Manhattan all the way down to the tip and the crowded cluster of buildings in the tangle of old Dutch streets in the Financial District. More than once, Athena had to tell me to stop gazing out the window and get back to work—but how could you not begin to wonder about all the lives that were going on all around you? How could you not help but imagine the stories they're part of, and the voices they have? I should have told her that my true vocation was daydreamer, incubus of invented selves, a hungry ghost, but—as my mom and sister, Leslie, would agree—that's just not the kind of thing you say to your boss.

"Scroll," Athena commanded, handing me the iPad.

"Yes, yes, yes," I said with growing enthusiasm as I made my way through her slideshow. Athena values my opinion especially when it comes to art, not as much as she does with soap, but I know that I am heard. We were in familiar territory. She has a penchant for lyrical abstractions. For large canvases, vague and lovely.

"And this!" Athena said, snatching the tablet from my hands and holding it up for me to see. "What a coup!"

We were looking at the most beautiful painting of the lot, a big canvas brilliantly flickering between being recognizable and shockingly strange, something funny but so smart. Profound, I'm not afraid to say. Something that really made a statement. Something that made you stop and look. It was called *Birthday (The Bridge)*, and after a moment I could see it, the soaring swoop of the cables, great gothic apertures revealing a turbulent impasto sky flashing with dozens of bright gooey stars. It was made not just of paint, but of cut pieces of canvas, of found debris, wood and wire and wax, of innumerable pieces of broken bottle glass in blue and green. Even in the photograph it glistened and gleamed.

"Clarissa Jewell," I gasped.

"You know her? Her work, I mean?" Athena asked.

"Clarissa," I said again, my noisy stomach even more shocked than I.

Yes, I knew Clarissa Jewell. We had walked across that bridge once, together. On my birthday. She was more than a name to me, beautiful, genius Clarissa. She is—she *was* my friend.

I met Clarissa sophomore year, we were in a printmaking class together. Ours was

not the most prestigious art school, but it had decent facilities and was close enough to New York. I'd surprised my parents by applying with sketches from my high school set design class, and figure studies from weekend workshops at our community college. Vicky, my best friend since junior high, was applying and we did everything together. She had serious, well-established dreams of being an artist. I still wasn't sure what it meant. I got in. She didn't. I fell in love with school immediately and whatever dreams that once were Vicky's were now mine (and we were no longer friends).

That first afternoon Clarissa and I shared a press. We inked one another's plates. Afterwards we ate leathery veggie burgers at The Commons, and she told me nearly everything about her. I let the facts of her life fill me up. Her father was black. Her mother Filipino. Both were very religious. She was tall. She let her hair grow wild. Everyone wanted to sleep with her, and she obliged quite a few.

"I'm a pothead, but I'm also pansexual, ha! Pots and Pans."

She idolized Jimi Hendrix and Peggy Lee.

"Mad old school," she admitted. "But I kinda hate our peer group, don't you?"

Of course, I did. That is, if she did. I devoured her words greedily. Naturally, I wasn't half the artist she was. When I confessed to her my insecurity, she looked at me funny and shook her head.

"You're not here by accident, Maya. You have something to say," she said. I tried to believe her. But Clarissa was touched by vision, full of experiences I could only imagine. I tried on her life in my mind. It was so different from my own. (There is nothing mixed about my background. I'm as uniform as a stick of butter.) It was thrilling to feel the sensation of another soul on me like a mask. And she so easily offered that soul—and then I betrayed her. I put something false between us. I was silent when I should have spoken. I hid my humanity and my imperfection, and what could be more important to show one another? We don't need heroes. We need familiars. We need friends. And I was a very bad example of what one should be.

The reason for my betrayal? Freshman year I'd gotten pregnant and had an abortion. It doesn't make me unique even if it was something to have my capabilities so swiftly demonstrated. I could be a mother! But, at the age of nineteen, I was in no way prepared to be a parent, and certainly not because of an overlooked condom and a cute Ceramic Arts major I'd met at The Mug. There wasn't any question in my mind that I would go the route I did. And there were no tortured feelings about it either. I don't mean to diminish the seriousness with

which other women confront this situation, only that if in other moments I was not as clear in who I was or what I wanted, in this one there was no ambiguity.

But I was thrown by my pregnancy. It was almost as if I had been tricked by my body. As though I'd fallen for some vaudevillian con. I decided then I'd be so careful from then on, with everything. That nothing would keep me from my dreams, as ridiculous as those dreams were. I decided, too, that I'd never ever tell anyone. This was before I met Clarissa. Only my sister, Leslie, knew about my mistake. She met me at school and drove me to the city where the clinic was. It was a blip in an otherwise seamless school year.

And then, like me, Clarissa became pregnant. He was a visiting painter at school. Clarissa loved his work. I'd never heard of him. He was taller than her. Had a dancer's posture and a slight belly. Gray hair. He was a little bit famous, American but known for working half the year in Italy, for rejecting the political imperative laid on him back home. He chose history instead, Western, and refused to be exempt from it. He wore an expensive denim work shirt with a mandarin collar. Was recently divorced. He gave Clarissa a glowing critique when he visited our studios. "Neat," was all he said about my work.

He emailed her two weeks later. If she was going to be in the city on the nineteenth, he had a plus one for an art talk at the New Museum. She told me her head spun all night long, all the people she met. Afterwards they had martinis at a swank ruby-lighted lounge on Bond Street, just around the corner from his loft where she passed most of the night, and then a few more. He was back in Italy by the twenty-fifth with no more emails to follow.

"You intimidated him," I told her. "So, in his mind he had to take you to bed to level the playing field."

When Clarissa missed her period and later had a positive pregnancy test, it was one of the few times I saw her lack confidence. She was knocked off balance. She was afraid.

"I don't know what to do," she admitted.

"I guess the question is, do you. . . do you want a child?" I asked.

She laughed nervously. "As if!"

She chose an abortion, and it was me she asked to help her, to accompany her to yet another clinic in the city and to take her home again. Naturally I did it without hesitation. We spent the weekend in her room together as she recuperated. But that weekend, as she recovered from her procedure and poured

her heart out to me, I never said anything about my own abortion. She confessed to me, and I never returned the favor.

"You're too smart to ever make this mistake," she told me as she sobbed over her lack of good sense. "I wish I had been that smart." Clarissa knew I took birth control. I'd gone on the pill right after my pregnancy. She'd seen them on my dresser. But being responsible had nothing to do with it. I'd simply messed up and didn't want it to happen again. As terrible as it was to watch her cry, I also liked that she believed that about me. That she thought I possessed common sense that she didn't.

"I trust you, Maya" she told me. "I wish I trusted myself as much."

I think back now, on how it was the most damning thing anyone could have said to me.

But that wasn't the end of it. We wound up back at The Mug the week after her procedure, and it was there I added insult to injury. Not long after midnight on Saturday, I was in a corner of that windowless on-campus bar in the basement of the Brutalist brick student center, much more drunk than I had planned on being, watching Clarissa on the tiny dance floor. As usual, she was electric. She was already famous in her way, and all light and eyes were on her. Her cousin, Dawn, a sweet, sheltered high school junior, was visiting while looking at colleges. She'd been confused, of course, by Clarissa's artwork, unaware of the complicated person her cousin really was. She'd been yawning since ten-thirty. I dragged her out with me onto the little dance floor as I hopped and swayed and flung my arms with abandon, shouting, "woo hoo!" and "yeah baby!" hitting poor Dawn on the forehead at one point. At another I fell and then nearly did it a second time.

"She moves great for someone who just had an abortion," I said to Dawn as I flopped back heavily into our booth. I cursed myself even as I heard the words leave my mouth, but Dawn seemed oblivious. Still, drunk as I was, I barely slept that night. I felt dangerous, like a car with bad brakes. Sure enough, when Clarissa's mother called on Tuesday and asked her daughter to tell her the truth, Clarissa did. She never lied about anything. I told Clarissa what I'd done too. I couldn't lie either. I couldn't bear another secret between us. She shrugged it off.

"I was going to tell them anyway. That's just how it is between my mom and me," she said. "Though this is the first real fight I've ever had with her." Clarissa had been shaken by how extreme her family's reaction had been. "I just didn't expect them to judge me so much. It wasn't my mom's anger so much as the fact that she now thinks I'm a fool. Which makes *me* angry!"

They never completely mended fences. The abortion remained between them, just as mine remained between us, even if I was the only one who knew. I'd given away her secret but refused to reveal my own. And Clarissa thanked me for my honesty.

"Oh! And that we were a bad influence on Dawn, Miss Boring USA. Ha, she could use it!" she said.

That was the day that I saw what I was capable of; the day I poisoned our friendship. It was the day I began to turn away, to let shame fill up the space that I had allowed between us.

After the dust settled, of course, Clarissa had responded to her abortion with her own characteristic candor and brilliance. In fact, that's when she made her first serious piece, *"Thank You! Come Again!/My Abortion."* A flower arrangement if you can believe it, painted on a sheet of black glass like those old Dutch floral paintings where the riotousness of life stands out against the darkness. Only her flowers were all dead, and the vase—chipped cut-crystal straight from the funeral parlor—sat upon a remarkably rendered *trompe l'oeil* check from the Acropolis, our local diner, blank but for a childish drawing of a dick. It got the faculty talking. It got her into Cal Arts after graduation, even if she dropped out after one year because she was just too good and had already attracted a gallery by then.

I was involved in a very different kind of work of course. My instructors called them puppets. Yes, they were human-like figures that I held on my hand and made speak in funny voices, but they were more. They were themselves avatars of the universal forces of transformation that I alluded to earlier. I was in meta-territory, crafting dynamic sculptural reflections on Self, both capital S and lowercase.

(Maybe I should take another pause here because I don't really believe that either. I'm fine now calling them puppets, and I'm proud of the work I did in school. Clarissa was right—I wasn't there by accident. Maybe, though, it had been a surprise. Still I learned to sew, to glue, to carve. I taught myself how to make eyes. I figured out teeth! I hadn't grown up dreaming of becoming an artist, but maybe that's what I'd been doing all along. At school I found my voice, or to be accurate, *voices*, plural.

Of course, it also annoyed some people, conversing with foam rubber. My sister told me it was not healthy. My mom, I think, didn't really understand what was going on. Only Clarissa believed in me.

"Your talent is that you always say the wrong thing at exactly the right time!" she told me. "People need to hear that, even from a puppet.")

I fell asleep in her studio the night she painted *My Abortion*. When I woke the next morning on the threadbare swooning couch we'd bought at the Goodwill, she was gone.

"Did she leave it for us to see?" I asked the oily, wadded up paint rag I found in my hand. The rag nodded.

"*Oui*. But of course," it answered with a French accent. I'd always liked and admired Clarissa, been attracted to her, found her fascinating and intelligent and wanted to please and impress her, but this was the moment I understood that she was genius. "*C'est magnifique*."

I spread the rag out on my lap. It would never talk again.

Seeing her painting on Athena's iPad made it all seem like yesterday.

"Divine, no?" Athena asked. "I'm going to put it over the Urquiola sofa. Give it pride of place. Her gallerist is a complete ball breaker. They think staging is, excuse me, inadequate contextually quote unquote, for her work—but this beauty was floating around the secondary market with a very motivated seller who wants exposure and was happy to loan it to us. The problem is people hear "staging" and of course they think *banal*. Of course they think *whatever*. Most stagers are just glorified rental companies! They wouldn't know what to do with a work of art of this caliber, or any caliber. You can't *rent* a painting like this. Just imagine! Athena is not like them with their trucks full of beige boucle. Their beige rugs."

I'd heard it before. Athena chafed at being associated with something corporate and quotidian, which unfortunately quite a bit of staging was.

"*Hate* beige," I said.

"No, baby, of course sometimes there must be beige, but with them, you've seen one staging, you've seen them all. Go online, look at the listings. I do it the first time every time." She did. She was amazing.

"But these other companies, they underbid me because they have so much cash, so much inventory, entire warehouses full of Chinese knockoffs. Shelves and shelves of accessories from Good Homes."

"HomeGoods," I said.

"Well, Athena doesn't do knockoffs. I am an artist—like her," she said, tapping Clarissa's painting on the iPad. "A buyer with a good eye will walk

through the door and see this painting and need to have it, and Athena will get a little commission. Mmph. Just look at it. Doesn't it get you right here?"

Did she mean my stomach, which, by now, had started a legitimate revolt? I felt the full weight of my shame in my bowels. I always had. My mom got headaches. Leslie broke out in rashes. I wore my guilty heart on my gastrointestinal tract. I grimaced with chili-induced urgency. I needed to use the loo, stat! Athena threw a glance over her shoulder to Rogan just as I was about to make my move and excuse myself. I did everything I could to focus total control on my root chakra, seat of desire and elimination, but I knew I couldn't hold out for long.

"This asshole," she began. I knew I was trapped. "He'll never get it. He doesn't know what a genius she is. And so young. Probably your age. Can you imagine being so smart and successful already? Rogan is just a used car salesman, no better. He's the one with no taste. All that cologne? Less is more, no?"

"Athena!" Rogan called. She rolled her eyes at me and went to meet him in the kitchen. It was all I could do to reach the toilet in time, the one in the third bedroom, meant for live-in help or a problematic mother-in-law, and avoid an accident. It was the most modest of bathrooms, with the worst view, which was still incredible, nonetheless. Thank goodness the builders didn't cheap-out on the interior doors. They were as soundproof as the hard marble and tile chamber was resonant of the sputtering timpani of last night's culinary efforts with its own incriminating echo. I cringed at every explosive release. It had all the doleful catharsis of a confession. I don't think I could have emptied any more of myself before God or any other inquisitor. The chili had done double duty. Afterwards I sat, catatonic. I guess foolishly I had thought I'd never have to think about it all again. Clarissa, I mean. I thought I was safe, past everything. Now it's easy to see that the rift in our friendship was the elusive little hum that had lain behind everything, the tiny pebble in my shoe that I thought I was doing a good job at pretending wasn't there. Maya, the hopeless optimist, that was me—but can you fault me if I held my life up against hers, maybe even without knowing it? She was a rising star. In mine I just escaped shitting my pants.

"You're okay, Maya," I told myself as I sat there in the bathroom. "You're okay, you're okay, you're okay." It was my secret mantra in moments of distress. When I felt myself dissolving, becoming unfamiliar, when the world seemed to spit me out. When I'd done something terrible. You're okay, Maya. You're okay. The past was the past was the past *is* the past. "You're okay. You're okay."

Soon the syllables were absorbed into one another. They became everything. Motive, relief, song. They became breath itself and the picture in my mind of my misdeeds evaporated in the process of respiration. But it wasn't that easy to breathe in the poisoned atmosphere of that guest bathroom. So what if Athena was going to hang Clarissa's painting? So what if we knew each other at one time? So what if she was a star and I was dust? Things fall apart. Life hands you unfavorable outcomes all the time. The key to success is to not get knocked off balance. I was good at that. I'd move forward as easily as water goes down the drain. I caught my breath and leaned over to open the window and endeavored to flush away my toxic shame as gently and discreetly as I could. I pushed the toilet lever once and when nothing happened pushed it again. I heard the muffled clank of some internal apparatus in an obviously empty tank. I pushed it again, and then again.

What followed was one of the worst moments of my life. There should be one of those complicated German nouns that mix up two or three profound experiences at once. Some many-syllabled word that expressed the onrush of reality that brings the understanding of one's body as a vehicle for shameful agony, or agonizing shame. I would have spoken it, instead of my useless mantra.

"You're okay, Maya," I croaked.

I would have invoked anything at that moment, so deep was my desperation. So clear was the picture of myself as something broken and foul. As something helpless. Something impossible. I didn't like to feel that way about myself. I was not a fan of self-pity. I was a believer, but I think at that moment—perhaps for the first time—I had lost all faith, in myself, in the world. I had yet to realize, of course, that more humiliations, more of those complicated nouns describing the total disaster that my life would become, were in store for me.

"Clarissa," I said out loud.

The bathroom stank to high heaven, and my curiosity, now frantically turning the taps on the sink, turned to anxiety and, finally, terror, as I remembered that the water in the bathroom had yet to be connected.

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Chapter 2

The Treadmill

I did the best I could and camouflaged my terrible mistake with one of the contractors' T-shirts that, serendipitously, was waiting there in the cabinet under the sink in a joint compound bucket along with a dust mask, knee pads, and bandana, the last of which I—to my great shame— admit to using in lieu of the absent toilet paper. I lowered the lid and backed out of the bathroom. I walked, shaking, to the next bedroom, where the plumbing was operational, and —violating a pristine, unwrapped, deftly merchandised bar of hand-crafted honeysuckle soap, made by nuns no less—washed my hands, staring at myself in the mirror wishing that I would simply explode and be done for good. You're okay, Maya, I told myself. No! I'm not!

"Maya! Where'd you go? Join us," Athena called from the living room. She and Rogan had been joined by Austin from the brokerage. He was goodlooking, charming, epitomized being on-point: right hair, right shoes, right belt—his belts were always great. He was only a few years older than me and already the head of his own team. *Owned*, didn't *share*, a house in the Pines, he'd announced, and which he was compelled to explain to me was a beach town on Fire Island and "the single gayest place on earth"—at which point I realized he was gay too, of course, after a couple of weeks trying out the idea of him as my new crush. If Rogan was capitalist Id, Austin was Ego, relentlessly self-aware and cultivated. I think at one point he might even have considered me someone who he could potentially be friends with, but then he cooled.

"Hey," he said when I forced myself out of the bathroom. "Cute shoes."

I stayed quiet for the rest of the walk-through. I kept covering my mouth with my hand as waves of shame and disbelief at what I'd done kept washing over me,

as well as the fear it would be discovered. My palms smelled like honeysuckle. It broke my heart.

Thankfully there was no reason for the group to go into the guest bathroom I had nearly destroyed, even if, for one terrifying moment, Rogan strode into its adjoining bedroom to look askance at a sculpture placed on top of a dresser, thirty-eight bronze inches of an undulating clothing zipper, as if torn from the jeans of the *Colossus of Rhodes*.

"It's too big," he said.

"It's supposed to be," Athena answered. Austin winked at me. That seemed to settle it. The three of them went down to the Sales Office to talk money. Since Clarissa's piece and the rest of the art wouldn't come till later that week, Athena sent me home for the day.

I'd never worked for anyone for as long as I had for Athena. In fact, it was the only real job I'd ever had, the closest thing to a career that drew on anything that might be considered an aptitude. Before that I had telemarketed for a while. Then I temped. I worked at a string of coffee bars, each time relearning why I was not a good fit for retail, before being hired again and again. Until Athena, I was untethered. I was of my moment. Like the rest of my generation, not destined for the old ball and chain of a regular job but positioned to join the new decentralized and dislocated workforce. We were on the doorstep of a new era where we could control our days and set our own schedule, tailor our work to our lives, and find deep individual fulfillment. Naturally there was an app for that.

"Welcome to the G-g-gig economy!" That was the wonderful welcome message I discovered in my inbox after registering, and, naturally, downloading GigTurtle, a "game-changing disruptor" of a job search portal that, for a small activation fee, handled *creatives* like me. I'd always wanted to be a noun that derives from an adjective. The Cutes. The Exceptionals. Positions for Remarkables. Careers for Thoughtfuls. How wonderful it was to be recognized for my art, for someone to understand what made my heart beat. You can't spell algorithm without rhythm, after all. Funny, then, how shallow my algorithm turned out to be. How little there was waiting for me.

"You're a people person, Mata," Justin, a career coach there, or a version of one programmed to anticipate my responses, messaged me. I had misspelled my name on my application, and for some reason I was not allowed to change it.

"I know," I told him.

"You make people smile."

"I know I do!" I said proudly. "But I need a job."

"I hear ya. Have you tried Office Assistant Ad Agency Midtown?"

"I am a *creative*, Justin. I need to do something creative. I have great taste!" I told him confidently.

"I hear ya. Have you tried Office Receptionist PR Firm Tribeca?" he asked.

"I think maybe you're not hearing me."

"I hear ya. Hey, Mata, why not try one of the online tutorials?" he asked.

"I took three already. Meeting People, Being Yes, and Curating Success," I said.

"Cool, so my favorite is Being Yes. Have you tried that one, Mata? To sign up for an account, simply go to the home page."

"But I've already got an account. Don't you remember me?" I asked, stung. "Mata?"

That exchange repeated itself in different forms a few times that week. After that I lost heart. I couldn't bring myself to chase another of Justin's humiliating leads. I'd been having a *crise de confidence*. I'd even flirted with the impossible idea of going back home. I needed all the reasons to stay in the city that I could find.

And then, thankfully, I found Athena. I'd answered her ad on the Big Ass Artist's Opportunity Board, an unwieldy and often confusing online spreadsheet with community generated listings for grants and awards and residencies and, most importantly, jobs for artists. It was the very opposite of the app for creatives. Someone was looking for a muralist to decorate the lobby of a bail bondsman's office. Another party sought someone to don a pineapple costume and do American Sign Language jokes at a Polynesian-themed hearing-impaired bat mitzvah. There seemed to be dozens of ads for registrars and just as many for archivists. If you were proficient in sculpting Styrofoam with a hot saw, you were also in luck. It was there that I first heard of staging.

"I like your tattoo," Athena said when I met her for the first time in the swanky blank lobby of a brand-new mid-rise building on Allen Street. New development was encroaching on every neighborhood in Manhattan, even the cramped and legendarily gritty Lower East Side. Former home to punks and junkies and dissidents, it was now another glue trap for models and influencers and fifty-year-old banker bro skateboarders. There were scores of empty apartments anxious to be populated.

"My name, in Sanskrit," I told her, holding out my wrist. "That's not why my parents named me that. In fact, Maya has a lot of meanings. It means generous, it

means love, it means illusion, it means confusion. Maya is a goddess. Maya is the veil that distracts us from the true nature of reality. Maya is drama. Maya is a bumpy night."

Athena smiled. "Let's go upstairs and I can show you what we do," she said.

It was a very grown-up and sophisticated apartment, the kind of which I'd soon see dozens. That had never been my dream, a home, especially a fine one with beautiful quartersawn oak floors and smart light switches and a unit-wide triple filtered water system. I'll admit I was intimidated, at first. I felt as if I had no business being there. (I was right!) Nothing about me would ever belong in a place like that. Athena walked me through the rest of the loft room by room. I don't know where I found the courage, but when we stood in the doorway of the primary bath, I stepped in and rearranged a few things. Moved the brush to hang on the faucet, rolled a towel into a pillow, stacked the soaps so they looked, despite being wrapped, much more casually placed. Like I told you, soaps are my forte.

"She loves her baths," I said.

"You're a bit of a storyteller, aren't you?" Athena asked me.

"I'm sorry!" I said.

"No, tell me," she said. And as we made our way through the apartment, I told her how the candy dish in the breakfast room was a gift from a college lover who'd passed away too young. How the Peter Beard book in the library also meant that he was, naturally, a friend. How the teenager would swing in the family room hammock and dream about swinging in a hammock on a desert isle.

"And this is where she learned she was pregnant," I said, standing by a French telephone table in the dressing room. "The doctor's *just* called."

"Bravo, Maya!" she said. "Life is there between the lines. And you really were good with that soap!"

I respected her, was a little afraid of her, but also liked her. She started hiring me the next week. I was officially a stager. Freelance but pretty regular. That was almost four years ago. And it had all gone smoothly. . . until I saw Clarissa's painting.

With the afternoon ahead of me, I headed to the gym. I needed to clear my head. I needed to channel all my nervous energy somewhere. I needed to run and go nowhere. On the treadmill life is so much easier. Eliminate the destination and the journey becomes that much more rewarding. Plus, there are the rewards of firm thighs and glutes.

The gym was not very crowded, but it was unusually redolent of disinfecting wipes. New signs had popped up everywhere, reminding people to wash their hands, to cover their faces when they coughed or sneezed. I've always prided myself on being very clean, except when I'm not shitting in dry toilets. Oh. My. God. I shit in a dry toilet! I tried to put it out of my head. *You're okay, Maya.*

I changed, picked out a machine, walked on it for half a minute warming up before I stopped, got off, got a disinfecting wipe from a nearby dispenser, cleaned the machine, got back on, and started again. As I fell into a rhythm, my mind began to clear, and I was able to see the afternoon from a more objective distance. It was a problem I could solve. I would go back later. I would tell Athena I forgot something—maybe the key to the service entrance I'd forgotten to return—a believable ruse considering I often left chargers or sunglasses or my debit card behind at job sites, and—after doing a quick search on my phone for the workings of a toilet—I'd use the spare key to the service entrance (given to me for the very reason of my forgotten possessions) and I would fill the largest vessel I could manage and pour water into the toilet, overriding the empty tank and flushing away. . . everything. I would have to remove the T-shirt, but there was a cost to everything. I made a note to pick up a pair of kitchen gloves from the nearby ninety-nine-cent store on Thirty-Fourth Street. I breathed a huge sigh of relief, and before I knew it, I had been running for almost twenty minutes at a pretty good clip. The Tom Tom Club, a favorite band of my parents, clapped along in my ears. I felt good. I had solved a problem. I had caused it, of course, but then I had dispatched it, or would, with cleverness and expediency. I picked up the pace. The Buzzcocks started next. Another one from my dad's playlist. *What do I get?* they asked in driving post-punk nervousness.

I glanced up at the TV screens above the bank of cardio machines. There were music videos, an imitation courtroom presided over by a comedian, five over-accessorized women on white sofas discussing some apparent celebrity misbehavior at a "super exclusive" party that was widely documented on social media in real time, and on the screen directly above my treadmill the news was running. A pair of newscasters, a youngish man with thoughtfully disarranged gray hair and an ageless symmetrical blond, called our attention with conspicuously dignified seriousness to some grainy cellphone footage. I saw a pickup truck swerve. I saw a man chased, dodging bullets. I saw him fall. The crawling text across the bottom of the screen said it had all happened months earlier and nothing had been done, until someone leaked this video. Did that mean someone

knew and said nothing? What kind of awful secret was that to keep? It reminded me of my own, though mine—disabling as it had been—was trivial in comparison. I lied to Clarissa, but it wasn't really a matter of life and death. I was the same as millions of other young women. I was safe. I was alive. Shoot, I was even exercising. Although I did feel a funny buzzing in my head and suddenly understood that I'd never be able to pull off my coverup in the bathroom. Likely, I'd already been discovered. Rogan would want me annihilated. Austin would think me a member of some lower species. Athena's disappointment would be too much to bear. I'd get fired. Then who would I talk to?

I tried not to think of any of it. Instead, I lost my concentration, and my footing. My temple hit the spinning belt before I even knew I was on my way down. I was immediately shot off the treadmill, backwards, but not before my right foot, with a blinding conflagration of pain, caught on the side rail. On the floor curled in agony, I looked up and saw the man's face on the screen. His death played again and again in silence.

"You're okay Maya," I said even though I knew I wasn't. Pain, shame, and—I understood—grief, of which I had little experience, had punctuated that veil of illusion. The TV ran the footage one more time. Then there was an advertisement for air freshener. A housewife sprayed it in her bathroom. Bergamot.

I cried.

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Chapter 3

The Hospital

They tried to get me to sign something, a waiver of sorts, but I waved it off and waited for a Lyft to take me to the emergency room. An ambulance would be too much on my freelancer's insurance. Everything was too much on my freelancer's insurance. I would have preferred to arrive sirens screaming, my gurney banged urgently through swinging metal doors as a team of caregivers surrounded me, snapping into action, waving tubes and stethoscopes and clipboards and enormous spurting syringes, but I just hobbled in, noticed by no one in my faded fuchsia Lululemon and an artfully pre-distressed faux-vintage rock T-shirt, ripe with forty-two minutes' worth of sweat. At the triage window I traded Staci-Ann—in R2-D2 scrubs—my insurance card for an ice pack. Not long after, Pierre the orderly watched as I stood up painfully and sat myself down in the wheelchair before he delivered me, wordlessly, to an open bed in a curtained area where he watched me repeat the painful relocation in reverse, then left, again without a word. Not long after that, another nurse appeared. This one had enormous biceps and an illegible calligraphic tattoo on one of them. He stuck an electronic thermometer in my mouth and a blood pressure cuff on my arm and a pulse-ox sensor on my fingertip and interrogated me about fevers and coughs. Chest pain. Had I traveled to Asia? To Europe?

They seemed strange questions to ask in an emergency room. The truth was, I'd love to travel more. I shook my head. "No, but Sri Lanka is on my bucket list," I said, though with the thermometer under my tongue it came out like "mucket." Like Pierre, he left saying nothing.

A doctor came, a small and tired-looking woman in her forties, the pockets of her lab coat filled with papers, her hair a nest of split ends, her lips horribly dry. She asked me all the same questions the nurse had. She touched and hurt me in

the same way and left. The nurse returned with a big yellow pill, watched me swallow it, made a notation on the computer and, pulling the curtains closed around my bed with a skillful snap, told me radiology would pick me up soon.

It was not soon. I grew lonely and despondent in my solitude, in my little Bedouin tent, the kind Leslie and I used to make with bedsheets. We'd tuck the corner into our dresser drawer, drape them over the back of chairs, line the floor with pillows and play at being Lawrence of Arabia, not that we knew who on earth he was, only that our dad had mentioned him and he sounded exotic and strange, despite a typical name—it was Larry after all—and Arabia was a distant and mysterious land. Leslie always grew impatient with make-believe, however. Her games were always competitive. Jacks, fiercely prosecuted jump rope contests, hand after hand of blackjack on the coffee table.

Abandoned in my encampment, I did my best to let myself be washed away by the colored light filtering through my emergency room tent. But the throbbing of my ankle, the anonymous footsteps and rattle of carts, gentle beeps everywhere, plaintive, intoxicated voices—was *everyone* on their phones?—kept pulling me back. The light was dull and blue. The curtains a colorless dun that matched the paint and the linoleum. I was nothing but pain and a steadily increasing sense of hopelessness. My brain was not my own. It was stuck in a loop and at the top of the loop I fell off the treadmill, then at the bottom that terrible clanking in the empty toilet tank. It was a nauseating cycle that erased everything before shoving it back in my face. *You're okay, Maya*. Oh no I wasn't. I dug my phone out of my bag and called home.

"I've fallen and I can't get up!" I said, crying, when my mother answered. After a few sobbing moments, I managed to convey a more detailed account of my accident at the gym.

"Oh dear, this is why I worry about you being alone," she said.

"She likes being alone," Leslie said.

My mother had me on speaker phone. Leslie seemed to feel that my life in the city was nothing more than one long embarrassing fool's errand, filled with bad choices, pretentious people, and unseemly abasement in the pursuit of advancement. I also understood I was often the most interesting thing in her life. I stopped crying and switched tack.

"I'm doing fine," I told them cheerily. "Just great. And it's just a sprain, probably. I shouldn't have called."

"You call every day," Leslie said.

"You're practically the only person Leslie talks to."

"Mom," my sister said. Leslie, along with her husband, Doug, lived with my parents. They were saving money. They were building a life, slowly.

"We just want you to be happy, Hon," my mother reminded me.

"I am!" I said.

"That's *won*-derful," my mother said. How I love that sing-song of her voice, even if I could detect among that maternalistic melody an alien inflection, a little lilt that seemed to say "Well, I hope so" or "Yeah, are you totally sure about that?" She was ever asking that of Leslie and me growing up: Explain yourself. Why did you draw on your bedroom walls? Explain yourself. Why did you burn the face off Leslie's Barbie doll with a cigarette lighter? Explain yourself. When Leslie urinated into a sandwich baggie so the two of us could send it, slingshot style, over the back fence at Louis Delmonico's house: Explain yourselves.

The questions were different now. Why are you struggling in a job that doesn't nearly pay enough money? Why don't you have a boyfriend? Why aren't you an artist anymore after making us talk to your puppets for years?

"Don't you get it?" Leslie practically hollered at me. She could hear the subtext in the sing-song too. "She worries about you!"

"You don't have to worry about me," I said, grimacing.

"You sound like shit," Leslie said.

"Leslie, please," my mother said.

"It's always some crazy story with her, Mom."

"That's life in the big city, Sis," I said. "Adventure. Excitement. All the time." Even in my agony I didn't want to give her the advantage.

"That's right. That's life in the big city," my mom agreed, excited.

"No, it's not! That's life as a klutz on the treadmill," Leslie said.

"A man died!" I said, a little too loudly.

"What, Honey?" my mom asked, concerned.

"I go to the gym after work. I keep my days full and productive. I have aspirations," I said. "Have you ever heard the expression, 'Being Yes'?"

"You're living in a dream world," Leslie told me. "The way you go on about your job like you're God art-directing the universe."

"Not the universe, no," I said.

"All you do is help people who already have so much more than you. Like there's so much at stake with a bunch of fucking *demitasse* cups!" Leslie shouted.

"Leslie!" my mother said.

"Cups matter," I told Leslie. "Having pride in one's work matters. Having pride in one's life. Being in control of one's life."

"That's right," my mother agreed.

I really wished Leslie could actually see what I do. I sent her pictures of our stagings and described the stories behind them: Moroccan princesses, the inventor of vegan cheese, the widower who climbed the seven tallest mountains in the world—but it fell on deaf ears. I thought if she could see one of these apartments, if she could just visit the penthouse Athena and I were working on, I knew she'd understand why it mattered so much to me. I'll admit we'd grown into our own persons, so sometimes my sister and I kept one another at arm's length, but it's important to be known by those we love.

"Supporting oneself and living on one's own," I added, perhaps hitting below the belt. Growing up, Leslie had griped about our measly little town, our sad little middle-class house and lifestyle and how she was going to get the hell out of Dodge as soon as she could, but instead she found herself—no, I think she *led* herself—right to where she'd always been and where she'd always wanted to be: at home with a pale pliant pastry for a husband. It's she who has suffered under the delusion.

"This is different," Leslie insisted. "You're obsessed."

"I'm a professional," I answered calmly, I'm proud to say. Coolly. Just as Athena would. She is the picture of unruffled. No one ruffles *her*.

"You make dollhouses for the obscenely rich," she said.

That was a low blow. But maybe it was true.

"And you're a basement dwelling *sponger*," I said to Leslie.

"Maya!" My mother gasped.

"You're not famous!" Leslie said. "You're not whatshername, that girl from art school."

"Clarissa," I said, knocked back, reminded of her.

"Whatever. Honestly, Sis, I'm worried about you," Leslie said.

"Clarissa," I said again, barely a whisper.

"What was that dear?" my mother asked.

It was at that moment the wonderful yellow pill, that sweet ovoid canary, took effect. How nicely it untied the knot growing inside me. How swiftly it upended the gravity dragging my heart down. I guess we need yet another meaty noun for that moment of clarity granted by a narcotic analgesic, when it offers us a glimpse of an unsullied future and regret-free past. When it shows us in that

perfect zen way the sacredness of now, the throbbing Damascene goodness of the instant we are in. I laughed. Oh, how I laughed and laughed, until the nurse with the tattooed bicep stuck his head in to make sure I was alright.

"I'm on the phone with my mother," I whispered to him theatrically before laughing again. Oh, I felt so good!

"You're bizarre," Leslie said. "You're living in make-believe."

My mother laughed along with me. "Oh, Leslie, she's always done that!"

After I hung up, I was wheeled into the radiology salon where a man positioned my ballooned ankle on a cold table beneath the funny snout of the X-ray machine. His name was Angel, and he was going to help me look inside myself. I smiled at him.

"Feeling good, huh?" he asked before hiding behind a partition and blasting me with radiation.

"Divine," I said in my best Hedy Lamarr. (I idolized Hedy Lamarr. *Old* Hollywood, you know? As in: *They don't make 'em like that anymore*.)

Afterwards I waited in the cold hallway for silent Pierre who wheeled me back to the ER. Under the influence of the canary, it had become a place of whispery murmurs behind fluttering curtains. Everything was putty and pastel, a world made of fondant. I was whipped lighter than air. I floated on a cloud of peaceful yellow plumage. Canaries and angels and all sorts of feathered beings would take care of me from now on. I'd never fall again, that is if there still was such a thing as gravity. Maybe I would just roll out of bed and find out. . . but my doctor returned. She and I should go for a spa day, I decided. In fact, I heard myself say that.

"Spa day."

She gave me a weird look. "The good news is nothing is broken. Nothing fractured."

She was wrong, of course. There were tiny fissures all over the world. And things were definitely broken. How else could an innocent man be shot down while jogging? Of course, all that was vague and distant at the moment, aloft on my painkillers. They were like the wet plaster my dad smoothed over the cracks in our house growing up. According to him, the house was forever settling. Tiny lines formed in the corners of the living room, my parents' bedroom. Like the pencil marks on the kitchen doorway cataloguing our height, they grew longer by the years, while other ones sprang into being spontaneously. Often when she was

angry at Leslie and me, my mother swore they formed because we stomped around the house in the most unladylike ways.

"Smooth," I said to Doctor Split Ends. She gave me a brief look of concern but calculated that I was not worth calling in a psych consult.

As far as my ankle, I just had a severe sprain, with some bad swelling and awful pain, but for that I was given a prescription for an entire bottle of those same wonderful yellow tablets—a whole flock of canaries—as well as a boot, all foam rubber and plastic.

"To keep you stable," the good doctor explained. I couldn't help but laugh, and then I couldn't stop. Me? Stable? I wanted to roar. Perhaps I could see her reconsider that psych consult before she strapped my foot into the boot with that satisfying Velcro crunch.

"I'm as well-packed as a mail-order pineapple," I said when Staci-Ann appeared at the foot of my bed to discharge me.

"Maya, where's your ride?" she asked.

Where indeed? In New York almost no one has a car. Bicycles there are by the thousands, but you can't get home, booted and lame, on a dinged-up Schwinn. Staci-Ann told me I had to be accompanied. It wouldn't do to be released to the care of an anonymous cabbie.

"It will have to be Craig!" I said.

I wasn't a virgin when Craig and I met in art school, but I might as well have been. What are the mechanics after all? Technical matters. Yes, driving a car involves turning the key, but really, it's everything that comes after that's important. Intimacy is the real issue. Body hair, odors, softness and hardness, accepting it all and getting to know one another. A proud "gamer," he was studying digital design, while I bounced from sculpture to textile arts, to theater design, and back. We came together in the most typical college way: We lived in the same dorm. So many college relationships seem to be like that, matters of convenience. Right time, right place sort of thing. We kept winding up at parties with one another, kept walking one another home.

Our relationship did not survive college, however. There was no abrupt end. No teary telephone split a couple of weeks after commencement. It simply fell into disuse and crumbled as those kinds of unions, for all their sticky closeness, do. Even though we both relocated to New York just a few neighborhoods away from one another, there was always something pulling us in different directions—

jobs, parties, new friends. We chatted online, sometimes saw one another at afterwork gatherings of the old school gang, until that too dwindled away.

It was a tough time for me. I let other friendships fade too, not that there were many, but of course the most important was Clarissa. Her star was already rising. She was on the tip of everybody's tongue. "Weren't you guys tight?" alums inevitably asked me, when I had no first-person updates on her ascendance. Then followed a polite question or two about me, about my art. "Are you still making puppets?" But I knew the real question was, "What happened to *you*, Maya?"

After I signed the lease in Sunnyside, I posted pictures of my empty, new, if slightly crooked home. I didn't receive a single like, but I did, to my surprise, receive an offer from Craig to help me move. Craig has never been athletic nor particularly strong nor very motivated, for that matter, except by the few serious obsessions he has: the news cycle, his incompetent supervisors at work, dystopian science fiction. Moving futons and dressers is not his forte. It wasn't long into the afternoon of the move before he'd hurt his back. Once my mattress was on the floor, the U-Haul securely locked outside, I offered him a backrub. I'm sure he had an erection from the moment I touched his neck, to say nothing of removing his shirt. Sweaty familiarity took over after that. Convenience reared its ugly head once again. It would challenge my solitude, which to my surprise, I'd grown to cherish and protect fiercely, but I was willing to make the sacrifice. It's not like we were married, just Friends With Benefits, the way, say, regular café visits grant you that eleventh drink free after you pay for ten. After that, our hook-ups happened semi-regularly, usually after dinner, whether as a pretense or subconscious aphrodisiac, I don't know. Ethiopian, Cuban, artisanal pizza, Greek salads, we are adventurous eaters of the bargain sort. Then it's usually back to my apartment. . . and sex. It never lasts long. That's never been the point. Craig is kind too, I should add. And, in his way, he knows me, even as well as my sister and parents do, if in a different way. There are things I can share with him and vice versa. I know all his insecurities. "Every hair I lose on my head seems to wind up growing on my back," he told me once, softly.

It was true that Craig and I didn't eat dinner together as much, though when we did there was still sex afterwards. We recognized each other's rhythms, but some space had grown between us. Our frequency was different but there remained something else, unchanged. I knew I could call him. I knew he'd come.

And sure enough, soon there was Craig on the other side of the emergency room door, face in his phone, khakis sagging, hair in need of good shampoo,

confused as to why I wasn't immediately visible. I was still in a wheelchair with Pierre, silent, by my side.

Here I am, I said, just as silently. I believed, perhaps under the influence of that wonderful yellow painkiller, that sweet canary, that I'd developed the ability to project my thoughts like that. *Come to me*, I said. I knew I'd have to go to him instead. I'd have to switch my location from Emergency to Waiting. It's no mistake then that a doorway is also called a threshold, the level at which something is achieved. It sets a standard for everything that follows.

"The most important thing we design is what's behind the front door," Athena told me. "Right away it must say, 'You've arrived.'"

Pierre was kind enough to let me press the big silver button to activate the swinging doors, the one with the blue wheelchair icon.

"Your wife," Pierre said to Craig, surprising him with my discharge papers. Craig looked up, confused, and then saw me, musty in stained leggings and repro Whitesnake shirt, foot extended and strapped into that plastic moon boot. He'd never seemed so dismayed in his life.

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Chapter 4

Dinner, Later

I told Craig I was going to buy him dinner to express my gratitude, but first we had to go to the pharmacy a block from the hospital to fill my prescription for those yellow canaries. I didn't really need another but, as directed, I took one with food this time. Tibetan. Delicious stews, and momo, and tea conveniently right next to the drugstore.

"You look good," Craig told me as we sat down. "Have you been working out?"

Despite my episode of catastrophic klutziness, I'd once been, in fact, an athlete. At my dad's urging I joined my high school volleyball team. I got to wear shorts and a ponytail and clap a lot at my teammates whom I loved like sisters. It was terribly hard work, but it brought out something in me. I was a fierce and vocal competitor, if second string, charged up by the sudden changes in my body. I'd moved quickly from child to adolescent without much of an awkward phase in between. My dad played college hoops himself. He and Leslie scrimmaged all the time, until she switched to mixed martial arts, at which she'd gotten quite proficient and sometimes competed. Her marital bedroom in the basement of our parents' house was adorned with her many ribbons and medals and photos of her at her matches, barefoot and bloodied and beaming.

At art school though, I'd let sports go, but I exercised for my own satisfaction. I ran and swam and did Pilates and light strength training at the field house. I had lots of excess energy. I guess I still do.

"Whatever you are doing you must tell me!" Athena insisted the day I met her. "You are like a gazelle. But also, that color on you is terrible. It's okay, New York is filled with beautiful people who have no idea how to dress. It's why everyone wears black, but, well, if it works it works."

She hired me and I went right out and bought black leggings, black jeans, black blouses, boots and tees. One day a listings agent mistook us, honestly or not, for sisters. Athena kissed me. I thought she'd cry.

"It's easy for you, beautiful girl. For now."

I shrugged at Craig. Nothing felt easy. I stared dolefully at my momo. The first canary was wearing off. The second one hadn't started to kick in. Watching Craig's cheeks as he chewed the last of his dumplings, his lips as they pressed to a tall glass bottle of incongruously Mexican Coke, it all became suddenly clear. I didn't know how to be in the world without losing myself in the process. Without pretending, looking away, falling on my ass. . . or my ankle. I didn't know what I thought. I didn't know what I was. But Craig would know, wouldn't he?

"Hey, you've barely touched your rice," he said before I could ask him, as ridiculous as that would have been. "You okay?" he asked. "I mean, in general."

I smiled. "Pills, stomach," I said. I was suddenly very tired, but I smiled. Craig went back to his meal. He ate heartily. He wears a beard like most men his age in Brooklyn, and much of his meal winds up there. He is always patting away with his napkin, absorbed by his food, eyes closed. He was a creature of the senses, as much as evidence might suggest otherwise. He owned less than half a dozen body products from teeth to toes. Sometimes I thought that if he could get away with one product to clean and soften and condition and polish and trim his entire body, he would. That type of efficiency can be an attractive trait in a man. No frippery, right? Solidity. Of course, it could be boring sometimes. Just ask Leslie. Her husband was so plain he was almost invisible. But maybe she was right. Maybe I was a fool, living in make-believe. By day I was just a delirious handmaid to the uber-rich, convincing myself that I was a storyteller, at night sharing cheap meals with my shlubby college ex-boyfriend. The easy fuck. A polyester security blanket.

"This is what happens when you hit the gym," he said, alluding to my ankle.

"You're lucky, you don't really need to," I told him. Physical exercise, even the point of it, confused him. I liked him the way he was, soft, in places. "You have a natural physique."

"That doesn't mean anything," he said.

"I astounded myself today," I said.

"Okay. That's good, right?" he asked.

"Not today it wasn't. I did something. I let something happen. So much

happened, really."

"You fell, it was an accident," he said.

"Haven't you heard? There are no accidents!" I said.

"Yes, there are. There are accidents all the time," he said.

"Do you ever think sometimes that you're just going to keep making the same mistake over and over?" I asked.

Craig scanned himself as if checking for crumbs. "No," he said.

"Maybe that's not what I mean."

We were quiet again. I knew he didn't like when I did this, offer something and then pull it back. String him along with my anxieties. Involve him, but only halfway. Wow, I was really feeling bad.

"What's on your mind?" he asked.

"At the gym, the television. . . I looked away. I shouldn't have. I left something unfinished in my head—so no surprise it kept spinning off on its own and knocked me down," I said, and stared down at my plate.

"Maybe you don't always need to try so hard, Maya," he said.

I would have been angry at such a suggestion—I would have been stung, humiliated—but for the second time that day the canary took flight. It didn't matter what thoughts I had in my head. Everything was suddenly and equally good. All facts, whether denied or acknowledged, were acceptable. I reached across the table and took Craig's hand. He looked at it for a moment, and I felt the slightest flinch as if he was going to pull away, but he relaxed and looked at me, smiling again. I knew he thought he had reached me. That he had soothed me.

"What do you think of this news coming out of Wuhan?" he asked. The news cycle was his obsession number one.

"Wuhan? Is that in Tibet?" I asked.

"China," he said a little judgmentally.

"What news?" I asked.

"Um, the big bad virus that everyone's talking about? No? Might be nothing, might be the end of the world?" he said.

Stoned, I sang. "Some viruses have all the luck. Some viruses have all the pain. Some viruses do nothing but forget. Some viruses do nothing but complain."

It annoyed him when I was so intentionally unserious. It was one of the things that drove us apart. Sometimes he made me feel insubstantial. Other times

I thought him pompous. We weren't always aligned. What mattered was that we forgave one another.

"Tell me more about this virus," I said.

"Really?" he asked.

"Why not? It might be our last chance."

"Well, it's almost like the whole thing is defined by how much we don't know," he began. "We're not entirely sure how it's transmitted. What systems it attacks, although it looks respiratory. We don't know where it comes from, but one plausible idea is these wet markets in China. We don't know how many people are sick. We don't know how many have died."

"Why?" I asked.

"Why what?" he asked.

"Why don't we know?"

"Because the knowledge has yet to come to us," he said. "Because it's so new."

"Sure, because as a culture we are addicted to what's new," I said, not entirely sure why I had. I was wary of sentences that contain the word *culture*, but I was feeling such affection for Craig. His excitement was endearing. I wanted to at least give him that kind of attention. I could see he appreciated it. What did it matter if we didn't have sex? We could intercourse with our intellects. He was so enthusiastically connected to the world, while I tended to turn inward, to find quiet moments of beauty. To tailor experiences on a human scale. Craig's perspective was always global. He was well invested in the big picture foolishness that infected humanity. It was a relief for me, too, to not think about the relatively small disasters that had struck today. I should count myself lucky that I'd gotten away with what I did. I could leave it all in the past. My ankle would heal in just a couple of weeks if I was careful with it.

"I'm all for it," I said. "New, new, new!" I sang. The canaries had erased the past and offered me a present moment with fields cleared. Someone else had done that terrible thing. Someone else had lost control. Someone else had turned away. Someone else had fallen. I was a creature of Now. Craig gave me a funny look and was about to say something else when my phone rang. Athena's name flashed on the screen. I stared at it, a little confused.

"She's so cool," I told Craig.

"Do you need to answer that?" Craig asked.

"Right," I laughed. "Hello, you have Maya."

"Maya, we must be very careful with these contractors!" Athena said as soon

as I answered.

"Hey," I said.

"Do you hear me?" she asked.

"Yes, be careful, we must. Young Jedi," I giggled. Craig cocked his head at me. Sometimes I think we communicated best without words, but in those instances, we only had about a half dozen things we could say. "You're cute!" or "Really?" or "Again? Okay!" This particular head-tilt seemed to say, "Isn't she your boss?"

"One of them," Athena said, "It's hard to even say, one of the illegals I assume, defecated in the guest bathroom."

I sat up quickly, groaning with sharp pain as I did.

"Exactly. It's terrible, isn't it? Can you believe some people?" she asked.

Some people. Which people? Me people. I was some people who didn't care. I was some people with no self-control. I wanted to hide. I wanted to disappear.

"Maya, what is it?" Craig asked quietly, disturbed by my panic-stricken face.

"I cannot," I said as the canary's buffer withered under the blast of shame that now hit me. I was no longer high. I just felt disoriented, nauseous, foggy and afraid. "So they don't know who?" I asked, terrified of the answer.

"No. I mean, who could even tell the difference? But Rogan was livid! It was quite something to see. The fusspot. I told him we'd need to have an exorcism. Now tomorrow I need you to find those *demitasse* cups before you come in."

"Actually, funny. . . I fell," I said.

She didn't hear me.

"I want to get the kitchen done so we can concentrate on the art. Aren't you excited I scored that painting?" she said. "Oh, there's Rogan beeping in. Can you believe someone calling at this hour? He's such a pain in my ass. Got to go."

She hung up and I stared at my phone.

"Are you okay?" Craig asked.

"Do you think I'm lost in make-believe?" I asked him. He looked at me, mouth full, mid-chew, and tipped his head sympathetically, but I could tell he hadn't understood the question or was trying to appear that way.

"Let's get you home. Do you need another pill?" he asked.

"It wouldn't hurt," I said.

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Chapter 5

An Existential Crisis, If You Can Believe It

From the beginning, Athena was impressed by how dogged I could be. She insists on having only what no one else does and she knows I'm a bulldog. I'd do the legwork it takes to find that perfect undiscovered thing and, indeed, I was making my way towards those demitasse cups at a steady clip, despite my boot. I wasn't having much luck finding what I needed, however, and it was starting to make me feel bad. I'd already gone to a half dozen of my reliable sources. Stores filled with beautiful things, treasures from the East, from the desert, from clever artisans in Brooklyn. Blown glass and ceramic and spun metals. I saw treasures shaped like insects, like computer components, like molecules or the faces of Greek gods. I saw tea pots that looked like doves in flight. I saw a desk carved from a single piece of carbon. But no demitasse cups. On top of it my ankle was beginning to ache again. I had held off as long as I could before taking another pill. I had woken full of optimism, determined to push through the terrible events of the day before, to not let the humiliations accumulate, and to face the world clear and unimpaired, and I'd been doing a great job, But now I was in agony. I got myself to Soho to Roman and Williams Guild, a restaurant with a store attached or, depending on which door you enter—Canal Street or Howard—a store with a restaurant attached. The distinction doesn't matter. One eats and drinks and sits and sips and smiles on the very same merchandise that is for sale. Forks and napkins and flowers and water glasses, everything is available. It is welcoming and abundant. For the last project, Athena and I had purchased from them an adorable Nicaraguan molé pot for one of the bedside tables.

With my ankle now pulsing, I sat down on a Cameroonian birthing stool to rest for a moment and help myself to my first canary of the day. I was feeling bad again. Do you know how pain transforms the mind? It opens doors. It reveals

truths. It shows us who we really are. And I apparently am the kind of person who, when the pain is too much—when it aligns with germs of self-doubt and embarrassment, after falling off a treadmill—rises from that birthing stool and curls my fragile, feeble self into a forty-thousand-dollar live edge California King-size bed in the middle of a store in Manhattan without anyone even noticing. . . because I guess on top of being pathetic I am also unnoticeable. Granted there were so many pillows and such a plush duvet that I found a place where I could be invisible for a while. Who'd be able to see me anyway? I had melted away to a dark place immune to eyes. I suddenly felt the strain of so much notice upon me, the strain of being known about. The Japanese *raku*, the Malawian linens, the quietly powerful table-top iron sculptures from a Belfast women's collective, were all laid bare for what they really were. Everything was so much smoke and ash. I was having a panic attack, a not-so-mild freak-out, an existential crisis, if you can believe it. Worse, a moment of fucking clarity! I had fallen like an imbecile at a gym I really had no business pretending I could afford, looking away when I should have watched and learned and known. Do you know what dedication it takes to run? Do you know how you can shape yourself through discipline, how you can reshape the form you'd been given, how you can own yourself, finally? How simple it is and yet so challenging? Why should that not be enough to guarantee you safe passage? Why is that honorable act of self-respect not enough to protect you from your fellow man? Had I never really seen the world before? So what if I burned down a friendship out of cowardice? A man was dead!

I needed to hide, to disappear, and, thankfully, the richly layered visual merchandising let me do just that. I needed to be remade. The self I found myself to be was corrupt and crumbling. If only there was a way for me to reboot. If only we could shut it all down, just for a moment.

Somehow, I actually managed nearly twenty undetected minutes in that bed before my phone rang. Calypso music. Loud. The night before, a little stoned, I'd changed over my ringer from a near silent buzz to that island melody. I'd been testing one ringtone after another—Beethoven's Fifth, a Dixieland rag, dance techno—but they didn't have it in them. Then I heard the island beat and knew it was mine.

"You must go," Athena told me when I answered. The connection was bad, but then again, every connection was bad. Life was entropy. It was interference and static and fuzz and muck in the machinery. The world was chaos and misery

and somehow, I was an agent of all of it, even if I was no better than lint in the blankets. "Are you alright?" she asked. "You sound like you're sleeping."

"Ma'am?" I heard a young man, obviously a sales associate, ask me through the stack of sumptuous Panamanian bedclothes.

"Everything is bullshit," I told Athena. "I'm not what I thought I was. I don't think any of us are. I'm not sure any of us are anything at all."

"Ma'am, is everything alright? Can I answer any questions for you about the bed? It's Dalbergia wood, from Costa Rica," the young man said. I peeked out from under the covers. I saw his knees. I saw his stylish white sneakers on the rugged wide-plank floor. It broke my heart.

"Maya, forget the cups for now," Athena told me. "You have to go to Sunset Park. To Josiah's studio. He never signs his contract till the last goddamn minute, and Rogan wants it before he gets on the helicopter."

"A helicopter!" I sobbed.

"Ma'am?"

Josiah Platt, whom I'd secretly nicknamed The Handsome Painter, was one of our regular artists. Athena had seen a painting of his in a restaurant near her house upstate, and when she'd inquired after it, she'd discovered Josiah and she were friends of friends of friends, because that's how it was with Josiah, he knew almost everyone almost well, important people especially, even if he wasn't exactly important himself. I admit I felt a little thrill each time he showed up on a job site. Josiah was rakish and charming. He wore untucked chambray shirts and unpretentious spicy masculine fragrance. He had the Old-World whiff of gigolo about him but, as his well-worn motorcycle boots broadcast, was clearly his own man. He liked to personally deliver his work, usually as late in the project as possible. I think he liked to see where he stood, what other artists he was hung with, how big and expensive the apartments were, how good of a job Athena had done. He and Athena smiled at each other all the time, almost as if daring the other one to be the first to stop. I'll admit I flirted with him a little, even if each time he forgot who I was.

"Was your hair different?" he'd ask, winning me over again each time with his smile and double clutch handshake, repeating back my name as if for the first time. "Maya, I'm so glad to know you."

But what Athena was asking was impossible. I burrowed deeper into the bed. Leslie was right. I was playing with dollhouses. I did live in make-believe. I had no idea what the real world was like. I had nothing at stake. I was in hiding, not just

at this but at every other moment. Oh, I tell you, I felt my heart breaking over and over again even if I knew it didn't make a damn bit of difference to anyone else. Even if I didn't make any difference either. In the distance I heard a rising crescendo of forks against plates, muffled conversation, the scraping of repurposed oak library chairs against repurposed Amish barnwood floors. It was lunchtime already.

"Ma'am, could you stand up?" the salesman asked, decidedly less friendly this time. No, I couldn't. I absolutely could not.

"Maya, are you there?" Athena asked.

"I can't do it," I said. "So, I guess I quit." I sobbed again when I heard myself say it.

"I can't hear you," she said. "You sound like you're under the covers."

I was. I was in so deep. I needed to tell her I was drowning. I needed to tell her that I was crumbling. I needed to tell her that I was ready to cut my foot off at the ankle with one of those Japanese *dozuki* saws displayed with the root sculptures on the winepress that had been converted to a coffee table. I needed to ask her why this bed cost forty thousand dollars when my tears were still a dime a dozen, or why teenagers killed themselves or joggers were shot-gunned on beautiful mornings. But I knew there'd be no point.

And then, like a heavy breeze sweetened with lemon and sugar, I felt the canary's wing brush my face. The world tipped towards the sun. I wasn't lost or fake or flat or hollow. All the gray gravity fell away. I was airborne. I rose from the bed, removing some embroidered napkins that, from static electricity, had stuck to my shoulders and head.

"That bed is really nice," I told the scruffily gelled salesman. "But everything we're doing is so much more. . ." I made a gesture with my eyes and hand, a little bit of shoulder to say "better," "different," "easier." That we weren't going to try too hard. That we didn't have to. That we were lucky. We had been given so much. "But really, Dalbergia wood? What the F is that?"

I strode off towards a studiously casual ziggurat of antique books with their covers and spines torn off, rediscovering my phone in my hand as I did.

"I'll leave right now," I told Athena. "It'll be great."

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Chapter 6

The Handsome Painter

Even underground, on the long trek from one borough to the next among the grime and noise and clatter, I floated. The R-train roared like a chorus of sooty angels, divine and winged just like those wonderful canaries! Oh, everything was uplifting! It was a tunnel of love.

I emerged at Thirty-Sixth Street in Brooklyn and walked in the wrong direction, winding up a few hundred yards inside Green-Wood Cemetery before I realized what I was doing. It was the end of winter. I had no shadow among the gray monuments. In the breeze I could feel the first intimations of Spring still almost a month away. I thought I might be in heaven. I heard lovely singing coming from somewhere among the stately old trees and winding, crooked paths, accompanied by a beautiful, complicated guitar. It was a doleful Mariachi ballad. I saw a cluster of pink balloons poking out from behind a Greek temple. When I got closer, I saw the bright ruffles of fancy satin dresses and tuxedos. There were proud cowboy hats and pointy boots. Two gold helium balloons, the numerals 1 and 3, bounced in the sunshine. That chorus of beautiful voices was someone's funeral, someone young and likely bilingual. There is always beauty in sadness, but that's no surprise. It was a cemetery, but it was a garden, a celebration of life.

* * *

The day I brought Clarissa to the clinic for her abortion there were two lone protestors outside holding up mock tombstones.

"Get a life," Clarissa told them. She was rarely angry, but this set her off. "The worst is that they think someone talked me into this," she said. "That I'm not the one directing my life. All this bullshit about liberal people condescending to conservatives. Do they ever consider how condescending it is to assume we're just faking all this? All our concern for other people, that's it's just performance? How

we're led astray by a welfare check, have extra children just to get an extra few hundred a month? Meanwhile they can write off all their crazy by calling it the will of God."

While she was inside the exam room I wondered if I was directing my life. I knew I wanted to, but it didn't feel like it. The only thing I managed to do was keep secrets. I wanted to tell Clarissa everything. About my own abortion. About all the stupid things I was afraid of. I wanted to tell her how much I loved and admired her. I wanted to ask her if she thought it was possible that she and I might ever have something in common. That we might actually share something. She would have just told me that we already shared tons of stuff, and I wouldn't know what it was I was trying to say.

"I also had them give me a prescription," Clarissa told me on the bus back to school. She meant the Pill. "You're the smart one," she said.

The Mariachi melodies there in the cemetery entered me in the same way. It's the horn that makes it so poignant, isn't it? Despite how beaten down I felt in that ridiculously expensive bed earlier that morning, I now felt strong and powerful. I would not quit my job. I think I remember saying something to Athena about that. I would square my shoulders and get to it. Tell me that doesn't show real moxie! I raised my arms in the air, as I do when I'm really letting loose, and tried a few quick Mariachi steps, clapping my hands, my boot noisy on the cobbled paths.

"Ayy-ayy-y!" I cheered.

What a funny thing an echo is. A sycophant—always a step behind—it casts everything into sharper awareness by repeating it back. Maybe it wasn't exactly appropriate to dance and holler in a cemetery, but isn't a Mariachi band just as provocative? Just as far outside the realm of the expected? Just as beautiful for that very reason? Still, I didn't like the look I got from a nearby groundskeeper, so I left the cemetery and walked to Josiah's studio a few blocks away in Industry City.

Doesn't that have a great ring to it? It's not really a city of course, just a development of gigantic warehouses and factories along the waterfront of the Lower Harbor, dating back to when there was still enough shipping to keep them busy, made big enough to accommodate railroad cars to carry their cargo across this country. They'd been converted in recent years to lofts and workshops making and selling more modern wonders, like sustainable terrazzo and bespoke vegan cannelloni. When I stepped off the elevator, I was confronted with ten

identical metal doorways along the wide polished concrete corridor, most emblazoned with company names which more often than not included words like "logistics" or "systems" or most troubling, "solutions." Josiah's door, the only one apparently with a studio behind it, was open. I thought the studio would be bigger considering the size of the building, but it was relatively small, maybe twenty feet one way, thirty another, with smooth white walls not more than a few years old. I hadn't really set foot in a painting studio since college. I'd expected some old, scarred place marked with the injuries of a long, inspired creative life—though not that long, Josiah was probably in his mid-forties—but honestly it felt like a boring office space.

"Hello," I sang to the empty room.

But for his large canvases arrayed up and down the wall, unfinished, resting on pairs of plastic pails, it could have been a place where an unnecessary start-up starts up. There was a metal shelf unit filled with books and supplies. Gray flat files. A counter with a sink, a coffee maker, an electric kettle, a mini fridge. A best-selling sofa from IKEA. A sleek flat computer a few years out of date ran the news in one window, a Twitter feed in another, emails open in a third. On the desk was a stack of what looked like bills, with a lot of threatening red ink across the top. I knew my way around such carmine fonts. Though it seemed unlikely, I wouldn't be bothered to discover that Josiah lived hand to mouth. That kind of thing could be very romantic.

The computer monitor's wallpaper pattern was a painting I recognized from a one-bedroom in a converted insurance building in FiDi that we had worked on the year prior. It was all so cold and workmanlike, so sensible. But for the smell of oil paint—and really, for what artist is that not a madeleine? —it was all a disappointment. The chyron below the familiar newscaster on the wall-mounted flat screen TV was all about Craig's virus. Well, not Craig's, obviously, but the one he'd been so interested in. Sometimes I just hated the news for how inconsequential and obsessive it could be. I wondered if it wasn't better for us to just shut it all out sometimes, especially if you were making art. I walked towards the windows. I wondered if you could hear the Mariachi from there.

"Maya." I smiled, turning to greet Josiah.

"Maya!" He took my hand in both of his. They were cold from having just been washed in the men's room. He kissed me on the cheek with a flourish of coffee breath and Dentyne and squeezed my upper arm. He wore an Apple

Watch and a single, worn leather cord strung through some kind of foreign coin with a square hole in the middle. His eyes landed on the stack of bills and he turned them over. "Can I show you around?" he asked.

I smiled goofily, both from the flight of the canary and, if anything, for how ridiculous the offer was. Once you were in the door you saw everything the studio had to offer. Still, I followed him as he pointed out one canvas after another, most unfinished and turned towards the wall. In fact, there really wasn't anything to look at, not anything I hadn't seen before, at least.

"I've been casting around for something new," he admitted, running his fingers through his still thick, messy, graying hair. "But I never push it. I never rush things. It's got to be real."

"Real is great," I said, taking in one solid effort at unrushed realness after another. The results were almost always the same. Finally, we came to the piece Athena was going to install in the penthouse. I'll be honest, I was hoping to be surprised. Not that it wasn't objectively beautiful, of course, but it was similar to so many we had used before. As an artist Josiah was able, solid, a good copycat essentially, always interpreting the zeitgeist, which is to say, someone else's take on the zeitgeist. He was never the cutting edge himself, but somehow, he always wound up close to the choicest cuts. His work, in fact, was engaging, mostly. I saw Josiah as a man who never surprised, who was reliable, consistent, derivative, it would be fair to say. I was disappointed. I'd been hoping for a garden of great ideas, something as striking and diverse as all those strange monuments and mausoleums I had just seen at the cemetery, but instead it was just sameness everywhere I looked. I admired it but none of it stopped my heart. None of it beckoned like a secret path into the forest made visible only at twilight, like Clarissa's work did. (And none of it spoke, literally, like mine!)

Maybe it was unfair to hold him up against Clarissa for comparison. Her work looked like no one else's. It was unafraid to be idiosyncratic, or awkward, or even ugly. What you instead got from her was a very specific form of the truth. She gave it to you the way *she* saw it, in her own language, seemingly made for you alone. That's why it was often made out of surprising and unconventional materials, as if you'd discovered them with her. Josiah's work carried the comfort of the familiar. You looked at it and thought, "Oh right, *that*." And then maybe, "Nice." I wondered if Josiah had seen Clarissa's painting in the penthouse. I wondered how it would make him feel. Sad, probably, because that's how I was feeling for him at the moment, and maybe a little bit for myself. If Josiah had

floated more or less upwards it was because sometimes the mediocre did just that, especially in a city like New York, where everyone was frantically kicking their legs, trying to swim towards the sunlight. Some, by virtue of hard work alone, got there. Others, like Clarissa, were brilliant.

A moment later, however, encouraged by the reassuring surge of the painkillers that invested everything with a kind of heady optimism—I was discovering the canaries' arc, how its effects ebbed and flowed like the tides—I realized in a flash that Josiah was actually better than all this. Anybody could make great art every once in a while. Then there were those who made great art a bit more often—early iconoclasm, followed by a couple of masterpieces, followed by lucrative court painting. But the skill it takes to make not-so-bad art for a sustained period of time? That demands a special kind of talent fed by the understanding of people, of the culture, of art itself and, I was pretty sure, of women too. Josiah's hair was just so thick and messy, aching to be played with! I had discovered, too, how the painkillers mimicked the sexual response. My cells tingled with drowsy sensation. I wanted him. As the canary pulsed in my marinated brain, I was almost completely sure of it.

"Classic Platt," I said. "Gorgeous."

"Athena tells me you're the genius behind all those beautiful soaps," he said.

"None of us are *geniuses*, right?" I asked.

He smiled, holding my eyes. I felt so turned on and strange—between the weight of my boot and the rush of the pills, I was feeling flush. I was elated. I was nervous. My stomach in actual flutters, though some of it was the mild nausea that accompanied the canaries, though maybe I hadn't realized it at the time. I hadn't had any breakfast, and now I felt as if a strong wind might blow me away but also like I was made of lead and weighed a million pounds.

"I should sit," I said. Once settled on the IKEA bestseller I closed my eyes for a moment, and when I reopened them, it seemed as if Josiah had completely changed his clothing and gotten a haircut and, I think, become gay as well, if only because of the look of appraisal he gave me. Not a look that measured me as a potential sexual conquest he'd no doubt given me just a few moments earlier, but one that said, "You could have done so much better if only you'd tried." I'd received that withering assessment before. They are in good supply wherever decorators are to be found, though Perfect Austin had delivered a few of his own.

"How did you do that?" I asked, perhaps slurring a teensy bit. I was pleasantly fogged over and getting foggier by the second.

"Do what?" the new Josiah asked.

"Become someone else," I said.

He laughed, judgmentally I might add, and then by another miracle, replicated himself over by the desk, that is to say, the familiar first version of Josiah, reappearing now in his Urban Surfer Daddy drag.

"Hey, you met Zack," the original incarnation said to me. "Zack, this is . . ."

Um, Maya," I smiled when I realized he was waiting for me to remind him.

"Hi, um Maya," Zack said, smirking.

"Zack keeps all this running," Josiah said. "Coffee, Maya? Tea?"

"Tea, thank you. You're his assistant?" I asked the spiffy newcomer. How strange that Josiah would hire someone who looked exactly like him. Or was it just another example of his competence. Of course it was! As Athena always said: "Repetition is reputation!"

"Manager," the doppelganger bristled, indignant. I swear he might even have hit me would it not have been such a ridiculously unfair fight. Advantage his.

"Brother, twin," Josiah said as he fixed my tea without asking me how I took it. It was peppermint, massacred into a milky sugary mess. I was ashamed that I'd never known that my soon-to-be lover had a brother. As Josiah sat down, Zack took my tea from him and set it on the far end of the table where I had to stand and reach for it. Zack took my seat as I did, putting himself between me and his brother.

"Ah, wow," I said. "I have a sister but we're not at all alike. She's married. She's. . ." I couldn't finish my sentence. I was suddenly very drowsy. I felt a dream approaching me. I felt a cloud rise up around me and whisper in my ear, telling me to surrender to sweet dark gravity.

"Why are you here?" Zack asked me.

"This is Athena's girl," Josiah said.

"We have lots to do, Josiah. Doesn't Athena already have her hands full with that sociopath Rogan than to send us another skinny intern for the studio tour?" Zack asked.

It was then that I kind of fell asleep. My eyes clicked shut like those funny coin-operated telescopes on top of the Empire State Building. Maybe it was too much, or too much to be accurate, the brothers—identical but different—as if the world had cleaved in two and I wasn't sure to which side I belonged, and it shut me down. Or it could have just been the pills. I was no match for brain chemistry. The next thing I knew Josiah was laughing, touching my shoulder and

calling me "Shaya." The tea would have dropped out of my hands had Zack not had the reflexes of a fox.

"Pretty," he said, setting my cup on the end table again. "Athena sending us an oxy freak."

"Are you alright?" Josiah asked.

I shook myself awake. "Oh, heavens to Betsy," I said, a favorite of my mother's. "My ankle. My medication. My blood sugar."

Zack sighed and retrieved a banana from the counter, waving it in my face like smelling salts.

"Take all the time you need," Josiah said.

I nodded. It took all my focus to peel the banana and eat it all down. Each bite was strange labor, mesmerizing me as the banana broke down from solid to mush in my mouth.

"You're so nice," I told Josiah when I was finally finished and feeling a little better. "I'm an artist too. Well, lapsed," I clarified.

"You're a painter, I bet," Josiah said.

"Sculptress, of sorts," I sang.

Zack snorted. "That's not how you hurt yourself, is it?" he asked.

"No, it was something I saw on TV at the gym," I said.

"What material do you work in?" Josiah asked.

"Memories, dreams, reflections, and of course voices that I've been collecting for years. Children—"

"Wait. Children?" Zack asked.

"Adults too. Nurses, schoolteachers, opera divas, microbiologists, hot dog vendors, you name it," I said.

"I won't," Zack said.

"I like to call them inhabitants. But, of course, they're all really me. Gosh, these pills are strong. I've forgotten how much in love with them I am, my inhabitants, not the pills, though the pills are lovable too. It's like they help you *feel* the love. Or taste it, maybe, yeah."

"What is it you actually make?" Zack asked exasperated.

I took the balled-up tissue I had wiped my nose with and with a pen from the table in front of me, drew on it a pair of heavy-lidded eyes and long lashes, a set of full lips. Then I stuck it on the end of my pen and on top went my banana peel, the sultry face peeking out from a crown of blonde dreadlocks.

"Like, what a totally transplendent afternoon, I'm sure," she spoke in my best

Coachella princess accent, her sticky sun-kissed locks swaying in the pacific breezes.

Josiah grinned nervously, but Zack smiled at me for the first time, a smile so sincere, so unguarded and interested it shocked me awake. The fuzzy canary shroud fell away, and I was struck by the full force of awareness. He was a witness to my voice. I could see and be seen. For the first time in days, I felt honestly, truly, genuinely good, like a person with hope.

"Oh, *puppets*!" Zack said, delighted. He pinched my arm affectionately and, again, I cried.

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Chapter 7

I'm Dating Someone Too

I apologized for crying. I blamed it on my ankle and ate another banana and a small container of Greek yogurt, which was to be Zack's lunch. He gave me another of those withering looks. It was less hostile this time, if nevertheless still pitying. I treated myself and the signed contract to a Lyft back to the penthouse where the doorwoman, Sheila, not recognizing who I was at first, came out of the building to open the car for me, much to her chagrin.

"Thank you," I said. "Penthouse."

Athena barely registered my boot. I headed home. Stirred by the pills and Josiah's easy masculinity, I put a couple of poké bowls in my Chow Now shopping cart and called Craig. He'd taken me home the night before and put me to bed without even trying to make a move. Now though, I was high and horny. It was noisy on his end of the line. He sounded weird.

"Are you there?" I asked.

"Hey," he said quickly.

"It's Maya."

"I know," he said. "Hey, listen, I can't talk where I am."

"Oh, well, go find a quiet place. I have a lot to tell you. Or if you want, I'm home. In bed in my PJ's."

There was a funny pause. "I'm out," he said. "I'm not home."

"Oh, are you having beers with Louis?" I asked. Louis was Craig's work buddy from a couple of jobs back, I've lost track exactly, maybe when he was a Coordinator, and not yet a Manager, which he became after he'd been an Associate. Each step had been a major development. Each had involved writing code for a company he disliked that was in no way related to the visionary video game environments he'd once dreamed of creating. To celebrate each promotion,

we ate Korean, Falafel and Cuban, respectively. He and Louis liked to talk politics. Craig complained about how Louis's positions frequently changed, how he had, "no ideological rudder whatsoever." I always suspected Louis played devil's advocate. It was easy to get Craig riled up over current events, and he was kind of sexy when he was incensed. Something about the way he reddened and quivered with tension, like a flustered substitute algebra teacher. All you wanted to do was make him explode.

"Is he pissing you off?" I teased. The phone became muffled as if Craig had put his hand over it. He reemerged again in a quieter place. "Much better. So, like I said, I'm in bed—"

"Maya, I'm out with someone."

"Well, afterwards," I said.

"I'm on a date, Maya. With a woman."

I was confused for a moment because Louis certainly wasn't a woman.

"Oh. *Ohh*," I said. "Of course." I felt the flicker of the same darkness that had driven me under the covers in Soho, the cold wind of humiliation, but I pushed it away. I had made a commitment to feeling good and I would honor it. I squared my shoulders and said, "I'm dating someone too."

"Cool. I really have to go, Maya. Sorry." Craig said.

"He's a painter. A very handsome, successful painter," I said.

The connection was bad. It was noisy again. "A painter? Like Clarissa?" he asked.

"No!" I shouted, surprised by the desperation in my voice, by my lie, but I was thrown. I'd dated here and there but never once did Craig mention another woman. He was always available, until now. Nor did I think he might be attractive to someone else. I didn't want to think about what that might say about me.

"Cool," he said, with an impatience that made me feel so incredibly small and stupid.

"Have fun," I said as cheerfully as I could, digging the bottle of canaries out of my bag intent on taking the second half of the pill. It proved too difficult, like a needle in a haystack, to find the broken one among the others and to speak on the phone at the same time, so I settled for an easily accessible whole tablet. I washed it down with the wearied dregs of a chardonnay I had boosted from one of the showings. "And make sure you wash your hands and avoid touching your face,

right?" I said, remembering what I had read from the chyron on Josiah's flat screen.

"Avoid what?" he asked.

"Your face," I said, but the line was already dead.

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Chapter 8

The Box

I'm sure you're familiar with the great artist Artemisia Gentileschi. She was a baroque master, singular not just for her immense talent but for her sex, for being a woman doing what few women did at the time. I bring her up, naturally, because her most well-known image is that of *Judith Beheading Holofernes*. Taking advantage of the Assyrian General's great and overpowering desire for her, Judith, a widow with an axe to grind, was able to enter his tent and ply him with a doctored drink. Thus incapacitated, he became decapitated. It's not a pretty story but it's a neat one, maybe the first political painting by and about a woman. There are many versions of it, almost entirely done by men, but none are as dynamic and violent as Artemisia's. Named for Artemis, the hunter. Clarissa did her own interpretation of it our senior year. She painted herself as both Judith and the unlucky General, as well as the third figure in the painting, sometimes shown as a maid waiting in the background with a silver plate to carry away the severed head, but in Artemisia's painting this woman is helping to hold down the stricken Holofernes as Judith strikes the deadly blow. In Clarissa's painting she is holding a cellphone, taking a selfie in the middle of the bloodbath, proving she was there.

"Everybody is you," one of our more perceptive classmates noticed when she showed the painting at our weekly critiques.

"I really tried not to," Clarissa said in her defense.

I bring it up because sometimes we have to do the wet work, ourselves, that is, and sometimes we are the victim as much as the villain. Sometimes we are our own worst enemy. Sometimes, as Clarissa knew, we need to chop off our own head.

I hung up with Craig and left him to his date. I needed to remove myself from that situation. It had gone on too long. We'd—okay, I'd—let expectations arise,

and they weren't anything that I really wanted to have. It was clear Craig already had the same idea, maybe even for a while. There might even have been other dates! That made me feel bad. I was the safe girl. The fallback. How did I wind up there? I decided it wasn't a bad idea to remove myself from a lot of situations. I was over-engaging in life maybe, stretching myself thin. Better I do one very difficult thing than try to get a million other ones done. I was a go-getter, no doubt about that, only I thought it now might be time to go and get something else.

I didn't pull The Box out right away. Instead, I spent a long time staring at my bedroom closet. I call it my bedroom closet even though my apartment really has just the one room, and the one closet. I'd seen the box every day, only half-hidden behind winter coats and tall boots, fading into the background, like a tombstone slowly being overcome by grass and gravity. It had once held a mid-sized air conditioner before I repurposed it. I hadn't opened it in years. Leslie had tried to convince me to throw it away, that I was clinging unhealthily to the past. I would offer that it's the past that clings to us. I'd been doing everything I could to forget it. Hadn't I?

Wordlessly, I excavated the box and dragged it to the foot of my bed. In doing so, I found a lost sock of Craig's. He had sent a half dozen pleading emails that I find and return it. He is meticulous with his pairings and too sentimental to ever discard the inexplicable orphans that sometimes emerge from the dryer. I'd let a couple of days pass before I emailed him about the reunion. He deserved his space. He deserved his clean break. Maybe I'd even just put it in the mail with no return address.

Cross-legged on my comforter, I turned over the worn cardboard flaps of the box. It was the smell that got me first, glue and foam rubber, as potent as the oil paint and turpentine in Josiah's studio. Then nylon yarn, the way it gets when it's a few years old, dusty almost. I held my breath and from inside the box, I removed Mr. Woode-Bannister, an avuncular mustachioed figure I'd fashioned from a corduroy sofa cushion purloined from the ratty loveseat in the Art Department lounge. I exhaled, and my sigh was joined with a sob.

"You're okay, Maya," he said, graciously linking my personal fortitude with that of the brave chaps who fought in the Dordogne, before falling apart midsentence. He'd been decapitated by time, betrayed by a body no longer able to withstand his spirited reminiscences.

"It was beautiful. Clarissa's *Judith*," Mr. Woode-Bannister reminded me as I fixed his noggin, securing it with his schoolboy necktie.

"It was," I said.

"She smelled divine, did she not?" he asked.

"Judith?" I asked.

"Clarissa!" he said before his head fell off again.

"She did," I said. Clarissa wore men's fragrances exclusively, a total Artemisia move.

"Do you want me to rub your feet?" Mr. Woode-Bannister asked as I fixed his head back on one more time.

"Please," I said. He took my feet in my hands and squeezed gently. My ankle was vaguely sore.

"It feels good to be touched. Maybe that's all I've really been missing," I told him. "I think I've been very alone in this life. Athena isn't really a friend. Craig wasn't really a boyfriend. Leslie and I are nothing like the sisters we'd been when we were growing up. For all I know, Clarissa was a test run for how to torpedo every relationship I was ever going to have."

"Shh," he said. "Don't be so hard on yourself, dear."

"I guess," I said. "Still, it's kind of been one disaster after another."

"Shit happens," he said.

"Mr. Woode-Bannister!"

"Who's a cheeky boy!" he declared. "Truthfully though, Maya, you are more connected than you give yourself credit for. Just look around you."

I set Mr. Woode-Bannister down on the bed and one by one I removed my other creations from the box and laid them out around me.

Chopper was made from an odd left foot motorcycle boot, turned upside down, a scrub brush for a mohawk. He lisped tough guy slang from the flapping upper lip of his loosened sole.

Penny was a round cardboard candy box of the most inexpensive drugstore variety, spray-painted what was supposed to be copper and indeed was from some angles. Her eyes were dimes and set very close together, which gave the impression of painful concentration, probably futile.

Sandy was a mayonnaise jar half-filled with sand, a pair of glass eyeballs floating, all set inside a conch shell of rolled-up egg carton foam. Shake her up and she'd give you her cross-eyed opinions in a raspy smoker's voice.

Socky was, as you'd guess, a sock puppet, only he was made of a hundred

socks (none were Craig's despite his suspicions), much like a dust mop or dreadlocks. Sometimes I called him Dusty. There were many others, some had been lost for good, some I took apart and made new ones from their leftovers. As I laid them out, I greeted each one like an old friend. I embraced them. I welcomed them all back.

"Sorry, guys, I guess I haven't been a good friend," I told them.

"Itth alright, no biggie," Chopper lisped.

"You've been in a weird place for a few years now," Sandy said, leaking a bit as I shook her words from her.

"I deserve love and affection. I deserve foot rubs," I said.

"Indeed," Penny added, before one of her silver eyes fell off.

"Hereth looking at you," Chopper cracked.

"I'm horny," I whispered.

Socky shook his faded white mop top. "Is it love, is it love, is it love, is it love that you're feeling?" he sang in a bad Bob Marley.

"I don't know!" I said.

"Love seeketh not Itself to please, Nor for itself hath any care; But for another gives its ease, And builds a Heaven in Hell's despair," Mr. Woode-Bannister told me.

Moved to tears, I leaned in to give Mr. Woode-Bannister a kiss. Instead, I wound up pressing my lips to my bare fist poking through his distended neck. In the embarrassing silence that followed I wiped my eyes and helped myself to another canary. Why not? Craig had flown the coop. I needed to pull off my own disappearing act. I put all my sculptures back in the box and pushed it off the bed with my good foot. Despite their kindnesses, I reminded myself that none of them were real people. They weren't even other people. They were me, and I'd had enough of me to last a lifetime. I needed someone else, a real person, or at the very least a man. Although, as I sank into a terrible funk, a bleak blankness scented with mothballs and all the accumulated sweat in Socky's locks, it seemed yet another humiliating impossibility in a week filled with them. I'd never connect with anyone, not truly. In my twisted mind, no one would ever be desperate enough. No one would have the imagination or the lack of self-respect it demanded. Twenty minutes later, though, as the pill took effect and I found myself squeezing between my legs the down body pillow my mom had given me for my birthday the year before, I realized that Josiah would do just fine.

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Chapter 9

So, You Get It

I left my boot behind the next day. Josiah was delivering his painting, and I was going to remind him why he should be my boyfriend. I had great feet for one thing. It would be easy to see how good the rest was after that.

In my canary flight the night before, I'd decided that having a boyfriend would stabilize me. I wouldn't be so rudderless. I wouldn't be so whiplashed by sudden developments like being unexpectedly forced to confront Clarissa's work, and our sad history, and my terrible track record of being a friend. I wouldn't do this kind of thing—well, I had sworn not to say it or even think about what happened in the bathroom—but I wouldn't do *that* if I had a boyfriend. He'd never let me make chili. He'd be my rock.

Likewise, I wanted to look powerful and strong and able, but feminine, the typical tightrope routine that most women faced. Josiah, I imagined, had conventional tastes. Like his paintings, he wanted something pretty and familiar and not too challenging. I wore a dark sleeveless blouse with a bit of a plunging neckline, provocative but professional, no stockings with the flimsiest of strappy sandals, my hair up in a carefree, disheveled bun that took the better part of an hour to achieve. On the subway I stood even when there were seats so I wouldn't get wrinkled. I was a tempestuous gamine of the French *Nouvelle Vague*. If you did a good enough job boring me you could have my body, sure, but really you'd want my pouty smarts. Josiah would know what I was up to. As a painter he was a natural reader of signs.

"You look nice," Athena told me.

"Thanks." I smiled. It felt like such a bestowal. She lives up to her namesake. Wise and warlike. I have seen her stare down billionaires. I have seen her annihilate contractors with the cock of an eyebrow.

"I was beginning to think maybe we were losing you," she told me. "Come, I have something to show you." She took my hand and led me through the apartment, from primary bedroom to guest wing, past the bathroom I had befouled, to the capacious kitchen with its unrivalled view of the Empire State Building. The furniture had been delivered. The window treatments and light fixtures were installed. The carpets were laid down. The lime washed walls were done. Just a few more little touches needed, like those *demitasse* cups and, of course, Josiah's canvas. It was nearly finished and looking amazing. We stepped into the grand living room where—hanging in pride of place, immense and gorgeous—Clarissa's painting was.

"Fabulous, no?" she asked.

"No," I said.

"What?"

"I mean yes. Fabulous."

And it was, of course. It was big and beautiful and profound and poignant. Genius really. I recognized my friend's hand in all of it. Her funny feathery brushstrokes and endearing clumsy drips and sloshes. Her virtuoso color. Witty surprises everywhere, and yet each one made complete sense. It was a painting of a dream, like the ones she and I once shared. It made me feel so good. It was too good for that penthouse. Too good to be reduced to a spokesmodel. To help sell an unrealistic apartment to unrealistically wealthy people and/or internationally based shell corporations. The irony was you could see the real bridge from the apartment, and, from a certain angle, both at the same time. It would be hard to say which felt more real. The way Clarissa's fluctuated between being recognizable and abstract seemed to suggest another undiscovered dimension in which the actual bridge didn't yet exist. An extra truth emerged from the chaos of her found debris, vivid and beautiful, before it slipped away and made you wonder if you'd seen it at all. But it wasn't some sleight of hand at work. The stars, I saw they were made of carefully melted birthday candles, their wicks still intact. And the great cables drawn with crushed auto glass, inscribed like magnificently long pebbly lines of cocaine at a party for giants. The painting was an offering, it was asking to be finished.

I was so proud of her. I wanted to tell Athena everything. How Clarissa and I got so ridiculously drunk. How she confessed her crushes to me. How insecure she always felt about her talents. How she knocked on my dorm room door late at

night, sobbing over phantom anxieties and despair and I let her share my bed, like a sister. It was all I could do at that moment not to cry.

"Are you okay?" Athena asked. "You're. . . hopping." My ankle had started to ache. Obviously, going bootless was a big mistake. "Oh," she said, glancing now at her phone. "He just texted. They're on the way up."

I went to meet Josiah by the elevator where Jimmy, a porter from the building, caught me doing a quick sniff test of my underarms, which I passed with flying colors, by the way. His eyes were bloodshot; he was stoned all the time. He usually winked at me when I ran into him by the service entrance or the package room. He once told me he was Irish and Dominican, "like everybody the fuck else in Inwood!" (I went home and googled *Inwood*.) Jimmy had a clover tattoo, badly done, on his forearm and—as he revealed in a proud spontaneous display in the basement one day—an enormous dragon on his back, much better executed than the clover even if there was none of the necessary muscle tone to support it. It sagged as if with scoliosis. "My girlfriend hates it," he said. "It's awesome. . . Ex-girlfriend." He was feckless, but he also knew all the building's secrets.

"See," he told me, when I was searching for a missing delivery of custom clothing hangers painted stark white to be hung with all white clothing in the dressing area, and came upon Jimmy smoking a joint in the light well between the tower and an adjacent building. He must have read the apprehension on my face. "It's all good, Yo. We're in a fucking *blind* spot!" He laughed, I think trying to sound malicious in a sexy way. "When the stair door's open, it blocks the vent." He slapped the side of a scary looking galvanized plinth. It echoed its complaint in deep basso profundo. "Maybe on the monitors they see the door move but they don't see no *per*-son here. Ha! No, they didn't think about *that* when they wired this motherfucker. They figured if you were in the building, they already had your ass on camera, but there ain't no cameras here!" he told me, his breath a strangely hunger-inducing swagger of weed and Slim Jims. "If you ever wanna break in all you gotta do is go up the alley next door, then squeeze past the gap by the fence right here, exactly here behind the vent."

"What if you can't get in the alley?" I asked. (Not that I would ever want to break in.)

"You can. You just gotta walk in like you live there. Ain't nobody gonna argue with some white lady holding a garbage bag. Pssh! They think this place is secure. Ain't *no*-thing secure." He tapped out his blunt on the side of the vent and

slipped it into a half-smoked pack of menthol cigarettes. "What's that word? Flux. We're all fluxed. The zombie virus apocalypse is coming. Boo!"

Now I stood by the elevator doors and imagined the beautiful blind spot Josiah and I could find ourselves in while watching, impatiently, as the numbers on the panel rose and rose, the elevator flying towards me, dozens of stories into the sky with the handsome painter and his pretty nice painting inside. Finally, the doors opened with a sterile arpeggio. Revealed was the unpainted back of the canvas, stretcher bars and cross braces and Josiah's bold signature in black marker, along with an inventory number and date. From behind the piece stepped Cyrus, a skinny art handler boy I recognized from some of Josiah's other installs. He was annoying. He had strong banal opinions and spoke only in the latest slang, griping about the malevolence of celebrity culture but at the same time strangely well informed about famous people and their doings. One day I caught him adjusting the cuffs of his jeans with his tape measure, itself bearing an adhesive label with his name inscribed in skillful graffiti type, the "R" in the middle turned backwards.

"Where does this go?" he asked me officiously. I ignored him. From deep inside the dark elevator, in the shadow of his painting, Josiah's eyes met mine. The elegant line of his temple, it was unmistakable. I reminded myself of all the ways older men were better. Experienced, patient, their bodies a record of wisdom and achievement. He'd try not to break my heart, and I'd try not to let him. With Cyrus drawing it out, the painting began to emerge from the elevator and Josiah with it. I licked my lips and straightened my back. I closed my eyes so that I could open them just as he stepped in front of me. I regret now being as surprised as I was when I opened them again. Just as had happened in the studio, once again Josiah's twin had replaced him. Zack—or should I say Josiah in a tight pink polo shirt—gave me another of those looks, this one asking why I'd dressed the hell up, and also why I was standing there looking stupid with my mouth open.

"Tell me where this goes, please," Zack said. "We're double parked."

Cyrus sighed impatiently. Jimmy, still lingering, snorted. In a throwdown of toxic masculinity, my money was on Jimmy, doughy as he was compared to Cyrus's bike-toned torso. He'd fight dirty and win.

"This way, Zacariah!" Athena called from the dining room.

"Is your brother not here?" I asked Zack.

"*Ob*-viously," he sang.

I followed them into the dining room where Zack and Cyrus hung Josiah's

painting with practiced swiftness, Cyrus rolling up the bubble wrap into a small, neat bundle and handing it to me when they were done. “Do something with that,” he said.

“I got the perfect place to stick it,” Jimmy said, relieving me of it chivalrously and earning a sharp approving grin from Zack.

“You look cute,” Zack said to me. “Special occasion?” He didn’t wait for an answer. As he was striding back towards the elevator, however, he stopped in the living room, caught by Clarissa’s painting. “Now *she* really knows how to paint,” he said. I nodded.

“I mean, it’s amazing. It’s too good for this place,” I said, surprised that I said it.

He looked at me another moment, reappraising his appraisal. I think my stock was rising.

“So, you get it,” he said. “Maybe there’s something real going on in you, despite all your low-key drama.” He waved his hand in the air. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but you’re a bit of a mess. No, don’t say anything. Don’t explain to me why. I’m not here to work on you. I’m just asking, does it have to be that way? And put on your boot. What are you, stupid?”

“Um,” I said.

“Shh. And hey, you’re never going to fuck my brother. You do know that, right?

Honestly, between you and me, Puppet Sculptress, you’re dodging a bullet.”

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Chapter 10

My Birthday Party

In the spring of our senior year, not long before we graduated, Clarissa told me she had a surprise for my birthday and that her surprise was that she was taking me to a party.

"Someone's throwing me a party?" I asked, stunned. That hadn't happened since the debacle at my twelfth birthday when Leslie blew out my candles before I could. My mom re-lit them of course, but I insisted on fresh ones. My dad drove to the party store while I stewed in my room and all the guests left. I blew out my cake alone while my parents fielded angry calls from my former friend's parents.

"No," Clarissa said, with almost a laugh. "I am *taking* you to a party. A very important party, for artists. Like us," she explained.

"Oh," I said. We were making ramen in our off-campus student apartment, the second floor of an old Victorian house that we shared with two other girls. We were getting ready for our Senior shows and were never home, except on those days we slept for fifteen hours at a time. "Do I want chicken or beef?" I wondered out loud as I waited for my watched pot to boil.

"When have you ever chosen beef? I'm trying to imagine how they turn a cow into a packet of ramen flavor and it's terrifying," she said.

"Well, maybe for my birthday I'll make a change," I said. "No, chicken is fine."

The party was going to be at a loft in Dumbo, which was in Brooklyn, I learned, hosted by two very prominent artists, two women, a couple, who collaborated as a team.

"*You know who* introduced us," Clarissa explained. She meant the painter who got her pregnant. "They knew he was an asshole too, but I guess they liked me."

"So it's not really my party," I said.

"It's your *birthday*. The moment itself is auspicious," Clarissa said. "You are

going to be celebrated."

We took the bus down to the city. Clarissa had dressed us. We wore short skirts and cute shoes. She'd insisted on "statement eyes" since it was a big occasion. There's a chance I might have overstated mine.

I'd only been to the city a handful of times. I'd made a few pilgrimages with classmates in the school van down to the Met to complete term papers for Art History, but Clarissa knew where all the weird little emerging galleries were, down basement stairways or tucked behind Chinese butchers off Hester Street on the Lower East Side. I knew I'd wind up in the city after school, for a little while at least, but I'd never been to someone's home there. I'd never really seen how people lived. Sharon and CJ greeted us warmly at the door. Sharon, with long honeyed hair, one streak of which was gray, wore bright orange zip-up coveralls and green Dr. Martens. CJ, in an amorphous black tunic dress, had cropped snow-white hair, was barefoot with toe rings.

"The birthday girl!" Clarissa said, introducing me. They were confused for a moment but then both called out: "Happy birthday!"

Then they put their arms through Clarissa's and led her into the party. I followed for a few steps. The loft was big and beautiful: original oak warehouse floors, rugged reassuring timber beams, a kitchen cobbled together from industrial restaurant tables and found antiques. It was all so perfect, made even better by the quartet of tall arched windows framing the bright blue Manhattan Bridge and the glistening city beyond. Maybe this was part of Clarissa's gift, a glimpse of what life could be like for us, as artists. Who our circle of friends could be. How outside our windows an entire city was waiting to inspire us.

"Wow," I said, to no one, having been left alone. Clarissa was being led around the party and introduced to its esteemed guests. She was only a few steps away but somehow, she seemed already out of reach. Bravely, and like a grown-up self-sufficient person, I turned in the other direction, towards the bar.

"Oh, *puppets*," a lanky blond critical theorist I met there concluded as she sipped her gin and tonic and looked warily at my over-done eyes.

"And you're a *student*?" her lanky blond botanist husband added, finding it hard to believe Clarissa was one too, that we had come to the party together. They moved on but not before I extracted a Happy Birthday from them.

Glass of rosé in hand, I soon found myself in a kind of cozy nook created by the overhang of a massive staircase, a warm space full of books and deep furniture. On a wall crowded with artworks was, to my shock, one of Clarissa's. It was a rare

portrait from the summer between junior and senior years, when she had been granted a scholarship to study painting in Maine. It was a picture of me.

That summer I'd stayed at school, working at Nino's Pizzeria Ristorante, delivering pies to international students studying abroad in the states. It didn't take long to resent their oblivious good cheer, their cloying combinations of toppings. I felt like a townie, but the real townies resented me for being broke like them. Also, I had a brief, poorly conceived fling with Dougie, Nino's nephew. He had an equivalency diploma, a 2005 Nissan Altima with one door slightly less blue than the other, and a small, blond, but surprisingly long-lasting erection. I was too weird for him of course, but we were operating in the demilitarized zone of summer break. We had both lowered the bar. We were both horny and bored and a little pissed at our lives. It ended, finally, through mutual ghosting.

Clarissa came back in August all charged up. She'd studied with some well-known artists in Maine, CJ among them. She crashed with me in the little single I had. We hadn't moved into our apartment yet. It was still hot and sultry, especially in the half-empty dorms. She had a big suitcase full of her supplies. A klatch of paintings on a folding luggage cart held together with a bungee cord. She smelled like the woods. She smelled like herself.

"Bleak," she said about the room. I was there for such a short time I hadn't bothered decorating. It was beige-painted cinderblock walls, linoleum floor, no curtains. I slept in my sleeping bag on the bare twin mattress. Dougie never minded or noticed.

"What modern man wants is a monk's cell, well lit and heated, with a corner from which he may look at the stars," I said.

"Le Corbusier," Clarissa answered. We'd taken the same Modern Architecture module. "Still bleak, dude."

I ordered a pizza and a twelve pack, and when it was late I called Nino's to complain.

Dougie looked so crestfallen when he discovered Clarissa sitting on my bed sweating in her bra. I gave him a fifty-cent tip and shut the door in his face. Clarissa and I inhaled the whole pie and half the beer almost immediately.

"Take off your clothes," she said, opening her suitcase and getting out her painting box. "Ha, the look on your face. But do it. Keep your panties on. I'm not the pizza boy." I did, and she got to work, screwing up her face as she did. She didn't look happy. Maybe we were too drunk. Maybe it had sounded like a good idea at first but actually killed the close, warm vibe we were having. I don't think

she had ever painted me before either. In fact, back then at least, people didn't really figure into her work. It was always their evidence to which she turned her attention. The debris left in their wake. She'd come home with a striking still life of all the trash in the backseat of her mom's car she'd borrowed for her trip. "Apparently I'm a Funyuns-loving watermelon kombucha addict with a UTI and a penchant for eighties romance novels."

I was tense being put under the same consideration. The truth was the energy between us was different that night. There was only a tiny bit of space between Clarissa and me—I had put it there by blabbing about her abortion—but it had grown that summer. She had Maine and I had a series of hard-won but satisfying orgasms usually followed by Dougie's impressively well-thought-out plans for customizing the Altima. Coming back together knocked us both off-kilter somehow. We were each on our guard.

"Relax," she said, but I wasn't sure if she was talking to me or herself. I could see she was struggling. "Relax your toes. Relax your ankles. Relax your calves and your knees. Relax your hips and relax your torso. Relax your neck and skull. Relax your hair," she said. I lost track of my body parts, but I doubted that any of them were relaxed. A bead of sweat blossomed at the top of my brow. I felt it trace my hairline before running down inside my ear. I was holding in a tiny fart. I wanted to cry. Clarissa was right, but it wasn't just my room that was bleak, it was me too. My neck was sweating now. My chest shone. Of course I made a terrible subject to paint. But then something clicked. She grinned and nodded. She worked quickly for a few minutes, humming while she did. A fluid light came off her.

"Uh, huh," she said. Her hands soared and dipped like a bird of prey. "I'm gonna move this fan." She did and a breeze rolled over me. I could feel the hair blow back slightly from my face. I shivered—and then I relaxed. "Yes."

She made five paintings that long night. She painted over four of them when the semester started. Canvases were expensive and she needed them. But she'd kept this one, the first. It hung in Clarissa's studio in the art building, until one day it didn't. I figured she'd painted over it too. Secretly, I was relieved. It was weird to think of my face, or my body, naked mostly, just floating out there, other people looking at me when I wasn't around, people thinking that the painting was the truth of me, which I guess it was. Clarissa was that good of an artist. But how had it found its way to this handsome Brooklyn loft, to this rich wall among other paintings and photographs and works on paper by very famous artists, many

inscribed to CJ and Sharon personally? How had I never known that I had been made a gift like this too?

"She looks scared," a man's voice, suddenly at my side, said. "Sexy."

"Scared is sexy?" I asked, turning towards him. He was short and well dressed. His face betrayed its many cosmetic surgeries, but his pale green eyes remained untouched and seemed to look out at me from that past self. He was wise. He had impeccable taste. He'd have made a great puppet.

"Duh," he said. "Scared is the sexiest shit there is."

"Duh," I agreed.

"So good! Barely a few brushstrokes and she captures the sitter's apprehension. But also her deep self-regard. She shines! This is a portrait of someone hungry for a speck of love. But also they look a little crazy, no?" he asked.

"It's me! She's me!" I said.

"Well, I mean she's all of us, sweetie. It's art." He said it as if I didn't know what art was.

"I'm an artist," I told him, but he was already gone.

I found Clarissa again at the center of a circle made up of CJ and Sharon and some of their friends.

"My picture!" I said, smiling. "How did it get here—"

"It's Maya's birthday!" Clarissa announced. "She's right here!"

A polite little cheer went up. Someone wished me Happy Birthday. Someone else kissed me on my cheek. Clarissa was right. I did need to be celebrated. She knew I'd find that picture here. What a wonderful surprise! She knew everyone would recognize me and give me much more than a speck of love.

"Who is she?" someone asked somebody else.

"I'm the shiny, apprehensive one!" I said. "You know, scared is sexy. What a crazy night that was! It was hot as hell. Clarissa had just come back from Maine, and I was just out of a summer fling. We were both in our underwear—"

"Clarissa, go on," someone said. Clarissa smiled at me and turned away and went on.

I found myself a little off to the side again. Then I was more on the outside of the circle than in. Then I was fully out of it and drifting towards the bar where I poured myself another very full glass of wine and drank it alone. Then I floated over to the big windows where I stood, alone, gazing out at the city and trying to avoid my own pale reflection and the party going on behind me. My eyes looked

ridiculous. The only statement they made was "lunatic child." Eventually, when she was done, Clarissa found me, and we walked back across the Brooklyn Bridge, the first time for both of us.

"We need cake. *You* need cake!" she declared. She was walking on air. It had been an amazing night for her. As much as that kind of success would soon find her, being in such rarefied heights was still a rush. We walked all the way through Chinatown and Soho and the Lower East Side and wound up at the Ukrainian restaurant, Veselka, on Second Avenue in the East Village. "You've been quiet," she said, when we sat down at a table for two by the window. I smiled. "Birthdays can be tough, I know. They are usually anticlimactic."

"That's probably it," I said.

"Sugar will fix everything," she said. I wanted to believe her, but for the first time I had my doubts. Maybe not everything that Clarissa said and did was so good. I hated the thought of it and shook it out of my head. The cake arrived, candle and everything. The waiter and a few of the more drunk patrons joined in singing, "Happy Birthday" while Clarissa beamed proudly, a good friend. A best friend. I wanted to make a wish, I really did—but I glanced at my phone and saw that it was after midnight. It wasn't really my birthday anymore. I blew out my candle.

"What did you wish for?" Clarissa asked.

"I can't tell you or it won't come true," I said.

"You really believe that?" she asked.

"You really believe in wishes?" I asked, maybe a little too sharply. Clarissa looked at me as if I'd uttered something terrible. As if it was me who had suddenly revealed a different, more grown up and terrifying self. I glared right back at her. I wondered if she saw me or ever had or ever would now that everything that she had once claimed not to be interested in—status and success and attention—were promised to her. We had started the day like two little girls playing dress-up in mommy's high heels and smeary lipstick, but now I saw how she was a woman already, an artist, a real one, and I was stuck in make-believe. I was still blowing out the candles on my cake.

Then the moment. . . melted. We loved each other but we were just beginning to really understand who we were. I envied her. That much had become clear in a way it never had before. I prayed not to hate her too. She shone so bright sometimes it hurt to be in her presence. But that's not the type of thing you can tell another person, especially someone whom you love desperately, and whose

love you crave in return. It made me sick. It embarrassed me. But like so many hurts, it was mine, and I'd guard it jealously.

"One day," she said, "I'm going to make a painting of that bridge. And I'll call it *Birthday*."

I doubted that too. Not for any good reason. When it came to her art, Clarissa usually did what she said.

"To fly!" I said, suddenly, almost involuntarily. "Yes, I wish that I could fly."

Clarissa lifted her big foamy cappuccino. "Well, then here's to Maya in the sky!" she said.

"With ra-men!" I sang.

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Chapter 11

Another Party and a New Acquaintance

How on earth could you shut down a city like New York? For two whole weeks? You couldn't! We were told that's what we needed to do to flatten the curve of rising cases, to protect the hospital system and emergency rooms from getting overwhelmed. But just how was that supposed to work? I suppose that's the way it is with cataclysms; they are inscrutable. I've always wanted to be inscrutable. I think I just wound up confusing. Or confused. I guess, like a lot of people, I didn't really take it seriously. But already the stock market was crashing. Schools were shutting down. There was talk of something called "social distancing." Leslie joked that she thought it should have already been mandatory for all sorts of losers. My mother told her that wasn't a charitable thought. Craig, whose date hadn't worked out and was back in regular communication with me, was very worked up.

"This is not going to end well," he texted me.

"What does end well?" I wondered in return. "Ends are usually sad things filled with regret."

"That's not the point," he said. "Are you prepared for this, Maya?"

I wasn't really prepared for anything. That had never been my strong suit. I found it hard to believe in anything until it was dumped in my lap. I was skeptical of lockdown and almost convinced that it wouldn't come to pass, that it was all a big mistake, an overreaction, the way the previous mayor had neglected to plow the street properly one winter and ever since, in the strident wake of blowback, the trucks rolled out across the city when barely an eighth of an inch of frost threatened to grind the city to a halt. It was easier to believe in blizzards. We had until next Monday to see if I was right. Meanwhile, Rogan had planned a viewing

party for that Friday to launch the apartment on the market before "these idiot sheep people ruin it for everyone!"

I've always liked parties—maybe with the exception of my birthday at CJ and Sharon's. I'm one of those you'd call a dancing fool. I'm good at letting loose. Despite what Zack said, I didn't want to wear my boot. It was clumsy and ugly and made me walk with a silly uneven gait. Josiah had missed my lovely feet on the day his painting was delivered. I wouldn't miss another opportunity to show him. On the day of the party, however, barefoot and clear-eyed, I was in near agony and by the afternoon succumbed to both boot and pill. The day before, I'd committed another crime against my credit card and bought myself a new blouse: pale ivory silk with cap sleeves and a pussy bow and large multi-colored polka dots. As the canary took flight, it became clear that the best thing would be to pair it with pink hot pants and bright green tights. The boot I felt would be the perfect idiosyncratic touch. A bit of whimsy. What do you know? I was having fun.

"That won't scratch the floors, will it?" a tense Athena asked about my boot when I arrived. She did a quick scan of the rest of my outfit. "You've never been afraid of color, have you, baby?"

She moved on from my boot to air-kiss a cadre of well-heeled women. The sun was waning, the horizon was reddening. Golden light began to pour through the penthouse. It electrified the champagne flutes floating by on silver trays conveyed by black sleeves. I helped myself to one, ignoring the doctor's injunction against mixing drinks and the yellow birds. (I couldn't understand why. They were like old long-distance friends.) I promised myself I'd stop at one glass but then I found myself in front of Clarissa's painting again. It didn't need any sublime sunset to be brilliant. It was like being with her again, even if no doubt I'd crumble with shame should I ever see her again in person. I reached for another champagne and downed it in a gulp.

The very last time I saw Clarissa was at the opening of her first one-person show. She'd usually been circumspect about her successes, even as social media blossomed around us. While everyone else was trumpeting their triumphs, Clarissa was steadily and quietly working away, not so slowly climbing the art world ladder. I'd googled her name almost daily, following as she wound up in group shows at all the right galleries, trading up from one to another, showing in the company of more and more prominent artists. Finally, she was offered her own at a beautiful and well-known space in Chelsea. It was in the slower summer

months, but still it was all hers. She'd emailed me so excited when she was offered the show. I told myself I'd been surprised to hear from her. We hadn't seen each other in months, and even then just for a few loud moments at a party someone from school threw in Windsor Terrace. It was strange to see the invitation in my inbox. It felt like something out of a time capsule or another dimension even. It felt like a mistake, like I was no longer the same Maya to whom it had been sent. That Clarissa had never even known *that* Maya—which is to say, me—at all.

It was raining when I arrived, the kind of sudden and severe downpour that you only see in the summertime, when the day seems to build up with heat and moisture and tension until it all boils over in torrents of hilarity and hysteria. I took cover under the scaffolding outside the post office on Tenth Avenue and West Twenty-Fourth Street. The rain echoed on the metal roof of the sidewalk shed. A steady parade of droplets ran across the top of the green painted-plywood walls before leaping to their ends. The gallery was just up the block, its big, bright, picture window glowing like a drive-in movie in the prematurely darkening day. I could see Clarissa's painting, *Birthday (The Bridge)* where it was hung in the front of the gallery. Even from a distance it was striking. The place was packed. The rain hadn't kept anyone away. That made me feel good, but I was frozen in place. Worse, I was taking a half-step back in my mind for every one forward. I glared at the gallery window like a pregnancy test when I should have been walking across the street to greet my good friend, to hug her and wish her love. That had been the plan all along, hadn't it? I'd dressed a little nicer than usual. I wore perfume. I'd done everything I would have ordinarily done with a gallery opening in mind, including going to the gallery, almost.

Instead, I knew if I went in I'd bring nothing but my own smallness and darkness, both of which, at that moment, I was feeling acutely. I wasn't part of that luminous, movie-screen world, as lucky as I had been to stand adjacent to it—and her—for as long as I did. Crossing the street would be impossible. Then Clarissa appeared in the crowded window, in the midst of an animated conversation with a guest. Her smile was enormous. Even from across the street she was a source of light in the middle of the dark downpour. She had her own magnetic pull, but I was an immovable object. My heart weighed a million billion pounds. It was impossible being me in a world where she was the sun. I closed my eyes. I just wanted to fall asleep or die or something. I hated myself for feeling all of this.

Then my phone buzzed in my hand and my heart nearly stopped. Oh, how I

wished it was Clarissa calling to tell me I was being silly. To tell me I had nothing to worry about. That I was good and bright myself and that there was a place for me in there. But it was only the agency I worked for at the time. I was a companion for elderly people. I was a lunch buddy. A chin wiper. A reader. I sat and watched movies at two p.m., then had dinner at four. Sometimes my phone beeped with reminders to take cholesterol pills. To check blood pressure. To make sure *Ellen* was being taped. Maybe it was Mr. Werletz calling to complain again that I talked too much and that we should discuss it. I watched the agency call go to voicemail, and when I looked up Clarissa was gone. I was halfway home before I realized I was on the subway.

As I rumbled back to Queens, I pretended I didn't feel the ache of a missing limb, of the hole in my chest, of the brain I had abandoned. That night was when all my characters went back into the box. That was when I told myself I was putting away childish things. I forgot to return the call to the agency, and I lost that job not long after. Those were some of the worst years, right after school. Being reminded of how unformed I still was, with no idea of what I wanted or what I believed in. In watching Clarissa's dream come true, I realized how likely it was that mine or anyone else's might not. It was Athena, surprisingly, who led me once again to think that maybe I was good at something, even if it was all just how I folded a towel or how I arranged some soaps. It was she who gave me something of my own, however puny.

Standing in front of Clarissa's painting in that ridiculously costly penthouse I struggled again with scale. Had everything been a disaster, or was this just a blip? Was she really a genius or, was she now like me, just helping dress up some expensive real estate? Did I ever really know her, or had I been kidding myself for years that any of this ever mattered?

(Another one of those pauses here, sorry, because of course I knew her. Of course I loved her. Of course it all mattered. And that made it so much worse. And of course she knew me, too, I mean really knew me, precisely because she knew my biggest mistake: giving up on us.)

"She's here, you know," a voice said behind me. I wasn't sure if I heard or imagined it, if it was my mind reassuring me that I hadn't lost my friend, that in truth she lived in my heart always or something corny like that.

"Clarissa," the voice repeated. It was Josiah at my shoulder. "Athena must have moved heaven and earth to get her," he said. "I rode up with her on the elevator. She's really very nice—"

He'd barely finished his sentence before I disappeared, as quickly as I could, hobbled as I was by my boot and the champagne I'd been quaffing like water. A moment later, I was inside the guest bathroom, site of my earlier crime. There was water now. I splashed my face and sacrilegiously dried my skin on the elegant hand towel I myself had folded and refolded into perfect casual form on a hook by the sink. I was frozen with fear.

"Be careful what you wish for," my mother always told Leslie and me. I had to figure a way out.

I peeked out into the corridor and caught sight of Clarissa from behind. She was talking to Josiah. Both of them were so beautiful. I couldn't help but smile again. She looked so much the same girl I remembered. Everything had really happened. We had been connected, we had loved each other, we had known each other. I felt terrible and good at the same time. I steadied myself against the doorway and bumped my boot loudly against the wall. In that microscopic flash of silence before everyone's eyes turned Sauron-like towards the source of the interruption, I leapt back into the bedroom, painfully, only to discover I was not alone.

"Yes. I saw you before," said a man, almost tall, balder than not, more thirties than twenties, more apt to avoid eye contact than to hold it. He wore an expensive blazer over a very expensive T-shirt that advertised an expensive clothing brand. He wore the right jeans and sneakers, also expensive. He had an expensive smartphone in a death grip. It seemed to command his attention every few seconds. He had a very even layer of stubble and a short, skillfully sculpted haircut that minimized his receding hairline. Both looked—you guessed it—expensive, and neither really fit. "About twelve and a half minutes ago," he added.

I realized I had seen him too. Rogan had been smiling at him by the antique Bechstein Athena rented, as a pretty, middle-aged woman gently played "*Someone to Watch Over Me*." Smiling! Rogan! I don't know who it seemed to pain more. Clearly, this shiny, if unassuming, person had tremendous value, which meant, simply, he was tremendously rich. But if money really did buy happiness, this fellow seemed not to know. Every time the noise of the crowd swelled, he flinched self-consciously. He looked away from me and lay his hand on the velvet chair before pulling it back suddenly.

"That's a very pretty blouse," he said, almost a question.

"Yes, it is," I reassured him.

An uncomfortable pause followed. And then another followed that one.

"Are you hiding?" I asked.

"Simon told me not to call it that," he said.

"Simon is. . .?" I asked.

"Hm, good question. What *is* Simon? I guess he's like a coach, or a therapist, but he doesn't like to be called that." His phone chimed. I saw a glowing jagged green trendline awash in numbers. The man tapped the screen. "I just made a hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars," he said, strangely flat. "Are *you* hiding?"

"Yes," I said.

"Wow. Yes. Just right out there, yes. Simon would get a kick out of that."

There was noise in the hallway. Voices. Athena's, Josiah's, Clarissa's memorable laugh.

They were coming this way. I pushed the man into the closet and closed the door behind us.

"Hi, yes, we can't be alone unless you sign a waiver," he said. "Even my stepfather has to. Nothing personal."

I looked at him like he was crazy, but then I remembered that I was crazy too. I was hiding in a closet with a high-net-worth case study for ultra-performance neuroatypicality. He smelled very good, by the way. Hermès Equipage. I knew it well. Clarissa stole it from the artist who'd made her pregnant. She'd wanted him to notice, and when he didn't, she threw it away. I took it from the trash in her room and hid it in a drawer, but after graduation I kept it out wherever I lived, once in a while spraying a little into the air. It reminded me of Clarissa, even though she'd never actually worn it, until, after some time, it reminded me of me. It became my thing, and I loved it. It's a classic sturdy scent, but full of life. This man, at least he had the sense—the sense of smell, that is—to understand. . . I don't know. . . something. I smiled at him. He did his best to smile back. I could hear voices in the second bedroom on the other side of the wall. It was them. If time hadn't been running out before, it was almost gone now. I took him by the sides of his shoulders. He was wider than me by a bit. He'd do fine.

"I'll sign anything you want," I told him. "If you get me out of here right now!"

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Chapter 12

Sushi with an Adventure Capitalist

"You were in a hurry to leave," he said when we were on the elevator after dashing out the service entrance. "Did something bad happen?"

"No, that was why we left," I explained.

"To avoid something bad," he offered.

"Yes." I felt as if I owed him a gold star for figuring it out. "And you were just *born* to block the view."

"Of someone else," he said.

"Yes," I told him.

We had sushi at a cool, casual place across the street near Madison and Thirtieth. I had quite a lot. He told me his name was Norman. In my mind I dubbed him the Nebbish. For the uninitiated, as I once was, the word is Yiddish in origin. An isolated dialect of German favored by immigrant Jewish communities. It's not in use much outside of the Northeast United States and pockets of Los Angeles, Florida, and Arizona. I like to pepper my speech with it to confuse newcomers to our city. Spilkes, Nebbish, potchke, ungepatchke, shmutz, shmuck, fekakte, they are all *apropos*. For this fellow especially. He was kind of funny. Peculiar too. When we reached the sidewalk, I'd realized that I could, if I wanted, simply leave him right there. He had done his job. I was out of the penthouse and hadn't crossed paths with Clarissa. Athena had raised her eyes and champagne flute admiringly as she caught us slipping out the service entrance behind the kitchen. Ordinarily she might be annoyed that I left early, but clearly the Nebbish's storied riches absolved all sins. Anyway, I couldn't knock him down after he'd done me a solid. The look of expectation on his face whenever he was able to meet my eyes was heartbreaking. Besides, I was starving and beginning to feel the combination of canary and champagne and really needed to put something in my stomach.

I put in a lot. A king's ransom of sushi and sashimi and tempura and some udon noodles and yakitori skewers and edamame and oh, oh, oshi tashi! Always oshi tashi. My brain chemistry equalized. I felt good.

"So, tell me more," I said to him.

"I kinda said everything." He shrugged apologetically.

It was true. I could tell that he had exhausted his Get To Know Me repertoire in a rapid fire, if strangely monotone, fifteen minutes, like it had been professionally prepared by a marketing expert. He liked Delta blues. Struggled with acid reflux but found success with an exorbitantly expensive Swedish herb. He was in some kind of business in which the business was money. He made enough to afford the waiting car and driver outside and, he intimated, a plane and a boat and perhaps a helicopter, but in some business not stuffy enough to demand he wear suits.

"I like to think of myself as an *Ad*venture Capitalist," he declared, putting practiced emphasis on that first syllable, and proud of it.

"Aha. . ." I said.

"Simon says, I'm supposed to talk about you, my companion that is," he said.

"You said, 'Simon says.'"

"I did. Anyway, first analysis: You are somewhat peculiar, but you also have good muscle tone," he told me.

"Oh, thank you, on both counts," I said.

"I imagine some might find it off-putting if a partner's personality is too pronounced, but I can see how it might also be sexually attractive, especially combined with a statistically above average body like yours."

"Statistically?" I asked.

"Can I ask you what you think about mine?" he asked.

"Your?"

"Muscle tone. Scratch that. Bone structure. Face to start. Yours is also objectively appealing," he said. "Simon said compliments are a net positive."

"Right," I said.

"But again, it's your behavioral ticks that are read as 'endearing' that probably puts suitors at ease, right?"

"You tell me," I said.

"Yes," he answered.

I swallowed the last two pieces of sushi, earmarked for him, from a plate we were sharing.

"And *your* personality?" I asked.

"I don't follow," he said.

"Do you want my opinion on that, to go along with your bone structure?"

He thought about it for a moment. "Not necessary," he said.

There was no wife, no children, despite being a good ten years older than me. Unlike Craig, Norman did indeed have good muscle tone. In fact, he had bona fide muscles, a few of them at least, despite the little round belly that seemed cast in the same mold as his head. No doubt he paid someone a good amount of money to put him through the paces at a private gym somewhere, maybe on his helicopter. He bought his tight biceps but for some reason decided not to spring for more hair. His glasses were expensive, too, but unflattering, like a little boy impersonating an astronaut. Doubtless he had no defense against salespeople. He was like one of my puppets, only he relied on a dozen different hands to help operate him. He kept looking at my boot as if it might be something he should get and hadn't yet been informed by his stylist. Thankfully he was too socially awkward to be arrogant. He was a *shlemiel* on top of being a nebbish. Some women would have eaten him, and his assets, up. Not my thing. Money was never a good enough excuse to me to put up with a man I wasn't gaga over. Though I'll admit he had his charms. His weaknesses, from his chin to his struggle to empathize or make eye contact, were endearing. The Equipage, also a big trigger. Besides, he'd done me a huge favor. He'd been my excuse to leave, thereby avoiding Clarissa. I owed him at the very least my attention and my particular insight into human nature.

"But what do you want?" I asked him.

"Want?" he asked.

"You have so much. Don't you want any of it? Isn't that why you go for it?" I asked.

He was lost. Maybe he wasn't driven by desire. Maybe for him the only thing that made sense was closing the loop, balancing the equation, striking the algorithm; money was just a side effect, and billions were just a matter of scale. The only thing he wanted was the next problem to solve. It was a terrible place to be.

"Imagine something that you can't have," I told him. A weird, confused look came across his face. "I know. But try. And then pretend that you can have it." As he pondered, I took the opportunity to signal for more *saké*. A good thirty seconds passed, which, despite how it sounds, is actually a very long time to sit at

a table with someone in a restaurant and say nothing while they think of an answer to a pretty basic, if important, question. I figured I'd get some version of his Rosebud, the lost emblem of his soul tossed away by a hard-driving father or sacrificed to grief. A dead mother maybe.

As I waited for him to struggle to answer, I felt eight years old again, maybe because Norman himself looked like a little boy, face all screwed up trying to figure out what was going on inside him. I had a good childhood. I was loved. But there is a loneliness you feel in that part of life. Childhood moves at breakneck speed after all. As much as it is a time of growth, it is also defined by one loss on the heels of another. Watching Norman confront an uncertainty like that broke my heart. Maybe it was my brain chemistry reaching critical mass—the canaries, the *saké,* the mercury in the *sushi*, the adrenaline of the close call with Clarissa—but I couldn't hold it in. I cried.

"Oh," Norman said, exhaling and then taking a deep breath. "Wow."

I'm a quiet crier. Really, I gasp noiselessly, face wet and red, until I'm dizzy, then, when focusing on getting my dizziness under control, I often forget my upset. It didn't go that far. Still, Norman was terrified. He had no idea what to do. He kept staring at my hands, or just over my shoulder. To be fair, though, he had kind of done that throughout the entire date, but it wasn't really a date, just dinner, just a getaway driver. It was as if the space between us became thick like gelatin but through the blurriness I still felt a kind of connection, like those strange creatures that live at the very bottom of the sea, kindred ghosts that pulse with weird self-generated light among the frigid, syrupy ocean. He didn't know me at all. I could be anyone. Just a stranger who cries at dinner.

"I'm sorry," I told him. "I guess I'm pretty stressed."

"I believe you," he said.

"Thanks."

"Does that happen a lot?" he asked.

"To me, or people in general?" I asked.

He took a second to consider. "You."

"Yes," I said.

"I have a decent position in Cannabis futures. Canada mostly."

"Oh?" I asked, not understanding the non sequitur.

"It helps people relax," he explained. "First impression. Off the cuff. What would you think of cannabis-infused lunchmeats?"

"I'd think very lowly of them. I'd hate them in fact. I'm sorry," I said. He

waved it off. I ordered green tea ice cream and a cup of green tea. "I was trying *not* to see someone," I told him as I held the lumpy little ceramic cup in both my hands and sipped. He had no idea what I was talking about. "You asked me before if I was trying to avoid something bad."

"Okay. You don't like this person?" he asked.

"This person, no, I love. It's me sometimes I cannot stand."

"I believe you," he said. And then, sort of, he smiled. I can't tell you how much I needed that awkward crinkle of his mouth. Hesitant as it was, it was also something real, something at least trying to be human.

"Thanks," I said.

He was kind enough to send me home in his expensive car. The look of fear that came across his face when I started to cry never left him. He told me he needed to walk and clear his head. I believed him. I turned around and watched him walk all the way down the block without once looking at his phone. He must have been wrecked. Despite how well fed I was, I felt terrible. I don't really like to frighten people. As girls, Leslie and I would hide in our bedroom closet to scare one another. I always knew when she was in there because she'd be too scared to stay inside with the door completely shut. I feigned terror just to make her feel better and let her get it over with before she scared herself more than me. But I was fine hiding in the dark for long periods, waiting patiently for her to come upstairs, to start reading or playing with her dolls. And just when she was comfortable and fully absorbed in her contentment, I leapt out, shouting at the top of my lungs. One time she screamed so loud she burst a blood vessel in her eye. At school they teased her for a week. They called her Cyclops. They called her Bloody Mary.

I didn't feel any better in how I prosecuted myself with Norman. I tried to explain this and the rest of the disastrous evening to Suleiman, his driver, going back a few days to my wounded ankle, my experience with Josiah. Even though I left out the episode with the dysfunctional toilet, I couldn't stop crying. Suleiman was patient, said nothing but for the occasional clearing of his throat. He'd never been to Sunnyside before, he told me, after some prodding.

"It's wonderful," I told him. "Are you an artist, Suleiman?"

"Miss?" he asked.

"An artist? A creator?" I asked.

"No, I don't think so," he said.

"You're lucky," I said.

“I hope so, Miss,” he answered.

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Chapter 13

A Proposal

Saturday passed without incident. I had leftover sushi for breakfast. I rested my foot. I swallowed a couple of canaries. I made some token efforts at tidying up my apartment. If we were to be stuck at home for two weeks I might as well make it more livable. After wiping the toothpaste spots off the mirror and sweeping the bathroom floor with my sock, I gave up and instead took a leisurely walk around the neighborhood. How wonderful the mix of chilly air and strong sunshine, like a cake swirled up sweet with chocolate and tart with berries. It was just another reason why I loved this city so much. It was a rough place, but it was generous. And as crowded as it was, there was always a place for one more (which also meant there was always someone waiting to take your place). I fit. My life was human-sized and real. It was good to be out of that other world, of super tall towers and super rich people, of bullies like Rogan and lost rich guys like Norman. My mom had loved that my new neighborhood was called Sunnyside. Leslie was suspicious in general of New York no matter the neighborhood. On one of her visits, she got shitfaced at a Chinatown dumpling house and vomited onto Pell Street and all over the strappy sandals she had bought that weekend from a street vendor in Union Square. To her, the city was one big con game inhabited by preening fools. She wasn't entirely wrong. She just couldn't see how beautiful it was at the same time. We preened for a reason, to show off our plumage, to make the forest ring with our song.

Queens, especially, had so much to recommend it. It wasn't Brooklyn, for one thing, which can be wonderful, but is pretty much already discovered—and what's been discovered has been irrevocably changed. Queens was full of surprises. It's a community filled with communities. It's where all those many different people you pass on the sidewalk while working in "the City" actually

live. Queens is real. I know I'm probably romanticizing it, but I'm good at that kind of thing. Oh, and just like Brooklyn, Queens has its own big cemetery too, though nothing like Green-Wood. At Calvary, however, a photograph taken from a fortuitously placed camera suggests that its many rows of headstones are in fact a continuation of the Manhattan skyline in the not so distance—or that the skyline is a continuation of the cemetery, it's a matter of perspective. But otherwise, we have those little front yards with birdbaths and motorcycles, Thai-taco fusion and rock-climbing gyms, mosques and car washes. A couple of weeks after I moved in, Craig and I enjoyed a delicious meal at a Romanian restaurant we'd stumbled upon, Danubius on Forty-First Street, after he helped paint the ceiling in my bathroom. Then there was sex, of course.

I walked until my ankle started to ache, which was much farther from home than I had intended to go. When I got back, I took another canary. I'm not sure when I fell asleep. I woke when Norman texted. He wanted to go to dinner again tomorrow night.

"last chance b4 the whirl ends or something," he wrote, followed next by, "world."

He'd had fun the other night, despite how I cried. It had "affected him," but he had sat with his feelings, as Simon had suggested during an emergency three a.m. tele-session, and it turns out I made him feel good, but it still wasn't clear why.

Just as promised in the itinerary, Norman's assistant, Abby, sent me, Suleiman picked me up the next night at six-thirty. I offered to sit in the front—I'm very egalitarian that way—but Suleiman demurred, locking the door before I could even grab the handle. During our ride I teased out that he had a daughter and a son, Aisha and Ibrahim, and a wife, Fatima, in Morris County, New Jersey. I insisted he put the radio on to a station of his choosing. It was remarkably difficult for him to choose. Finally, we settled on a football match from Uruguay. I asked if he knew anything about either of the teams, or did he cheer for his home country. He was born in New Jersey and was a Yankees fan, he told me and said nothing else for the rest of the ride.

"I can't tell you how it cheered me to get Norman's call," I told him. "I love Italian food!"

Suleiman left me in front il Pulpo, a stark, if impeccably patinaed, trattoria in the West Village. Chairs, tables, plaster walls—everything was the color of the best bread you've ever eaten. Norman was waiting at a corner table beneath a

skylight, half hidden behind an arrangement of flowering olive branches in a voluminous chipped amphora.

"Look," I pointed at the shadows moving in the bright yellow windows above us as I sat down across from him. "I love looking into other people's houses."

"Really?" Norman asked. "So do I."

"If I could, I'd take the back off that building. I'd go right to the heart of things," I said. Norman glanced up nervously. "They can't see us," I reassured him, even if I knew that they could, and probably clearer than we could see them. In fact, they probably looked down with bottomless annoyance at the charming grotto-like room at the back of the restaurant where privileged guests sat in private, served by attractive waitstaff in smartly designed muslin jackets. The apartments behind the restaurant weren't great. Old rowhouses left over from the bohemian days of the Village, awaiting ascendant finance professionals and their unimaginative gut renovations. In the meanwhile, they were filled with cat ladies and old communists and aging gays in the same rent-controlled flats they'd had for decades.

"Where do you live, Norman?" I asked.

"Right now?" he asked.

"Well, not at this very moment, but in general."

I could see it wasn't an easy question for him to answer. "Where should I live?"

I saw that that was the problem. Norman could live wherever he wanted. He could have a new home every week. He could live on a yacht. He could live on an airplane forever circling the globe.

"Well, what feels like home to you?" I asked.

"Feels like. . .?" Another tough one. Poor guy, he just wanted to have a nice dinner.

"Let's eat!" I said. "And leave the feelings for later."

Norman exhaled, seemingly glad to be off the hook. I ordered broccoli rabe. I ordered lobster ravioli. I ordered tartufo. Norman ate only a salad. Someone apparently had told him to do that.

"Last month I tried fasting," he explained.

"Fasting?" I asked, my mouth full, hoping my eyes and bulging cheeks conveyed my interest.

"Going all day, two even, without eating, even though I was completely hungry, and my body hurt so much it was crying out for food."

"Why on earth would you do such a thing?" I asked him. He gave me a funny look and then ordered another salad.

"It's funny you should bring up homes," he said.

"Funny?"

"Remember we had sushi?" he asked me.

"Um, sure, like two days ago," I said cautiously.

"When you asked what I really wanted. It kept me up all night thinking about it," he said.

"Oh, I'm sorry," I said.

He waved it off, but I could tell the memory of it still bothered him. "If I don't get my four hours a night, I get weird. Anyway, I'd like to make you a proposition," he said. I was on my last raviolo. I took the time to chew it, my eyes on him the whole time. I nodded casually. I didn't want to give away how apprehensive I was. Did he mean a Robert Redford-type of proposition? A proposal of the indecent sort? I swallowed.

"I can recognize and predict certain movements that are driven by markets but also by patterns repeating and reliable patterns of behavior. I mean big-picture scenarios. Winds of change, etc. But the other stuff, you know. . ." he said.

"Stuff?"

"The. . . real stuff. The warm stuff. The small stuff."

"The little picture," I offered. Norman nodded.

"I'm not a good judge. I get confused. A lot of things don't mean what they mean. A lot of signals, they're misleading," he said. "I never know who's telling the truth, completely. Even our waiter—"

"I know, he was like '*Good evening,*' and I was like '*Fuck You!*'" I said.

"What? Oh. I get it. See? I didn't get that right away. You weren't telling the truth," he said.

"Right. I was making a joke," I told him. "Being ironic."

"I'm bad at being ironic," he said.

I wanted to tell him that his entire being was ironic. That it was ridiculous that so much wealth had been put in the hands of a person who had trouble reading the most basic facial expressions. It seemed unlikely that he had some complicated deviance to propose. Sex for him was probably like needing to sneeze, free of any psychological dimension at all.

"Tell me," I said. "No irony. What exactly do you want to propose?"

"I'm alone," he said. "I think you are too."

"I am not—" but I caught myself. "I am not sure what you mean," I said.

"I think you're *curious* about me because you like weird things," Norman said. "But in the end, I still don't *interest* you." I shrugged, not entirely sure what the difference was supposed to be. "Overall, though," he suggested, "for the likely timeframe, I think that's a sustainable formula."

"Sustainable? Timeframe?" I asked.

"Marry me," he said.

"Marry—" I nearly laughed, but then it struck me as so. . . well. . . pathetic I nearly cried out. I nearly hugged him. I nearly smacked him in the face. "Now hold on."

"It's okay. I kind of get the feeling you're not really interested, which is why I am."

The waiter appeared. "Fuck you!" I said to the waiter. Neither he nor Norman got the joke. This is when I decided to order another glass of wine.

"I know my wealth distorts the perception people have of me," Norman said.

"I think it might distort you entirely."

He nodded and looked himself up and down as if seeking evidence of the fact. "In a way you are right. I'm. . . I'm different," he said, after a difficult moment. "The things that matter, to me, that matter to other people about me, they are singular."

"Like the fact that you can't tell me where you live," I said.

"Yes. And it is, well. . . I suppose the word is *lonely*. Now, marriage, there's been some statistical erosion, yes, but overall, again, it's a solid institution with proven results," he said.

"My parents are married," I said.

"So, you know what I'm talking about."

"Will we have sex?" I blurted, unaware that I had before I heard the words exit my mouth. "I mean, don't be ridiculous."

"Probably," he said flatly. "But just to get it out of the way, because we'll both be curious. But that's not what this is really about."

"Because you could have sex with a thousand women who are much hotter than me," I said.

"Correct. The same way you can't afford to eat at this restaurant," he said.

"You, sir, really know how to charm a woman."

"You are sexually attractive. Simon told me I should reassure you of that," he said.

"Here's to Simon," I said, raising my glass.

"But it's an anchor I'm looking for," he said.

"Ah. Sounds drowny," I said.

"Once in a while we'll go places and you'll help me with things, like getting jokes. Or funerals. I do business with a lot of really old people. I always say the wrong thing. Because, in a way, I don't know who I'm supposed to be when I'm saying it. I need to be something. Something real. Rich is not real," he said.

"But ours wouldn't be a real marriage," I answered. "And from where I'm standing, rich seems pretty real."

Again, consternation, but it passed.

"There'd be conditions. There are sixteen documents you'd have to sign. Abby," he rolled his hand, alluding to the absent assistant who'd sent the night's itinerary, "can forward you a PDF if you want to review. You can have your own apartment too. There'll be a shared domicile, somewhere, anywhere—a few of them, likely—but you can have your own space. In fact, I'll buy that apartment from the other night."

"You'd buy me. . .?" I couldn't finish my sentence.

"Too much? It's a lot, right? I'll buy you that painting, your friend's really nice painting," he said. I almost choked on a big spoonful of tartufo.

"We're not friends. . . anymore," I told him when I recovered, surprised to say it out loud, maybe for the first time ever.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Real life," I said, quaffing both of the little glasses of dessert wine that had magically appeared at our elbows. I didn't have it in me to explain to this strange, obscenely wealthy man, how I had ditched Clarissa, for weeks giving noncommittal one-word answers to her texts, always claiming to be busy, to get right back to her, until they stopped. I just couldn't bear to describe how I had shrunk my life, made sure I didn't wind up at the same place as Clarissa, a party or a bar popular with our classmates, or even her show, though I did finally stop by one night close to when it was closing. I called the gallery first and asked for her, only to make sure she wasn't around. The show was amazing, of course. I said nothing to Norman of how seeing *Birthday (The Bridge)* again, up in the penthouse, had terrified and thrilled me. How it reminded me of what a coward I was, of how consumed with self-pity I'd been. I'd gone a little crazy since I'd last seen Clarissa, and then, of course, I'd gone too far and could never repair what I'd

broken. Maybe I'd grown up a bit, moved on to a different life, but it was a fragile stability. If I had my way, I'd never lay eyes on it, or that apartment, again.

"Listen, maybe I don't get jokes or don't know what to say at funerals, but I do understand human weakness. I do know when people are at a disadvantage. I made my fortune knowing that," he said.

"How reassuring," I said.

"I know you're in trouble. That you don't know which way to turn and maybe you're even starting to crumble a bit. Simon says accidents like yours are never really accidents," he said.

"Oh, does he?" I asked.

"I know that you probably got prescribed some painkillers for that ankle," he said.

"Canaries," I said. "You probably throw money at everything!"

"I never make an offer that doesn't make sense." He fiddled with his napkin, then looked at it, appearing disappointed.

"Listen, Norman. No, I will not marry you, and I definitely don't want that apartment," I said.

He shrugged. "Then what do you want?"

"Why do you care?" I asked, shaking my empty wineglass at my mouth.

"I'm not sure. But I do. I want to do something—how did Simon put it?—nice," he said.

"Marriage isn't *nice*," I answered, the glass still teetering in front of my lips.

My phone rang. Good timing or bad, I wasn't sure. I ignored it the best I could. I'd left the volume very high and even from deep inside my handbag, like Norman's body products, it infused the air with island rhythms.

"It wouldn't have to be forever, just long enough that it made sense for us to get divorced, because, of course, we shouldn't be married. But we would be authentically divorced," he explained.

"And then that would be your anchor?" I asked. "Something to believe in."

"It's a matter of identity. I want to be able to say, 'This is who I am.'"

"Married. Then divorced," I said, putting down the glass with more force than was needed.

"Authentically. Yes. I really need something authentic," he said.

"There's always olive oil," I suggested, slapping the side of the amphora, and earning a dusty cough from its depths.

"Look, I know it sounds unusual. . ." he began.

"No, it makes a lot of sense, although personally I take identity very seriously. It isn't something you put on and take off on a whim," I told him.

"It's not a whim. It's a plan, and a good one," he said.

What if it was? I asked myself. For millennia people had been enjoying the security, even just the sense of security, that marriage confers. Colder deals had been struck. People married for money, for power, for citizenship or immunity from prosecution. Norman, the Nebbish, only wanted to feel like he was something besides a pile of money. Wasn't that admirable, even if it was a very low bar to set?

"Let me ask you again," he said, "What do you *want*?"

The bastard. Turning the tables on me like that. Making me actually think. You'd probably say, Well, Maya, isn't your life just a series of desperate dives towards what you think you want? How could you not know what it is you've been reaching towards? I knew that I hadn't ever achieved it. That it had been a series of not-so near misses. That even my work with Athena, while I enjoyed it, while I was good at it, wasn't exactly fulfilling. Norman had a gift for identifying weakness. I had a gift for ignoring it completely. Who knows, maybe we would have made a good couple. I wanted to answer him honestly.

"I guess I want to do something meaningful. I. . . I don't care if it's beautiful, or if a lot of people know about it. I don't even care if it doesn't last. I just. . . I want to do something that matters," I told him. I was surprised to hear myself say it.

"See! Right there. That's what I'm talking about. Authentic. Great stuff."

I wished I felt the same way. I wished I could have been as excited as Norman was. I wished I hadn't eaten so much. I wished my ankle didn't ache. I wished I could just go away and hide and figure it all out. I wished life didn't whip us around the way it did. I wished there were no questions to answer. I wished people were easier. I wished I didn't sound like such a whiny tween. I wished I didn't want anything. I wished I didn't keep imagining Norman naked, bringing me breakfast in bed, all burnt toast and weak coffee, pulp in the orange juice. Sometimes I thought I derived the same comfort from a naked man as I did walking in the woods at the edge of our little town. Force and fragility all mixed up together. Peeling bark. Soggy fallen branches turning back into soil. Grayness. Purpleness. The odor of decay and renewal. Also, yes, hardness.

A double espresso arrived. I inhaled it.

"You should be married, Norman, but it should be to someone you love," I

said.

"You don't know how hard that is," he said. My purse erupted with Calypso music again. "You sure you don't want to get that?" he asked.

I reached into my bag and brought the loud hot beats of the Caribbean into that hushed dining room. It was Leslie. She'd called before too. I silenced it. I've never silenced her before. She'd know it too.

"Sorry," I said, shoving my phone back in my purse. "Look! Canaries!" I took out the bottle and tapped a couple into my palm. "Care for one?"

He looked me right in the eye and smiled. "I do."

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Chapter 14

I Needed to Do Something Big. Something Catastrophic

We had sex. I know, what a cliché. When we were done, I didn't like him any more or any less. I didn't regret what we had done. It wasn't half bad, canaries notwithstanding. Norman had a nice body. Nature hadn't shortchanged him anatomically, quite the opposite, though I'm not sure he knew. Sex is a great leveler. There in my little apartment in Sunnyside, he looked like any other man, well hung or not, creeping up on middle age but still holding it together, endearing in the way his smile lines were just beginning to suggest themselves, or his firm little tummy, Dad-like and boy-like at the same time, ready to put in the work. He was a formulaic but attentive lover, and what the hell, it worked.

"This is a nice place," he said, as he lay next to me in the glow of bedside lamp draped with a counterfeit Hermès scarf we used at a late nonagenarian philanthropist's Park Avenue duplex, a cluttered family home straight out of a *Catcher in the Rye*, a book every American high schooler was once forced to read.

"Really?" I asked.

"It's you," he answered. And it was: the streetlight peeking in through the matchstick blinds I had rescued from the trash, the mismatched kitchen chairs that I'd painted Magritte-sky blue, the exuberantly papered bathroom.

"What about these puppets?" he asked, lifting the cover of the box at the foot of the bed. I didn't correct him. "They're cool! You really made them? I've never made anything in my life except money." He started humming. "Hey, what's that song?"

My old laptop was running through an old playlist.

"'These Days,'" I said.

I had turned Clarissa onto Nico, the Velvet Underground, Iggy Pop, and all

the music that my dad loved. He had famously wooed our mom to *Chelsea Girl*. His heroes were all awkward and geeky and a little off-putting. I understood the allure. So did Clarissa.

"Sing it!" she'd demanded as we sat in my room, luminously drunk on Kosher wine that we'd swiped from a Womyn's Seder we crashed.

"But she's so much better!" I said. No one could match Nico's breathy melancholy, her strangely-accented English. It was a voice from a different time, too, when the city still had space for long contemplative walks down lonely streets in the middle of the afternoon.

Anyway, I couldn't sing it. I could never sing in front of people, and Clarissa I think was genuinely disappointed, maybe for the first time.

"It's sad and beautiful," I explained to Norman.

"Sad and beautiful," he repeated.

I peed and we had sex again. It was better the second time. I'd have to be careful. I couldn't let my physical attraction to him cloud my judgment. I hadn't realized how rote Craig and I had become. How easy it was to settle for that rather than put myself out there. I almost never thought about men. Although he was easy to talk to, Norman really only had that one quality I was looking for. I swung my leg over him again, eager to get it out of my system. The parts fit nicely. It would be easy to settle for that too. He proposed marriage once more but we both knew it was halfhearted at best, something I think he had to do out of some gentlemanly obligation.

"You're a good kisser," I told him.

"Oh yeah?" he asked.

"Present, but not overbearing. Soft, but not soggy."

He was paying very close attention, making careful mental notes, I could see. Perhaps he'd have Abby work up a whitepaper on the topic.

"Is there someone else?" he asked afterwards.

I laughed. "Someone else than what?" I asked.

"No one. I better go," he said. "Lockdown! Sorry." For a moment he put his hand on his wallet.

"Don't you dare."

"I wasn't! I mean, maybe I was but not because. . . you know."

"I know," I said. "Learn to be generous with something else, in your relationships at least. You have a lot to give, and the best things in life are free," I

said. He gave me a funny look. "It's a song. Actually, forget it. The song means the opposite thing."

"Ah, music and me, we don't have the best track record," he said.

"Good night, Norman. You should find a nice girl," I told him. "Really, she doesn't even have to be nice."

He left. I felt good. I turned on my TV. I couldn't afford a cable package, but, thankfully, I got broadcast reception. The virus was ravaging the political class of Iran. It was in Italy and China. There were ominous drumbeats and dismissive ridicule. Everyone was just like Norman, I guess: We all wanted something to believe in, only we all believed in something different, or at least we found it impossible to believe the same thing as someone we didn't like. I'm not sure what I believed at the time. Two weeks inside? How was that supposed to happen? It would be strange at first, and funny, probably, but by Friday and the first weekend that the bars and clubs and theaters and restaurants would be closed, people would start to get annoyed. Another weekend seemed improbable. Surely, we'd come to our senses before then. As far as the virus itself, I wasn't worried. I'd had my flu shot back in November. I washed my hands all the time. In fact, I had at least six different soaps in the bathroom.

"A lot of soaps," Norman had, in fact, said when he emerged from my shower, as pink as a mussel plucked from its shell. They were takeaways from jobs. The bathroom was always a big part of the story, Athena instructed. I let myself imagine a leading lady taking long luxurious soaks in big white tubs set next to soaring walls of glass, drying herself in rich, textural towels, scenting the air with hand-pressed Japanese incense cones and vetiver candles. She was like Ownership, not so much a person but an embodiment of a state of being. Struck by inspiration once, I made a note to perhaps repaper my bathroom with the artistic wrapping that these pricey little bars were packed in. Each one was a memory. A carriage house on East Seventy-Eighth. A Tribeca mini-loft. A brownstone in Brooklyn Heights. Each wrapping was a fragrant talisman, something a sophisticated witch might possess. I was protected. I rattled the bottle of canaries in the pocket of my robe like a maraca, but I was sated. I wondered what kind of a lover Josiah might be. I turned off my TV and tried to sleep, but I couldn't. My mind raced with all kinds of ridiculous free-associations, soaps and Umbrian delicacies and the abrupt borderline where Norman's thickly-furred chest met his obviously waxed back and shoulders. My evening with Norman had been very restorative, and instructive to boot. He'd revealed a scar on his belly. When he

was much younger, he'd donated part of his liver to his cousin, but the cousin died anyway. I needed to be like Judith, like Artemisia, like Clarissa. I needed to do something big. Something catastrophic. Something the world would remember. Something worth losing. I promised myself I would never crawl into bed in a store in the middle of the day to have a panic attack ever again. Before that ever happened, I would smash everything down. I'd give up everything. I'd stand over the burning wreckage and declare it mine.

The idea comforted me, and I soon fell asleep.

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Chapter 15

Introducing Miss Floor

I woke later, as if pushed out of a dream. The curtains were open to a blank and bright sky, a mirror in the dark. I rose and stood in the middle of my room, naked and blue, erased by moonlight. The night was so silent, I wasn't sure for a moment that my dream had ended at all. I looked at my shadow splashed across the floor, elongated and strange. How beautiful was the evidence of us, even the patch of darkness that we threw across things? Even our loneliness. In the queer emptiness of that moment, it felt like the only proof that I existed at all. A billionaire had peed in my shower, I'm pretty sure. I had a box of neurotic puppets in an old air conditioner box next to my bed. I had a plastic boot and a bottle of pills and not much else. A sharp stab of fear shot through me—it was wrapped up with embarrassment and shame and regret and humiliation and a deep longing for more of the same, for a lifetime of those feelings, because as devastating as they were, they were real, they were life, and to lose them was the saddest thing I'd ever encountered—and then it passed. But it was enough to have even a glimpse of my obliteration. I'd never considered that before. The fragility of my life. The thunderclap of grief that sat right below everything. I walked every day in a world that for all its dangers was still pretty receptive to keeping me alive, and I'd never given any real thought to what would happen if it all went away.

"You're okay, Maya," I told myself, louder than I'd intended. My shadow flashed monstrous and flat in the passing of an unexpected cloud. "Yeah, I know, but I want to be something else."

I was halfway there before I knew where I was going, and even when I did know, I still didn't know what I was going to do once I got there. From where I stopped on the corner of Madison Square Park, just a few blocks down Fifth Avenue at

Twenty-Sixth Street, the building was even more beautiful. A gleaming chandelier bauble. An elegant, faceted crystal set in a foundation of brick and mortar. It was lit up mostly on the lower levels, then more sporadically all the way up to the forty-eighth floor, then dark when it reached the penthouse levels—the building wasn't fully occupied—until it met the blinking red aircraft lights on the roof. It looked like one of those redacted texts released by the government or used in lawsuits. It looked like a censored novel.

Drawing near, I saw that Dan, the doorman, was at the desk. He spotted me on the sidewalk, strode over from the desk and pushed open the big glass doors. He recognized me even though we'd never actually spoken. His shift, overnight, was often ending when I arrived. I was a familiar face, but I was always Sheila's to deal with. I guess Dan's hand on the gleaming door was my last chance to turn around, to stop myself before I committed the crime of my life, but when a Manhattan doorman holds open a door to a luxury penthouse, what choice do you have but to pass through? He hurried to take his place again behind the desk where I knew there were monitors for the surveillance cameras, buttons to run the elevators, switches to open doors remotely. There were fresh flowers on the big marble desk. Sunflowers, if you can believe it, in early March. Whose bright idea was that?

"I keep trying to smell them," Dan said. "But nothing. How long do you think it will last?"

"Just a few days if we're lucky," I said. "Most flowers only make it that far."

He smiled. "Oh, I meant the lockdown," he said. "But hopefully that's short, too, Miss. Floor?"

"Miss Floor?" I asked. Did he think that was my name? No, of course he did not! He wanted to know my destination. He wanted to know where I *lived*.

Had I not considered it until that point? Had I only come to the tower to look upon it one more time before lockdown? To think, how a few hours earlier, Norman had offered it to me. Had I only been restless, aiming really to wind up at a bar or nightclub were one still open? All I knew was that I was drawn there. That it wasn't the moon, but the tower that had erased me with light and thrown my shadow across the floor, and that if I wanted to know the source of my pattern —the colored film pressed against the heat and glass—I'd find it there. I never planned to live there. I never planned to lie. I never planned to believe. I never would have believed it myself.

Or was I just going back to look at Clarissa's painting? Maybe before it was

too late.

"Forty-eight," I told Dan, where I knew the last completed apartments were. I guess that's where my deception began. Pretending to live here. To be Ownership. Speaking that number. It would have been too suspicious, after all, to see the elevator run all the way to the top. How did my mind know to operate with such efficient deceit? Dan nodded, and the elevator chimed a half dozen yards to my right.

The elevator cab, when it arrived, smelled strongly of disinfectant. It reminded me of the sex shops in Amsterdam junior year when Clarissa and I both were doing a semester abroad. She in Paris, me in Cardiff, for some reason. We met in Amsterdam for a weekend. We did everything stupid and typical. We got stoned on hash cookies. We gawked at the prostitutes in the windows. She called a stranger's bluff in a sleazy bar, and when he exposed himself on her dare, she laughed at his tiny penis. I felt bad for the man, but it was clearly exactly what he wanted. I remember he had such nice shoes. Then we saw them in a shop window, and I bought them! They fit both of us perfectly. That was another thing about Clarissa and me. Our feet were the same size. We shared a lot of shoes in those few years that we were friends. That kind of thing will bond you to a person, or maybe it will make you hate them. "*Forty- eight*," the elevator sang in an affectless, possibly female, voice. I gasped.

It was the last of the Loggia Level. A block of floors situated below the penthouses, big two- and three-bedrooms with killer views and little Juliet balconies pitched as outdoor space. I stepped off the elevator onto the dark carpeted hallway, everything rendered in sophisticated blacks and grays and spot-lit with bright pools of cool LED light. It was so still and new and precise I thought perhaps I was in a computer rendering. At any moment, the building would be turned around, and, like a dollhouse, we'd see there was no back wall, that there had been an unseen hand behind everything, and that I'd not brought myself here at all. Barely an hour earlier, as I looked out my window, I saw the moon there waiting for me. It reminded me how small I really was, how far outside of things I had put myself. That I had been making all the wrong moves. I told myself this was a step in the right direction, even when I nearly fell over a pile of packages left by someone's door. 48-C. Two bedrooms, two-and-a-half baths on the corner, west and south views. They were all addressed to J. Weinberg-Patel. Reading that name reminded me how swiftly the world had gotten unreal. J. Weinberg-Patel was a serious person. A homeowner. A recipient of parcels. He,

she, they, belonged somewhere. They had their story. It was hyphenated, a married name, most likely. They had their anchor. I pressed my face up to the door. I was doing it again. I was losing myself in the dream of another person. Most of the time I didn't even give them the courtesy of being real. I was a hungry ghost. It was barely an hour since I'd stirred from my dream. I was tired down to my bones. I could have fallen asleep right there, just like that, if I hadn't heard footsteps, the whisper and slap of slippers or flip-flops, just on the other side, then the door itself being unlocked. I leapt into the stairwell and made the six flights to the penthouse in no time before tumbling back out into the landing, panting, trying to catch my breath, aware—as I hopped on one leg and fished in my bag for Athena's key to the service entrance—of my throbbing ankle and the fact that I had forgotten my boot.

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Chapter 16

I'd Done Something Very Bad

Right away I threw open the double doors of the big refrigerator, blasting the dark kitchen with light. I was starving. The apartment had been hastily abandoned as lockdown approached. Clearly no one thought it was their responsibility to clear the fridge after Rogan's showy open house party. There was wine and beer and mineral water, frozen pastries meant to be heated in a rented oven, cookies, elegant crudités, shrimp cocktail, samosas—all food, I'd remind you, that would have spoiled had someone not eaten it—as well as the fully-stocked pantry of snacks and bulk nuts and dry goods, lentils, bulgur, cashews, in sleek PABA-free, stay fresh, acrylic containers that Athena and I had put together, just for show.

Had it not been for the open door of a fridge full of cold *hors d'oeuvres*, you'd barely even know that alabaster sanctum was a kitchen. Drawers and shelves and cupboards and appliances were all hidden behind the seamless millwork panels. The sink secreted underneath an impossibly frictionless sliding stone countertop that also revealed an induction cooktop and butcher block prep surface. Kitchens were no longer hidden away as the exclusive domain of staff but elevated to a kind of noble throne of nurture. At this price point, however, the messy evidence of labor could still be hidden, everything made exquisitely minimal, spotless, hygienic as the high altar of a zealot butcher. From this auspicious post I could indeed imagine sacrifices of the blood or maybe fire varieties, made in the witness of the glittering godhead beyond the glass. But I shook that out of my head. Exhausted and famished, I slid down against the wall until I was sitting on the floor. A canary, a healthy slug of chardonnay, and a sleeve of frozen shrimp promised to talk my ankle out of its revolt. I saw Josiah's painting in the darkness on the other side of the living room. Oh, it was fine. It was perfectly fine. It was,

of all things, a picture of himself, though you'd only know that if you'd met him. It was very abstract, more about the bravado of paint than the psyche of the sitter. Instead, there was his well-formed jawline, that messy rumpus of hair, all rendered in a color palette that was as *au courant* as the crop of throw pillows Athena had *curated* for the sofa. He was today's man.

"You're fine," I told Portrait Josiah so he wouldn't feel as though he wasn't up to snuff. "You're good. You got this."

I dissolved with laughter for about ten seconds before the panic hit. This was so far out of my league. I'd done something very bad. I needed to get the fuck out of there right away. There were shrimp carcasses on the floor and bits of paper where I peeled off the label from the wine bottle. My shoes and socks had been kicked off. Oily handprints marked the floors, the counters, the appliances. It all glared back at me dirtily and my ankle throbbed like an agonized heart. I prayed for the pill to take effect and took another swig of chardonnay to encourage it along. I crawled on my hands and knees, picking up the mess I'd made, wiping away my evidence with my shirtsleeve. *What the fuck, Maya?* I asked myself as the panic continued to rise in me like an alarm bell, a drill to the front of my skull. My head was so heavy. Too clumsy and crude for a place like that. Gravity was pulling me down where I belonged, street level or worse. My forehead touched the cool stone floor. It felt so good I wanted to cry. I turned my head and rested my cheek on the chilly marble. As I did, I caught a glimpse of Clarissa's painting. So goddamn beautiful, even in the midst of a total meltdown.

"You're okay, Maya," I groaned. And I knew I was. After all, I was in the company of an old friend. In another life I could have called Clarissa right then and told her what I'd done. She would have loved it.

"You're insane!" she would have laughed. Thinking of it helped the buzzing in my head ease up. The coolness of the stone spread through my body. I relaxed. I was not insane. Who knew, maybe I'd done the sanest thing in my life.

"We are so okay." I sighed.

A burst of Calypso from my bag nearly gave me a heart attack. Oh, I knew I was wrong! They were already on their way to kick me out. It would be Athena, firing me, telling me how disappointed she was. It would be Rogan, who couldn't even remember who I was. Maybe it was Sheila, giddily waiting for the chance to throw me out for good. I never hated Calypso music so much as I did at that moment. Frantic to silence it, I dumped out the contents of my bag on the floor next to me; the spare pairs of underwear and toothpaste and power cords and

tampons and the toothbrush and toothpaste I always carried and never needed, my bottle of pills, which had yet to rise to the occasion and prove themselves loyal and effective, and, to my surprise, a sleek aluminum box that looked like a pencil case or packaging for a hipster cooking knife purchased off late-night QVC, matte black with embossed matte silver lettering. Inside were fifty perfectly pre-rolled marijuana cigarettes, made in Canada. There was a sixteen-page informational booklet inside outlining the mission statement, executive bios, and descriptions of the five strains of weed from which the joints were derived. Among the mess was the Post-it that had once been attached. "This is a gift. Norman." He had snuck it in my backpack earlier that night, the sweet son of a bitch. At least it wasn't lunchmeat. I found my phone finally, but I'd missed the call.

It was my mother. I think I was relieved.

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Chapter 17

The Dollhouse

When we were little, Leslie and I shared a dollhouse. It was the most perfect thing in my life. We'd inherited it from our grandmother, which is the perfect way for one to come into possession of such a thing. She'd furnished it with great thought and care, making much of the decor herself, saving up her girlhood pennies for trips to Woolworths to buy what she could not create. It was impeccably arranged, more well appointed than our own home. Each thing was part of a story, the one about the lady of the dollhouse, the one Grandma called Amelia but to us was just "Mrs. House." There were the kitchen curtains she'd bought when she got married. Over the tiny sofa, an afgan she knitted while she was pregnant. The crib upstairs was a gift from her mother-in-law. And in the bedroom closet, a priceless fur coat, an anniversary gift for five years of blissful marriage, made from a pair of our great- grandfather's fox-lined leather gloves from Lord and Taylor. It was with great solemnity that our grandmother offered it to us. At first Leslie and I were skeptical. It felt old fashioned, so colorless and Protestant compared to the provocative, plastic toys of our day—flamboyant prepubescents with nylon ponytails, enormous eyes and blinking electric hearts and bracelets. We had to be reminded to chime our thank yous and add on a hug for Grandma despite our misgivings.

But the dollhouse soon cast its spell on us. It was big, too big to fit on any of the furniture we had, the matching bed and dresser sets from IKEA, so it sat on the floor by the closet, and we sat in front of it as before a shrine. To me, the very fact that it wasn't real is what made it powerful. That it couldn't ever be. It could never be occupied. I stared into that isolated perfection in wonder and knew—even at that young age—that it was a symbol of Forever.

Until it burned to the ground.

Leslie and I had been conducting experiments in focusing the bright sunlight of our southern-facing bedroom through our grandmother's thick bifocals, which she'd left behind after her last visit from the home. We thrilled over the tiny white-hot spot of light that first burned a hole in a sheet of loose-leaf paper, then the cover of *Horton Hears a Who*, then the dollhouse's tiny flammable window treatments on one of the upstairs bedrooms. What an amazing thing it was to see real flames jump into being like that! We'd been too deep in our hysterics to notice the flames had spread inside. Soon the entire building was on fire, the wallpaper peeling, furniture melting, plastic double-hung windows turning brown and curling like eyelashes at the end of a very bad night.

"Maya," Leslie whispered, pointing at the tendrils of smoke filling our room. I guess we need yet another complicated noun of the capitalized German variety for that moment when you understand that destruction and chaos are as abundant as order and creation, perhaps even more so, that they just might be the engine that turned the universe. An acknowledgment of the magma-hot forces that burn a world into existence, coolness and structure being mere afterthoughts.

"Les," I said, feeling my face frozen into a mask of horror and, in some way, ecstasy. I felt closer to my sister at that moment than perhaps any other. We had faced the Primal together. We had both tasted devastation. It was, I'm not hesitant to say, erotic. We embraced, both of us warmed by the flames, aware that we had unleashed a brilliant force, that we'd unlocked the key to something adult. It was over almost as fast as it started. Our father burst into the room with the kitchen fire extinguisher. Our mother was reduced to tears, having coveted the dollhouse since she was a girl. It was an accident, we swore. A search of our room naturally turned up no matches or lighters. It was a mystery of spontaneous combustion. My mother wasn't buying it. She made us live with the intractable sooty ring on the broadloom for years even though our father hated it. The smell it retained came in handy later on.

"We weren't smoking," we insisted as teenagers. "It's the rug."

Leslie still smoked and she still hid it, and she still thought that my parents didn't know better. She was, in my opinion, often nervous and unhappy and had been for as long as we were sisters. As much as she had shared with me our love of burning our dollhouse to ashes, I know that she also missed it terribly, and I had the sneaking suspicion she blamed me for its destruction.

"You goaded me on," she insisted, not long ago as we reminisced on one of my visits home. "You always do that."

Our visits were always an opportunity to revisit and re-catalogue our secrets. Our sisterhood, as any sibling bond would be, was filled with them. But those secrets, like the girlhood that had produced them, seemed to diminish into the past, along with so many dreams—mine at least.

"Are you alright?" my mother asked on the other end of the phone. She had always had an uncanny sense of when Leslie and I had misbehaved. Doubtless, she had detected the complex array of stress hormones I'd broadcast all the way back to the kitchen table where she was no doubt sitting, a firm grip on the phone. She is preternaturally apprehensive. Cheery to the point of being fatalistic at times. The dollhouse incident had been a watershed moment in our rearing. She'd been knocked back by our capacity to destroy, and we had been witnesses ourselves to an unprecedented, if quietly terrifying, rage. Our dad had always been the bad cop in their dynamic, but it was he who had to calm us down afterwards, who promised us that all would be okay. It wasn't easy to believe him, and he knew it. My mom took to bed that afternoon. The next day she seemed alright, but Leslie and I knew things would never be the same. And they weren't. My mom began to be, I think, a little afraid of us.

"Why is there an echo?" she asked.

"Must be your phone," I said. Definitely not the big empty Calacatta kitchen in which I was a fugitive. A stowaway. A usurper. I opened Norman's sneaky gift and took out one of the joints. Apparently, according to the almost unreadable heavy metal gothic typeface on the label, pain relief was one of the benefits offered by the Purple Chemdawg variety. It was impossible to light on an induction stove. Thankfully, there were matches, intended to light aromatic candles, in one of the concealed drawers. I lit up and took a long, much appreciated, drag.

"You don't think this will affect the phones too, do you? When they cancelled basketball season, that's when I knew it was serious. Your father was dumbfounded. A place like New York. The *epicenter*. . ." she whispered as if it was the dirtiest word ever. Truth be told, it made me a little proud. When had I ever really been at the center of anything before?

"Where's Leslie?" I asked, mouth full of a mini-ganache, a fistful of salmon puffs at bat.

"She's asleep."

"Asleep? For how long?" I asked.

"Oh, all day really," my mother said. That was odd. Leslie almost never slept.

She was a well-known insomniac who catnapped for no more than twenty minutes at a time. She could fall asleep anywhere but never for very long. But she was also susceptible to periodic depressions. Her "poop outs," my mom called them. "I'm afraid your sister is not taking all this very well. I guess we're all just a little afraid for the future. Are you sure you have enough food, Honey?"

"Definitely," I said.

"I hate to think of you all alone."

"But I'm—" I stopped myself before I said: "I'm not alone." Of course, I was. I guess I hadn't really thought about that part.

"But you've always been okay on your own, haven't you?" my mother asked, a little sad and a little cheery all the same. "Oh, there she is." I heard the extension pick up. "Leslie, do you have anything to say to your sister?"

Leslie exhaled. Her silences were aggressive. Usually, my defense was to blow right past them, flood the field with words, crowd her out until she had no choice but to engage. But I wasn't in the mood to talk anymore. I only had a few hours in the penthouse. I just wanted to sit with Clarissa's painting. I just wanted to watch the sunrise, and then I'd go.

"I have to go," I told them, rubbing my ankle. "I need to make dinner."

"Oh," my mother said as if she hadn't thought about it. Me and cooking were rarely used in the same sentence. "Maya," she said, suddenly worried.

"I'll be fine, Mom," I said.

I gazed over to the windows and beyond them the Empire State Building. I had seen it at night, of course, but never so close, never from right in the middle, halfway up, like a peer. But despite the monolithic impression of all that Indiana limestone, the city seemed so fragile, made mostly of darkness strung together by the most delicate of lights, a dew-speckled web that would disintegrate in a strong wind, or even just the gentle breath of an intimate witness.

"Are you home?" my mother asked.

"Of course, why would you ask me that?"

"We don't want you to do anything foolish," she said.

"When have I ever done something foolish?" I asked.

I waited for Leslie to weigh in, to take advantage of the set-up I'd just given her to slam me. That she remained quiet only worried me.

"It's late, Mom. Almost midnight," I said.

"I can't sleep," she said.

"How did you know I'd be awake?" I asked.

"I had a feeling," she said.

"So, what's for dinner?" Leslie asked, dripping with skepticism. She knew I never cooked. She knew I barely had a kitchen.

"Oh, hey, Sis. Guess what I did tonight?" I asked.

"Something stupid," Leslie said.

"I slept with a billionaire, and he gave me fifty artisanal joints. He also offered to buy me this, er, *an*, apartment," I said as I puffed away.

"What is an artisanal joint?" my mom asked.

"It's bullshit is what it is," Leslie said.

"Is it?" my mom asked, nervous.

"I assure you it is the furthest shit from bull," I said. I was getting a little stoned, and maybe a little turned on thinking back to my date earlier. I wondered why Norman hadn't broken these joints out a few hours ago when the mood was right, but I'm sure he had his complicated reasons that made some kind of complicated sense. "*Nor*-man!" I sang, balancing a chunk of cheese on the Danish cutting board as I stood before the fridge, phone tucked under my chin. "He fed me *tar*-tufo. He fed me *ge*-lato."

"So, you're dating," my mom offered. "Maybe this isn't the best time, Hon."

"Mom, there is no billionaire. There are no artisanal joints," Leslie said. Indignant, I lost my grip on the cutting board, and it clattered on the plaza of white marble.

"Why is there an echo, Maya? Where are you really?" The pitch in Mom's voice rose higher. Soon only dogs would hear her.

"I am somewhere fantastic, metaphorically speaking. Meta-*morphically* speaking. I am a dry shitter. I am a transforming chrysalis. I am the shadow of the waxwing slain by the only-opens-a few-inches aluminum windowpane."

"Okay, there probably are joints," Leslie admitted.

"Maya, should I be scared?" Mom asked.

"Scared is sexy, Mama," I told her.

"Maybe you should come home, Honey," she said. "We can pull out the sleeper in the den."

The canary and the weed had found each other. The angels nested in unreachable treetops, in the soft green canopy of warm yellow sunshine. I walked back into the living room and took off my shirt and pants and stood in my underwear in front of Clarissa's painting. I was alive all over. I felt so right and strong. I could say anything. I was the truth.

"The sleeper smells like Grandma's pee, and everybody knows it," I said.

"Oh my God, Maya," Leslie said.

I laughed, and then I felt bad about it. I touched my fingertips to the painting. Then I said goodbye, and hung up.

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Chapter 18

The Broken Door

One of my first jobs after college was as a temporary overnight reception desk assistant at the Hotel Fitzpatrick covering for an employee who was on maternity leave. My shift ended at four a.m. and I'd walk the few extra blocks to Rockefeller Center instead of the closer Grand Central Station just to take in, for a little while longer, the rare joy of the empty and quiet streets. It felt unreal, the stoplights blinking for no one, the long vistas of asphalt running down the glass and steel canyons toward a crowded horizon. As still as everything was, though, it all hummed with potential, like a night-blooming garden. I was in love. Clarissa's painting, her Bridge, was the same. It glistened, cool and aloof, undiminished by the darkness. It was part of time, if that's not crazy to say. I sat with it for a long while. I felt like it would wait with me—wait for me—until the lights came back up. Or until something better happened. I wasn't sure what that was. There was probably something I really wanted and just couldn't name. Maybe if I was a puppet I could. Either way, I felt weightless in front of Clarissa's painting, relaxed for the first time all day—so much that I fell asleep, waking just a few seconds later when I pitched forward off the sofa and dropped the joint, along with some bruschetta, on the rug.

* * *

I dampened a hemp kitchen towel we had laid across a live edge cutting board (accompanied by a small sack of imported semolina flour and a sprig of rosemary) and used it to get up the chopped tomato from the carpet. Then I set the alarm on my phone for ten minutes before sunrise and crawled into the bed in the primary suite. It was the biggest bed I'd ever been in. It was the best. (That record had until that moment been held by the Baronet Suite at the Hotel Fitzpatrick,

FYI.). Rogan had insisted on real mattresses, top quality memory foam in every room. It was theater, what we did, but it couldn't ever be fake.

"It's like he is selling a mule, and these people will want to look at the teeth," Athena had said.

She hated the idea of anyone lying down on the beds that it took us so long to style and drape. She was a master at fluffing a pillow, at turning down a duvet, at making it look real, but perfect.

The bed was smoother and cooler than I'd anticipated. They were the highest thread counts imaginable. Numbers too large to conceive. My bare arms and legs were flattered. Those sheets were a slick gigolo smooth-talking me out of my modesty. A moment later, I was writhing in pleasure the way Leslie and I did when we snuck into our parents' big bed in that brief interval between our arrival home from school and my mother's return from her day at work as an office manager for our local dentist. For a while in the seventh grade, Leslie and I performed the same act religiously. We'd arrive home, drop our coats and book bags by the door, pour big glasses of soda and chug them (we were not allowed to eat outside the kitchen), then undress to our underwear in our bedroom and dash giddily down the hall to our parents' room, always so sunny and quiet in the afternoons. We'd leap inside the cool, neat expanse of their bed. We were enveloped in adulthood, or so we thought. Naturally, we never imagined our parents doing parental things in there. We weren't even sure about the mechanics yet. We played at getting as close to each other as possible without touching. If an errant toe or ankle brushed against one another, we shrieked like little girls.

I clicked off the little bedside lamp, an oxidized hand-blown glass lump that glowed like radioactive Play-Doh and cost six months of my rent. I saw my amber reflection in the windows. I was surrounded by night. They say the earth's core spins on its own axis, floats freely inside on its own accord. I sensed that turning in me, maybe for the first time ever. I was totally connected to the energy that powered the universe. It was quiet and profound and going in the other direction. You'd miss it if you weren't paying attention. It was only in the solitude and the silence, in the auspicious perch of the penthouse, that it became apparent. I wondered if that wasn't the real value of money, not to glorify oneself or to chase pleasure or even security, but to afford the circumstances that made us aware of our universal potential. It seemed contrary to most of the spiritual lessons I'd learned, that it was the opposite of money that did that, but I'd been wrong before. For one night I'd trust my gut. For one night I'd take advantage of this

awareness. For one night I'd be at the center of everything, and then, I told myself, I'd go back to Sunnyside and tough it out for two weeks. I could do that. With a direct line to the universal force of energy I could pretty much do anything. The fear that had woken me in my apartment had vanished. In fact, I was even a little bit proud. Oh, I'd have a story to tell, even if I could never tell Athena what I'd done. I'd have to cover my tracks perfectly. Well, who better to do it? Anyway, I'd quit my job, I decided. In a couple of weeks when things were normal again, I'd find a new way to make a living, and in the meanwhile, this was the best way to bid farewell. I was done with staging. I was done with dollhouses. For this final night, I'd be the doll.

I woke unsure of the time. My phone had died, but the sun had risen. I wrapped myself in the blankets and stepped out on the bedroom balcony. Gone was that familiar roar, the undercurrent of energy that you found no matter which neighborhood you were in or how high you climbed. The streets were empty below me. The world seemed to be frozen. I didn't like it. I understood then, that the situation was much more serious than I had allowed. I remember when my grandfather died, we saw him in the open casket. It wasn't his death that had so upset me, although it had indeed. Rather it was the emptiness I saw in the body he had left behind. How it was him and not him at the same time. I didn't know how it was possible. I cried over him and couldn't stop. Finally, my dad had to take me outside to the car where he turned on the radio and held me until I calmed down. Leslie thought I was faking it, but I wasn't. Emptiness was terrifying. There's no way for a child to understand exactly what that means, and I knew it. I was confronted with my powerlessness, with my ignorance. I wanted to overcome it. Despite their apprehensions, I made my parents buy me *We All Say Goodbye*, a book that explained death to young children. I never read it, but knowing it would always be there, some kind of explanation, was comforting.

I pulled the blankets tighter around me, shivering in the face of the empty city. It was still winter, even if the wind had lost its bite, and the sun felt newly warm on my face. Nature was bigger than anything, except maybe time. Either way, both were still at work. The sun rose and set. The wind still blew. Even if all human nature had stopped. Even if we thought we could stop time and fool nature. I can't blame any of us for what we each might have believed at that moment. Who, but the most cynical or pessimistic, could have imagined what was really to come? And who could know what we were really supposed to do, how we should have reacted? Everyone was an expert. Everyone was completely

ignorant. Is that how it will be when the end of the world really comes? Is that how it was at the very beginning?

I went back inside and took a bath.

The lady of the house Athena and I had imagined would never get to experience our *spa moment*, so why shouldn't I? It was I who'd bought those elegant little soaps. I'd found those delicately scented candles, that bristle brush made from an acacia branch by a women's cooperative in Sao Paolo. I who had rolled and folded those nubby Turkish towels. I had to pee, but first I tested the toilet. It purred with water-saving capability. It felt so good I flushed it again. I filled the tub and let loose one of the colorful eucalyptus bath bombs from the vintage apothecary jars I had found and sunk into its fragrant steam, sending water splashing over the edge of the capacious tub. I turned off the taps and enjoyed the uncanny silence. Triple-glazed windows. A dormant city. I was my own epicenter, safe and limitless.

I'd never been more wrong. That perfect silence was soon shattered by the gentle tinkling of keys. By voices in the hallway outside the elevator.

"It's gotta be one of them, Yo."

It was Hector the building manager, who'd been none too happy in the wake of the toilet incident. With him was Jimmy, the porter.

"I tried 'em all!" Jimmy protested. "What's it fucking matter? This place is empty."

"Ownership wants it marked empty," Hector told him.

"They're saying this lockdown is gonna last a month," Jimmy said.

A month! I couldn't believe what I was hearing, to say nothing of the fact that I was frozen with fear as I heard them go through a half dozen keys on the front door.

The night before, I had been ready to surrender the penthouse in the morning. To slip back into the stairway, then down to forty-eight, where J.Weinberg-Patel lived, then back on the elevators, into the sad, sleeping city and the tiny apartment I called home. I steeled myself now to be discovered. I wondered if I could talk my way out of it. I'd plead poverty. Homelessness. I was a victim of Queens! I had food and wine to offer. I had my body. That would be obvious. I was naked in the tub! Or, I thought crazily, I could simply hide. The apartment was enormous with so many doors, so many cupboards and closets and cabinets. Spaces under beds and behind sofas, behind drapes and potted trees. I doubt they were here to turn over every leaf. Of course, I'd left a mess in the

kitchen. The primary bedroom was obviously slept in. My phone was charging again on the nightstand. My underwear was in the mosaic bowl on the dresser. The apartment probably stank of eucalyptus.

"Ain't none fucking work!" Jimmy insisted.

I remembered then that after the toilet incident Rogan had changed the lock himself. It was only my luck that the service door lock hadn't been changed and that no one had thought to ask me for my key back. Also, I realized that Hector and Jimmy would try that service door next.

I ran stark naked and dripping wet—like the wind, I tell you! —to the end of the family wing and snatched the heaviest thing I could, a Botero-like bronze from the Brazilian mid-century desk in the den. I reached the service entrance before they did and brained the door handle with the chubby little statuette. It worked. The jangling keys were impotent. The door was fatally stuck.

"We'll have to wait till Ownership comes back. Let's just mark this one as vacant and move on," Hector said.

"Shit yeah. Fucking disease all over this bitch. Shit gets hard, fucking rich people just fly the fuck away," Jimmy said.

Which reminded me, as I stood there panting, dripping, heart pounding, and hopping on one foot, I needed a canary.

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Chapter 19

I Was Having Fun

I took a pill and got back in the bath. Before, I could have covered my tracks, but now, I'd fatally damaged the door handle and left a good scuff on the side of the small bronze sculpture, itself sitting in a puddle of water on the floor next to the tub, along with almost all the towels. Also, Dan the doorman had seen me the night before. If there was a hard drive for the security cameras, and I'm sure there was, I was on it.

The bath had gotten cold. I drew my knees up close to my chest and wrapped my arms around them. Everything was a double-cross, a fake-out. Life was highs and lows, one after another. Hope dashed by disappointment. Rot hidden inside of treasure. I wasn't the center of the universe, the point on which it all pivoted. I was as random and insignificant as an errant gas trail in the furthest depth of nothingness. I was the sum total of mistakes and bad decisions. I was alone, naked, and only by luck—and one good whack with a bronze statue—undiscovered. I would have cried had I not started to shiver, and for that I was grateful.

But then an angel asked me a question. A lovely yellow child of God told me not to worry. I had everything I needed. All I needed was a refreshed perspective, and that pharmaceutical analgesic gave that to me. The bathroom window was clear again, its fog dripping away in sad streaks. The empty city revealed itself again like a cloudy sky turning a brilliant, endless blue. "What an opportunity you have!" my chalky yellow seraphim declared. There was nothing calling me back to Sunnyside. Rent was paid. No roommate or family or animal companion waited for me—just my sculptures, and they were just as good stashed away in that box as anywhere else. At the end of the month the same fate was waiting for me whether I left that morning or in a few weeks. And fate, well. . . what was that

but some vague notion, a piece of chewy candy with some special surprise inside? But guess what, it's still sweet! Everything was sweet. I turned the hot water back on and hung my arm over the side of the tub and gently stroked that little bronze figurine. A month. A month to be anyone I want. To be freed of myself. To be a perfect doll.

The days quickly found a pattern. I woke not too late. I made coffee from the five aromatic pounds of Sumatran Gayo—stored in the antique ceramic lidded jar that Athena and I had found online at an estate sale in Billings—and got back into bed where I watched the sky for an hour and read. Athena and I had staged a few books around the house, mostly stylish coffee table books on art and travel, and a color-coordinated display on the bookshelf in the den. I read about Ladakh and Paracelsus and Clarence House and the Tuareg. I read a green book about innovative packaging and a yellow book about Bolivian agriculture. I read a red book about C.G. Jung and a blue book on B.B. King. Educated and edified, I ate my breakfast, which—due to the available fare—I admit was no different from my other meals. I yearned for a croissant. I lusted after waffles or even a ridiculously small container of yogurt. I had crab cakes. I had so much cubed cheese. I had pasta tossed with olive oil and fresh garlic from the decorative braid that hung in the pantry. There was the fruit that the florist had worked into her arrangements for the bar the night of the party. A dozen apples and some unusual citrus I had to search for on the internet. All edible if not entirely desirable. Some mornings I went straight for the frozen pudding parfaits. I could polish off four, maybe five, before I was dizzy with chocolate.

Once my breakfast was digested, I turned faithfully, for the first few days at least, towards physical fitness. I availed myself of the expensive yoga mat made from repurposed coconut shells that Athena and I had staged in the home office slash den. Clarissa and I had discovered yoga together. We'd both had a crush on the visiting instructor at school, a fit, middle-aged ex-hippie from New Hampshire, handsome enough, with a serious inability to remember underwear. His floppiness was endearing and the subject of much speculation and, eventually, a complaint to the Campus Activities department. The next semester we were taught by a steel-armed woman with a white buzz cut. She barked out the poses with kombucha breath and reminded us how we were all made of love.

"Maya," my mother said on our daily call just after my workout. "I just want to know that you're safe."

"I'm the safest I can be," I told her.

It was true at least. I was as secure as a princess in a tower, even if I'd possibly invited charges of criminal trespass. "How's Leslie?" I asked.

Leslie had stopped joining our calls. She was not taking it well.

"Oh, you know."

"And Dad?" I asked.

"He's fine. Dave has been just a terrific help; I have to tell you. Your sister, I think, is struggling. It's hard to be married twenty-four hours a day," she said.

"Don't you and Dad sort of do that?" I asked.

"Well, you know your father. He's comfortable outside in any weather so he's just sitting in the garage with the card table and it's barely fifty degrees. I'm still wearing my sweater inside the house. Dave and I organized the bedroom closets, and it's amazing what I found."

"You did what?" I asked.

"Oh, we did a thousand things. Now I know where everything is," she said. "He's a very nice boy. Sometimes I think your sister gives him a hard time. I admit, they do make an unexpected couple in some ways, but everyone loves someone for a reason. Leslie said your apartment is very small, so that's probably easy for you."

"Being loved?" I asked.

"Knowing where everything is," she said.

"Where is she now?" I asked.

"Sleeping perhaps. Or resting. Well, I really should go, Honey. Dave and I are about to get the flower beds ready. I ordered new knee pads from Amazon. Can't wait to break them in."

Middays I got stoned on Norman's very good Canadian pot and made myself some lunch and watched TV. Athena hadn't wanted to include a television in her design. She thinks they're ugly. She thinks they are crass and obvious. Rogan, however, insisted, and he insisted that it work.

"People want to know what it's going to feel like to turn on the news in their living room," he told Athena.

The news was terrible. Bodies left uncollected in Italy. Stranded cruise ships rife with the virus. Mass graves. Loved ones ailing in the hospital unable to be visited. Presidential press conferences descended into disorder. Angry people showed up with guns at state houses. I followed that terrible bell curve as it soared upwards. Maybe it was just another example of everything skyrocketing out of control. For the last few years, people had started to give thought to seeing

what would happen if we just dumped everything, if we just tore everything down. Cynicism, doubt, fear, desire, longing, misinformation, xenophobia, greed: everyone had been lusting for a way to upset the apple cart, to be a disruptor. Maybe we were bored. Maybe we had been stoking the wrong curiosities. Everyone needed editing. Everyone needed that reasonable second opinion. But that didn't seem like it was going to happen.

Instead, a real disruption came along, and everyone lost their minds. I do think as a nation we've accomplished some extraordinary things, often without even intending to. In this case, however, I think we all went nuts. I think it came on too fast and too hard and on the heels of some other shocks to the system. The rest of the world had lived through bombings and famines and brutal devastation for centuries, not to mention a long, rough run of class division and an often-despotic aristocracy. Americans, in this instance at least, bristled at inconvenience. We'd made our name overcoming it after all. It was our brand. Land of opportunity, wide open spaces, the business of business, all that. It can be very hard when all of a sudden, you're told you can't be what you are. We are a young country, and New York a young city, relative to the rest of the world. Sometimes I think we have a child's self-absorption.

Likewise, while I understood pain, like everyone else, I made the mistake of thinking mine was the only one. I'd forgotten about that man running, but it didn't matter. Other faces replaced his. A man in Minnesota, a young woman in Louisville. As much a relief as it was to be insulated, as much comfort there was to hit pause in the middle of a terrifying pandemic, it wasn't until I sat quietly like I did, alone like I was, that I really saw how touched I was by something heavy and cold. It was as if all chaos had consolidated to a single lethal point, the way a tornado etches an impossibly fine line of devastation, relatively speaking, and yet is an event of planetary force. On one side of the street the houses are splinters, on the other mute untouched witnesses, oblivious or worse. It wasn't a man, jogging, then dead, that I saw, but the workings of a great, hazardous apparatus. I was a part of it. I was the point of it. I was supposed to revel in that excision.

I felt helpless. I napped often. The pills took their toll. I often woke hungover. It was nothing like coming off a bad drunk though. In fact, it first felt like a lingering dreaminess. Returning to consciousness was without the typical anxiety — it was just simple floating pleasure—but it could devolve into a muddy torpor, a headache, a loss of appetite that found me crashing later. A half of a canary proved to be enough hair of the dog. A whole one got me properly high. I relied

on them to help shape the arc of the day. They helped compress the long stretches of time into manageable portions. They were something to look forward to.

Every day I posted a picture of the sky too. (I spent *a lot* of time staring out the window.) North, south, east, west. Gray and white, reddened at day's end, hazy in the morning, breaking along with the afternoon into clearness, into depthless blue, into promises and memories. As strange as everything was, I had done something amazing, and I wanted everyone to know—but of course, I couldn't say anything. I couldn't let on in any way where I was. I never got much reaction to the pictures except for the same half dozen likes from the usual suspects and the occasional pity scroller—worked up by the pandemic into automatic affirmations via thumb tap—and Leslie, who, after a while, asked, "Are all of these the same picture?"

After my nap I usually fixed my dinner, easily the loneliest part of my day, and ate it at that gleaming table that effortlessly expanded from twelve to sixteen seats. On the news they said that at seven o'clock each evening the streets rang out with the sounds of gratitude. People clapping and cheering and banging pots and pans. I could hear none of it, naturally. Its quietness was one of the apartment's main selling points. It shut out the world, while offering incredible views of it from every angle. After dark, I cleaned. All the nasty parts of being a person seemed to come into focus under artificial lighting. I told myself that I was neat, precise, zen-like, but on close inspection I was hopelessly human, shedding and flaking and smudging everywhere with wild abandon. Leslie had always been the neat one. She maintained order with a vengeance, just to prove that she could. It irritated her when she learned what I did for a living, me who'd never cared about any living space she and I shared—from my personal messes to the burnt dollhouse—but I found it easy to fuss over the imaginary spaces, to dedicate the precision and thoughtfulness to places that, ultimately, I had no responsibility for. It was another way I was changing. And now I needed to be able to disappear at a moment's notice. Sooner or later, someone would come back, and I would have to leave, hopefully undiscovered.

I was meticulous in how I ate, leaving the kitchen spotless. I made the bed the moment I woke. I swept and wiped and erased any evidence of myself. No water on the bathroom sink, no hair in the drain, no fingerprints on windows, no footprints on the floor. I needed to produce as inconspicuous an amount of waste as I could. I snuck down to the refuse room on forty-eight to send it down the chute.

I lingered in that room longer than I had to. I was comforted, somewhat, by the humble scale of the chamber. Even luxury garbage rooms are modest, if admittedly spotless and painted a wonderful shade of gray to pick up on the wallpaper in the hallway outside. Athena had hated that wallpaper too. But my little trash room was a tranquil place. Engineered with simple efficiency, one might say it was almost elegant. Maybe because it was also brand new and in a building that was barely occupied. Maybe because it had an electric air freshener with magnolia-scented diffuser. After a few minutes the energy-efficient motion sensor lights went off. I stood in a shaft of warm LED light that shot in through the little round window set high in the door. I love round windows. They remind me of the swinging kitchen doors in vintage roadside diners. They remind me of portholes, of grand ocean voyages, of Edwardian waiters in vests and ankle-length aprons bearing Gibsons and plates of mutton. I traced my finger in a circle around the window frame, imagining I was traveling the globe, rushing toward Destiny over foamy whitecaps, alongside schools of leaping dolphins, chasing a dazzling horizon over which the sun was ceaselessly setting.

I knew it was just a dream. All of it. But what are we made for, if not dreaming? We spend nearly a third of our lives unconscious, deep in a world fashioned only by memory and fear and desire. Other than the most basic functions needed to keep us alive—our hearts beating, our lungs breathing—there's no other single thing we do as much as sleep and dream. Lockdown erased that boundary somewhat, stretched out the picture of myself like newsprint on Silly Putty. I knew I was just a stowaway hiding from the world in a garbage room, fogging the glass with hummus breath and the vapors of cheap white wine as the sweet odor of a half-smoked blunt rose from my pocket. Soon I'd realize how lonely I was, but for the moment I was having fun.

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Chapter 20

Outside

Meanwhile, almost two weeks went by, and Spring slipped its way in. In Sunnyside there would be birds outside my window. The trees and bushes out there are little more than weeds, grown wild and tall in the shadows of unassuming rowhouse backyards, but to quite a bit of wildlife, like me, it was home. From the penthouse, I saw only high-flying gulls and only in the distance. Like me, they were never really anywhere at all, always scanning the sky, following the flashing water. They clustered now by the big NYU Hospital on First Avenue near the river, beside which the news had told us waited a dozen refrigerated trucks. I'm sure it was just a coincidence. In the town where I grew up, there used to be a family of vultures that roosted on the dumpsters behind the diner near the exit ramp off the highway. Their featherless heads had evolved to protect against infection. (All that devouring of the previously deceased had its downside.) I showed them to Clarissa the one time she visited my home.

"What do you think they taste like?" she asked of the ugly, ghoulish birds.

"Oh, God," I wondered.

Clarissa said we were just like them, even the best of us. (Hadn't I waited for our friendship to die, then picked over the memories like a vulture?)

Leslie, who was with us at the wheel of my mom's car, nodded thoughtfully, and said, "Chicken. They taste like chicken."

Before I knew it, I had run out of food. I'd wisely frozen much of the food the first few days I was there and defrosted it as needed or, as in the case of the cupcakes, ate it frozen, but soon all that was left were three blocks of cheese—I'd been cutting around the spreading mold—five opened cracker boxes with no more than a few left in each, twenty limes, the end of the mixed nuts in some cloudy Tupperware, and a dozen frozen shrimp, the runts of the bunch, of which

I couldn't stand to eat another. On the plus side, there were still most of Norman's blunts, half a case of chardonnay, and an enormous unopened bottle of Bulleit we staged on the wet bar in the dining room. My stomach growled. I was going to have to go outside.

I'd only had one set of clothes, which I'd washed and re-worn many times by now. In the dressing room, Athena had a sleek Italian closet unit installed, a semi-transparent pod that glowed with concealed lighting. It looked more like the kind of enclosure used for computer servers on the national security level. She'd outfitted it not with an entire wardrobe of real clothes, naturally, but with six identical blazers and white shirts for Him. For Her the same black blouse a half dozen times, and a row of flouncy tulle tutus in white.

"It's aspirational," she explained to Rogan who'd wondered if it shouldn't have all just been fur coats and tuxedos—but white ones, if Athena insisted.

Early the next morning, I put on one of the blazers (I'd tried one of the tutus too, but it was just too. . . tutu), my big sunglasses, and a face covering I made from a high-quality bootleg Hermès scarf we bought at the consignment shop to drape over one of the guest room chairs, and I snuck down to the forty-eighth floor. From the stairway landing, I scanned through the little round window as much as I could of the corridor before venturing out. I wasn't sure who would be up and around at six a.m., whether the same type-A inclination for seizing the Manhattan day still held.

I strode up to 48-C, J. Weinberg-Patel, and put my ear to the door. It was reckless, I know, but for some reason, I was drawn there. I again told myself I could detect some fragrance. A candle or perfume or just some kind of essence. It was reassuring, familiar even. Did clouds smell this way, I wondered? Maybe they should, if even to remind us that they are real and not just pictures in the sky. I wasn't sure if "J" was real either. Was J a man or a woman? Perhaps they were a corporation. Maybe a pseudonym. Maybe it was none of my business. Or maybe I was drawn there because it was a home.

Ah, it struck me. I recognized the fragrance. Waffles! And not the frozen kind, but the ones made in a real waffle iron, as if J. Weinberg-Patel understood me and my deepest desires.

I don't know where I found the nerve, but I pressed my eyeball right up against the peephole and tried to look inside the apartment. Of course, I could see nothing but the southern light, strong and yellow and unfocused in the funny

bent and backwards world of the tiny lens. It was its own bright sweet-smelling sun in the back of my brain. A shadow flickered across it, deep inside the space.

"Is someone there?" I heard a woman's voice call out. "Is someone at the door?"

I was in the stairway in a flash and down all the way to the forty-third floor, panting, my ankle stiffening in a way that I didn't like. Again, I peered out through that round window. There were twice as many doors on this floor. We weren't in such rarefied heights anymore. Mostly one-bedrooms and studios, most already occupied. It might be like Grand Central Station out there. I opened the door as quietly as I could and stepped out. I tapped the little elevator screen with my knuckle, still catching my breath. It arrived in a matter of seconds, sepulchral and chic in stone and bronze. I stepped on. For all I knew I really was descending to the underworld. Certainly, I deserved it. I was a stowaway. A thief and pretender, a malingerer, assuming I was correct in understanding what that word means. The elevator might very well open unto hell and not an apartment building lobby in NoMad.

Actually, it stopped and opened at twenty, where a slender young woman with a fat dog stepped back in surprise.

"Sorry!" she said through her gingham mask. It went well with her pedal pushers and bright blue slides, her assiduously distressed denim jacket. "He's a really early pooper!"

My brain flooded with adrenaline. Human contact! Dog contact! Somehow, I had forgotten that going out meant encountering other life forms. The pooch howled. I, of all people, was holding up his natural functions. Sartre said, "Hell is other people." No wonder so many sins involve someone else. Lust, greed, envy, pride. She shushed him and waved us away generously.

"I'll get the next one," she said. I gave her an invisible smile. The door closed, and I was back to falling, falling, falling. I steeled myself for my exit—a quick wave to Dan without stopping. Miss Floor, last seen in a silk bandit's bandana and blazer. In the lobby, however, I found the front desk unattended, the door to the building uncharacteristically closed. I strode across the gleaming terrazzo and let myself out.

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Chapter 21

Hashtag Pandemic Glamour

I guess we were all masked in some way or another. On the line—a half hour long—outside Trader Joe's on Fourteenth Street, there were bandanas, sleeves cut off a T-shirt and pulled over the head, balaclavas, painter's respirators, and surplus gas masks. With our faces covered, we were unable to broadcast all our usual signals. Half our identities were invisible. Eyebrows had to do double duty. It only made me more eager to tell everyone everything. How I had fled from Sunnyside. How I had lived on frozen shrimp and cupcakes. How birds immediately collected on the terrace when I scattered the cracker crumbs from the bottom of the box. How had they found among all those buildings the one window that offered sustenance and companionship? But we were all turned in from one another. Spaced out, literally. In our safe, distanced, silent bubbles. I understood. It was enough that we were outside and could feel the sun and wind on our foreheads and forearms.

But the stillness of the streets felt queer and artificial. The emptiness of buildings was nothing like the hush of an early Sunday morning. That street corners were spotless had nothing to do with civic pride. The heartbeat was gone, as irregular and uniquely syncopated as it was. It seemed as though the virus wasn't just here to kill us; it wanted to make us shut up, make us forget how to be who we were. I wondered if that was possible. I wondered if that wouldn't be so bad. In a way, I'd beaten the pandemic to the punch and hidden away in the penthouse pretending to be someone else. Miss Floor, or Miss Apprehension, or Miss Taken Identity.

Then the rain started. A collective groan when the first drops hit, but no one broke ranks. No one gave up their hard-won position. I'd watched so much

weather from the penthouse. The last of the snow. Glorious fire-streaked sunsets. Imperial storm clouds rolling in from the ocean. All of it untouchable. The apartment, however, had its own climate. Its own atmosphere. It was never meant to be part of the world, but instead to sit above it. And as strange as that was, nothing was stranger than the world that met me when I emerged from there. Both of us were different. For a brief moment, I was terrified that whatever we had become would be something awful. That we'd never find our way back. Each raindrop was like a tiny kiss though. I couldn't help but laugh with joy.

"I'm still me!" I said to the woman waiting behind me. She turned away, back to her phone. I got it. Strangers were dangerous. We vigilantly guarded our six-foot buffer. We pulled our bodies into ourselves. Online, we could poke at each other all we wanted, but in line we need to back the hell off.

The rain passed, and the gray clouds broke open again to sunshine. The line moved slowly but steadily forward. Soon, I was waved inside by a man in a surgical mask and plastic face screen and Hawaiian shirt. He pumped two big squirts of sanitizer into my hands and told me to shop as quickly as I could and to please practice social distancing.

If I thought the empty Manhattan streets were strange, it was nothing compared to the bizarre dance of the underpopulated Trader Joe's. I'd shopped there countless times. It was, in its way, controlled chaos, moderated mayhem. It was usually crowded, sometimes ridiculously so, with the check-out line itself threading its way through all the shoppable aisles, even with thirty cashiers going at once, each cheery and quirky in their own special way and wearing a Hawaiian shirt and a utility knife in a holster on their belt. It had become now a touchless choreography. Space the ultimate chaperone. A *Pas de Don't Stand Too Close to Me*. How it thrilled me each time I passed close enough to another person to smell shampoo, wet wool, hand cream, body odor! After the perfection of the penthouse, I was among the living, the blessedly profane with their worn-out sneakers and unbrushed hair.

In the end, I had four bulging paper bags that were difficult to negotiate back uptown from Fourteenth Street, even with the underpopulated sidewalks. I was not used to shopping like that. In fact, Craig had always complained about how sparsely provisioned my apartment was. I bought what I needed at the moment, and consumed it right away. I rarely cooked. My generation was expected to be the standard bearers of a renewed interest in all that. Nesting. Houseplants. Taking care of the world. I was not good at any of it. My favorite laundry

detergent was a known carcinogen under investigation by the World Health Organization. I ate meat from sidewalk vendors.

"It would be nice to find a girl who cooks," Craig once admitted, sated with Domino's and a healthy roll in the hay. He knew even before I gave him the dirty look he deserved that he had spoken something terrible. "Sorry, that came out wrong." He was too much of a proud feminist to give lip service to such a regressive ideal, even if I knew that as good as his heart was, the quickest way to it was, indeed, his stomach.

But maybe it was time to change. Clearly, this was a moment of next-level transformation. I found myself a few blocks away in front of a gourmet food store with no line. Garden or Paradise or Smorgasbord Something, one of those upscale little groceries, the ceiling hung with baskets, the produce displayed in baskets, the bread—you got it!—in baskets. I charged in directly.

"I like your mask," a man in a bowtie and hunter green apron with matching mask behind the prepared foods counter said to me. A bowtie! What a day it was turning out to be! It was impeccably knotted too. Perfectly pert and plaid. Inspired, I left with a small fortune in cooked fish and vinegary salads, improbably hard flatbread, expensive dark chocolates that tasted like flowers, purple asparagus, and a spiced jam in a confounding earthenware jar that I'd eventually have to break to open. On the last leg of my trip back to the penthouse, I rested with my purchases on a stoop on East Twenty-Sixth Street for as much time as I could risk without my frozen *crostini* and microwavable *channa masala* defrosting. I held my phone out in front of me and took a selfie behind my Hermès mask and half a dozen grocery bags arrayed on the stoop behind me. Hashtag Pandemic Glamour. Hashtag Silk *Carré*. Hashtag The Rain Stopped.

I'd pulled off the mask and stuffed it into my pocket—I wanted to take a few selfies with myself actually visible—when I heard, out of nowhere, "Maya?"

I thought at first that I hadn't heard it, but only thought it in the way, sometimes, in a particularly stressful moment, that I told myself that I was okay. It was funny, because I felt pretty okay at that moment. Getting outside had really picked up my spirits. Seeing other people had given me a sense of possibility. It made me feel more grounded. I was excited to get back to the penthouse too. I could sneak out whenever I wanted, although to be accurate I hadn't yet snuck back in. I'm sure Jimmy had steered me right with his instructions, up the alley etc. I'd have to thank him if I ever saw him again, but I doubted I would. Anyway, Maya, I told myself, quite consciously, You're okay.

But then I heard it again—"Maya!"—in a real, human voice distinctly different from my own. "Over here!"

I looked over my left shoulder and there was Athena, sitting in the driver's seat of her Range Rover, pre-owned but with an impeccable pedigree, parked nearby. Her two Bernese Shepherds, Sammy and Io, took up the back half of the car. They were mother and daughter. Neither had ever liked me. Io growled at me, drooling through the half-open muddy window.

Athena was wearing an uncharacteristically ratty T-shirt, and her hair was a tangled mess tied up on top of her head. She waved at me, her mask around her wrist, and blew me a kiss.

"What are you doing in this neighborhood? Aren't we all supposed to be working from home now?" she asked, rolling her eyes before putting on a big pair of sunglasses.

"Hi," I said, bewildered, standing up with my groceries from a safe distance. "Wow. I can't believe, wow."

"I was just at the vet. Sammy's showing her age, but who isn't? They wanted me to wait outside on a plastic chair while they examined her, next to strangers. I sat in the car, of course, but is this the world we really want?" she asked.

"I don't think so. It's only temporary, right?" I said.

"Are you getting those checks from the government? You must be if you're buying purple asparagus," she said, peeking down into my bags. I felt sick. I was literally caught with my hands full. "I hope you're okay, baby. Don't tell me you are going to walk all the way back to Sunnyvale with those groceries."

"Sunnyside. No, I'm going to take the train," I said. Athena made a face like I had made a bad smell. "And that's where I'm going right now, home."

I had never lied to Athena before. I never had cause to, but I also thought that I could never get away with it. She had trusted me from the very beginning—with her credit card, with keys to expensive apartments, with her reputation. I could, of course, really go back to Sunnyside. It wasn't too late to abandon this betrayal. To be a normal person. To live in my own apartment. To buy groceries in good faith. Clearly, running into Athena was a sign. A red flag as big as the sky itself. Leave now, it said, before you ruin everything. Athena looked up the avenue towards the tower, visible even from blocks away.

"I'm headed back upstate but I was thinking I'd grab my favorite blanket that I used in the penthouse. Remember, cashmere, on the chair in the primary?" she asked.

Of course I remembered it. I'd gotten chocolate icing all over it about a week into my stay and then, somehow, which is to say very stoned on a whole canary, thinking it would be gentler, threw it in the dishwasher. It struck me as the worst thing I'd ever done—but of course it was so far from that.

"You're going there now?" I asked, shaking with fear. Athena was the one other person with the new key Rogan made. She'd be able to take the elevator upstairs and stroll right in the front door. Although I guess she could have done that all along, I just never imagined she would. I'd dodged a bullet, so far at least.

"Well, it's not far and I thought maybe I just should. It would be nice to have upstate," she said. "Or am I crazy? I kind of feel like I never want to step foot in that place again. It's Rogan's problem now. Good luck selling it in the middle of all this bullshit. Although who knows? Rich people, I mean the *truly* rich, even something like this doesn't touch them. Oh, did you hear? He got it! Rogan got the virus. Ran off to Europe and got it. What a ninny!"

"That's terrible," I said, relieved that he wouldn't be coming by either. "But yeah, why go back there, right now? I mean, now is the time to challenge all those old impulses. Favorite blankets, things like that."

"You're okay, Maya, really?" she asked. "Sometimes I worry that you're not very, I don't know how to put it, grounded, maybe. That you might just float away."

"Wouldn't that be fun?" I asked.

"No. Your life is here on earth. In this life, you have to build. Slow and steady, with a solid foundation. . . Sorry, I must sound like your father. It's only because I care."

"I know you do," I said, quietly. I could smell her. She hadn't showered recently. Ordinarily, she was a cloud of sophisticated fragrance. Athena was created layer by subtle layer, her clothing, grooming, hair, skin, scent, everything aligned, and pitch perfect. Now she was kind of rough around the edges. In fact, she was almost all edge.

"Because it's okay to not be okay." Her voice broke a little. Her eyes welled up. It wouldn't be a surprise to say it was the first time I'd seen Athena cry, for lack of a better word. Once or twice, she'd been melancholy and she definitely didn't have a problem swinging between elated and enraged, but she'd never been sentimental. Fragility was something she cherished in the stem of an orchid, not a fellow human being. "All of this has been a lot. My cousin and his wife and baby are staying with me upstate. People can be a lot."

"People can suck," I said.

She smiled and it was so real. I smiled back, so sad that I had betrayed her the way I did. For all I knew this might be the last conversation we ever had, especially after she went to the penthouse and discovered everything I'd been up to. It broke my heart to think she might cut me off now that we'd just gotten close, in a way.

"It's important to self-care though, baby, you know. And to hydrate. You have such beautiful skin. You are a very lucky girl, when you think about it. That's a nice jacket too, it suits you," she said. "Oh, and the protests! Are we supposed to stay home or fill the streets? I mean, fuck those racist pigs, right? "Beauty comes in all colors." Athena has always said this. But in some ways, I think, stay home. Justice can wait until after the viral outbreak, maybe, hmm?"

"I'm not—I don't know," I said, my arms throbbing with the weight of my groceries, my heart racing with anxiety.

"You know, I'm not going to the apartment after all. I don't know what I'm thinking. I need to get home," she said. Relief washed over me. I had been spared. My phone rang. It was Leslie. I silenced it and smiled at Athena, deeply grateful and repentant.

"Sorry," I said.

"Take the call, baby. Connect," Athena said.

I nodded. "Connect. So true, Athena. So true."

She smiled back. I really did love her at that moment. So much of what was good in my life came from her. She was tough, but she never steered me wrong.

"You know, I've changed my mind. I think I'll go get the blanket after all and then get out of this depressing city," she said.

My stomach rumbled. "No! I mean, are you sure? I really think this is a time to leave old things behind—" I said.

"You take care of yourself and be careful on the subway. Wear two masks maybe," she said.

"Wait! Athena!" I called, but she just blew me another kiss and drove off. I sat back down on the stoop, shellshocked. I should have stayed hidden. I should have stayed in Sunnyside. Now I was likely facing a breaking and entering charge. Now I had a small fortune in delicacies to carry back to Queens. I'd have to delete my LinkedIn, at least for a while—or maybe come up with a new name. Would they take away my pandemic benefits? Certainly, they wouldn't give money intended for disaster relief to a criminal, could they?

"You're okay, Maya," I told myself and sat there in stunned silence until a shoeless man in grimy clothing, reeking of sweat and urine, appeared in front of me. He was gray and scaly, camouflaged to fit in all the neglectful niches that living on the street provided. He made my disappearing act look amateur. He laughed at me with a bright toothless mouth and eyes long lost to another dimension.

"You look like a pile of shit," he said. "Right down to your fucking soul!"

I knew he wasn't really talking to me. His conversations were taking place somewhere distant and shattered, but when my phone rang again, I grabbed my packages and took off running. I ran and ran, past shuttered shoe stores and Indian restaurants, past dormant thrift shops and dark dental offices, up car-less avenues, past masked faces. I knew if I stopped, I'd burst out sobbing, maybe forever. I was a fool. I was fake. A lie. And I didn't deserve to ever be real again.

The muscles of my arms in uproar, though, I had to stop. Terrified, I looked at my phone. The missed call was from Athena. A moment later my phone buzzed as her text came through. I was cooked.

"Baby, I'm on the FDR Drive. I decided not to pop the bubble and go back there. Sorry if I was weepy before. It's Sammy. I love those dogs so much!! Take care and before you know it, you'll be working your magic with soap again."

Jimmy had done right by me. I squeezed through the space next to the fence. Then it was into the blind spot, then into the basement corridor as if I'd been there all along, then into the elevator and off at forty-eight without even stopping to glance at J. Weinberg-Patel's door, then into the stairs for the home stretch. When I was finally back in the apartment, my ankle was throbbing with recrimination.

"I'm sorry!" I shouted at my foot. My pain was both physical and metaphysical. The world had wounded me, just as it had before. I wanted so badly to cry right then, but I couldn't. It would have been too pathetic. Maybe I'd gone too far inside myself. Maybe I'd crossed over. I looked like a pile of shit, right? Madmen are renowned for speaking the unvarnished truth. I missed people, but I was terrified of ever meeting one again. Maybe the people I already knew scared me the most. I told myself I liked being alone. Well, I did, but I didn't like the thought of being alone forever. Or always. Or completely. Nothing good had come of me coming here. I crawled to the utility closet where Jimmy had stored the bubble wrap Zack had left after installing Josiah's painting. With the leftover duct tape from the contractors, I fashioned a boot for myself, but it popped flat in

five minutes. I called my doctor's office. She was not seeing patients in person, naturally, but her physician's assistant renewed my prescription as readily as the cable company had kept me plugged in. The pharmacy even offered to deliver. They didn't want crowds either.

"I'm caring for my aunt, however. Could you deliver them to where I am?" I asked the druggist. I asked him to text me and not to ring the bell, so as not to wake her. "Please write that on the bag, thank you, in case the doorman asks."

"And the name on the apartment?"

My phone buzzed in my hand. It was Leslie again. I hit decline.

"Name? Oh, you mean my aunt, of course," I said, sensing the slightest hope of feeling good again, that I had figured out the world once more, that I was making a smart move.

"Weinberg-Patel. J. Weinberg-Patel."

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Chapter 22

I Could Have All the Company I Wanted

After that it was easy to keep ordering things and to have them all delivered to 48-C, J. Weinberg-Patel. The government paychecks had indeed started to be deposited into my account. I ordered tights and T-shirts and socks and lounge pants and underwear but also dish sponges and emery boards. I ordered scrunchies for my hair, foam toe separators for a much-needed pedicure, I ordered a potato peeler and potholders. I ordered an herbal tea sampler. I always included my cellphone number and asked to receive text updates when my package was delivered. It was building policy to set them outside the recipient's door to avoid crowds in the package room or lobby. Once alerted, I snuck down to forty-eight and waited out of sight till Jimmy brought them up. I then quickly snatched them off the doormat and spirited them back upstairs. I figured if they were discovered, the real J. Weinberg Patel would simply assume they were a mistake and have them sent back. I wondered again what the J stood for. I'd heard a woman's voice, but that doesn't mean she was alone. J could be John or Joan or Juan or Juliet, or Joao or Juniper. But the hyphenated name suggested a married woman, mixed, as the saying goes. Jewish and Indian.

"Hello," I whispered. "I'm Judith Weinberg-Patel. So nice to meet you."

I wanted so badly to go and ring her bell. To bring her a pie or a bottle of wine, or share a game of Uno, a girlhood favorite that I'd also ordered online and had yet to take out of the box. I wanted to thank her for letting me pretend to be her. For assuming her identity when it was clear, for the time being, mine was of no use.

My ankle soon felt better. I made myself promise not more than half a canary at any one time and no more than two halves per day—and I stuck to that, for a little while at least, even as I smoked more than half of Norman's weed. On TV

they told us that people were drinking more, getting high more often, napping, seeking relief and pleasure and anesthesia. They were already exiled from the world. It was themselves they were escaping from. From the truth of their marriages, their underwhelming careers and homes and bodies. I was no different. I began to fall apart. I got bored of my yoga practice. I'd begun to bathe less. I slept away most of the afternoons. Some days I gorged on junk food, others I barely touched anything. The TV ran all day long. I was depressed, and I'd started to get anxious. I wasn't following the press conferences anymore. Instead, the world seemed like it was exploding in pain, and I couldn't look away.

I found myself doing laps around the perimeter of the apartment, pressing myself up to every wall and window as I traced the outline of the penthouse. I walked into each beautifully staged room. Wasn't I supposed to want this, or was it just a big bunch of nothing? I was as afraid as I'd been the night I'd run off to the penthouse, but I'd made a terrible mistake. I hadn't run away. I hadn't gotten free. I'd put myself in solitary confinement—even if it did have great views. I tried to remember what was so frightening about my other life that drove me to come here. Certainly, it wasn't just the pandemic. I could have stayed in Sunnyside. I would have been just as alone there. Or maybe not; my crummy little building was surrounded by life in a way that the penthouse never could be. Trees brushed up against my windows and kept me awake at night. I could smell my downstairs neighbors frying onions before sunrise.

One afternoon I realized I'd been walking around the apartment for almost an hour, talking to myself in an increasingly loud voice, from hallway to bedroom to kitchen over and over. I was having a conversation with myself, and with everyone I knew. I was shouting at Leslie, pleading with my mom, playing devil's advocate with Craig. I revisited Norman's marriage proposal and spent a good half hour re-explaining to him why it would be a terrible idea to marry me because what kind of terrible wife would I be, after all. "You're okay, Maya," I imagined them all saying.

That's when the world swirled and dropped away from me, as if it had never really been there in the first place, that it was as much an illusion as my place in it. There is a spot outside the den, by the corridor that leads to the primary suite, where you can see out all four exposures. Terrified into silence, I stood there for I don't know how long. I saw my distant reflection in each direction, a ghost of the north, south, east, and west. There's a name for each of the winds that blow from the four directions, that cover the earth, that move mountains and sky and sea. I

imagined them mocking me everywhere I turned. I was left in a cardboard copy, a flat world printed by an anonymous operating system. I knew I'd never return to the other one, the one of garbage smells and standoffish dogs and the joy of finding a bar of soap in just the right color. I'd gone too far. I had cast myself out. I was a witness to my own disappearance, my own funeral. I'd never felt so bad despite being able to feel nothing at all.

And then, just as quickly, it passed. The terror broke apart and blew away. I was three dimensional again, but I was wrecked. I practically fell all the way to my knees, before putting my forehead to the floor, then the rest of me. There was a sense of giddy relief. Yes, it had been a cathartic experience, but the same could be said of, say. . . diarrhea. Bad timing in the middle of a pandemic to have a bit of an existential crisis. I felt like a stupid, self-indulgent girl, stoned and well-fed in my penthouse. Well, not *mine*. Nothing was. I wanted to shower and go to bed, but it wasn't even my bed! It wasn't *anybody's* bed. Everything about me was fake, and maybe it was never a more important moment to be a real person. J. Weinberg-Patel was a real person, but I'd never know her, or him. I was tragically, hermetically, sealed—cut off from everything and it was my fault.

I had to get out of that apartment. Shaking, I put on my sunglasses and wrapped that counterfeit Hermés scarf around my face and went out the front door and down the stairs. I kept on going past the Weinberg-Patel residence, all the way to the thirty-third floor where it occurred to me, finally, that the outside world was just as terrifying. Case in point: my last trip, where not only had I a close call with Athena and almost got found out, which would have been humiliating, as well as cast my life into an even more precarious situation, but I was also called a pile of shit by an insane person. I waited at the little round window of the stairway door, thinking of what I should do. No, I couldn't possibly go outside, maybe ever again—as catastrophically alone as I was feeling. Thirty-three was the amenities floor: basketball court, maker's room, a resident lounge, and a game room. An inkjet stop sign was taped to the wall. CLOSED. Pandemic rules in effect. Though I hadn't expected it to, the game room door opened right up when I tried it.

It was a snazzy space, with moody industrial lighting and a graffiti-style mural of the building's address. There were ping-pong and foosball tables as well as some classic video arcade favorites, and to my surprise, Jimmy the porter, sitting in a bootleg Eames recliner by the chrome and glass propane fireplace holding a vape rig in his fist. I'd been found out after all!

"Sorry!" he said, surprised, and stood up quickly.

I realized, with a mix of relief and a little disappointment, that with my scarf covering my face, he hadn't recognized me but instead thought I was one of the residents. He was the one who'd been found out. Employees, he and I both, weren't allowed to use the amenities. I knew his secret, but he didn't know mine. That sounded very unfair, and very familiar.

Jimmy was wearing a neck gaiter of his own and pulled it up now over his face. It was printed with a bloody, sharp-toothed mouth with a menacing smile, but he didn't know it was on slightly sideways, as though he was literally talking out the side of his mouth.

"Don't go! I mean, not on my account. I just had to get out of the apartment. I've never been down here," I said.

"It's alright," Jimmy said.

"Look at all this," I said. I walked over to Space Invaders and pushed every button, but the screen remained dark.

"Here," Jimmy said, stepping up to the machine and reaching down by the coin slots where there must have been a switch. An onscreen countdown began. Full disclosure: I am very good at Space Invaders. It was the one video game, hopelessly out of date, that our local pizza parlor offered growing up. Leslie and I had many fierce competitions over the years. Everyone in town was really good actually. Once I got started, Jimmy couldn't conceal his amazement at my skills, even behind his grotesque face mask. When I didn't step back after my game ended, and he stepped in, eager to take his, our hands brushed on the joystick. "Sorry," he said.

"No, I'm sorry," I said. "Yours."

Jimmy was an able slayer of the invaders, but nowhere near as good as me. Still, I cheered him on, and he me, as we traded rounds with one another. Oh, it was nice to laugh with someone. To have nothing at stake.

"You smell nice," he told me when I stepped back again. "Sorry, that's weird, right? But I haven't really smelled anyone in a while."

"It's my soaps," I said.

"Soaps can do that, make you smell?" he asked.

"Sure!" I told him, brightly.

I leaned in and took a whiff from him. "Aw, come on. Fuck," he said with a laugh.

He didn't exactly smell nice, but it was real. Kind of like what I remembered

boys in high school smelling like when we played those tortured flirting games, tumbling on each other, punching shoulders, screaming, then sometimes falling into interminably long and frustrating make-out sessions. We played for a while longer until I finally said, "I guess I should go upstairs. Thanks, though."

"Wait, you wanna see something cool?" he asked.

I followed Jimmy out of the game room to the landing, where he swiped his fob for the service elevator.

"I—I don't want to go outside," I said.

"Not out, up," he said.

We sped quickly to the fifty-third floor, just below the penthouse. It was one of the unfinished floors. Here, there would be two smaller half-floor penthouses, but for the moment, it was just a vast, rough concrete space, with no interior walls, exposed pipes and wires and piles of building supplies and large boxed appliances waiting on wooden pallets.

"Heads in beds!" had been Rogan's rallying cry. Get as many units sold as quickly as possible. It didn't matter if the building itself was finished. I got the impression that the project's finances were dependent on it. It was Ownership at work dissolving itself. Residents were living there unaware of the rugged guts lying eviscerated upstairs, gangs of contractors riding the freight elevator, or the mild buzz of distant drills and saws—before lockdown at least. Even the penthouse, a single floor above us, presented as perfect and pristine. The fifty-third floor was the reality that lay behind the veil of illusion—otherwise known to Buddhists as, you know, *maya*. My sneakers would never squeak on that gritty gray floor.

"I'd take you to the roof, but it's alarmed," Jimmy said. "And I could show you the penthouse—"

"No!" I cried out. "This is more than enough," I said.

"Anyway, I can't. I'd get fired," he said.

Jimmy didn't get to work from home. He had to show up every day. He still had to collect the garbage and sanitize the doorknobs and vacuum the hallways and organize the package room and hose away the dogshit and everything else that he did for the residents before lockdown. Then, no doubt, he took the subway, not his pre-owned SUV, all the way back up to Inwood to have a so-called life. He didn't have a house upstate, or a place in Europe to go be sick at. He needed this job. I admired him. Maybe it was a little old school, that reliability thing, but I could see how that could be attractive.

"Here, look." Jimmy led me around to the southeastern corner of the building, where one of the tall window panels was missing. The gap was cordoned off with a crudely affixed two-by-four and some bright yellow safety tape, a little tattered now in the wind that whipped through the open space. Almost unaware, I walked right up to the edge. If I wanted, I could have stepped past that two-by-four. I could have walked right out into the sky, and I honestly don't know for sure if I would have fallen.

"Careful!" Jimmy said. Then quieter: "Careful."

He came and stood next to me, half because I think it was clear I was transfixed, and half because he wanted to protect me—that he felt responsible, maybe even a little proud.

"You're right, this is cool," I said. The wind came in gusts. Was it the wind, or was it the sky itself rushing in? It pushed me back a few inches. It pressed our masks against our faces. I could see that his lips were slightly parted. He blinked away tears.

"We're so high!" he said.

Maybe the penthouse shared the same fantastic views, but it was cut off. It was safe. Nothing like this open window. No wonder I was so lonely. No wonder I welcomed the cold rushing sky like a friend or a lover.

"Thank you, Jimmy!" I shouted.

"No problem. . ." He waited for me to tell him my name, but I said nothing. I stepped back to catch my breath. I'd like to think that as Jimmy and I locked eyes that we were silently acknowledging something in one another. His eyebrows rose and fell, the whites of his eyes glistened dully, and I could see that he'd been lonely too. He cleared his throat. "You wanna see my tattoo? It's on my back," he said.

I nodded, and wordlessly he unbuttoned his coveralls, they were embroidered with his name, and pulled off his T-shirt, turning around quickly, self-conscious of his doughy, pink chest. The dragon on his back looked even more ridiculous the second time. It was such overkill.

"Did it hurt?" I asked, because I figured that was the kind of question he, or all people with similar tattoos, liked.

"Hell, yeah it did!" he said, turning around proudly. "Halfway through I was like *fuck this*, but nah, I stuck with it. Now I got something to show my grandkids."

"My grandmother gave me a dollhouse," I said.

"Nice," he said.

"I burned it down," I said. He was the first person, other than Clarissa, who I actually admitted that to.

"Wow," he said.

I took his hands in mine—they were surprisingly sensitive and soft—and pressed them to my breasts. I heard him gasp beneath his gaiter. I closed my eyes, and he gave me a very gentle squeeze.

"Wow," he said, whispering this time, just like those high school boys had.

"Do I really smell nice?" I asked.

"You really do," he said.

It felt good being seen, being smelled, even being groped, consensually, of course. Maybe that's all I needed. Someone to acknowledge me. Someone to say: *You're there, Maya. I see you*.

"I see you," I said.

"Do you?" he asked. "Your eyes are closed."

God, I was so horny I felt it like an allergy. I kept my eyes closed for a few moments longer. I held my breath. He never moved his hands from me once.

"Take care," I told him, exhaling and opening my eyes and taking a step back. He seemed to understand.

"Fuck." He nodded, hands hanging in the air in front of him until he reached into his back pocket for his vape rig, threw his T-shirt over his shoulder, and sat down on a strangely out of place shrink-wrapped palette of toilet paper. Cool, momentarily sexy Jimmy and me—it was both our fates to be alone, in this building at least.

But then, as I walked back upstairs, it struck me: I could have all the company I wanted.

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Chapter 23

An Inflection Point

I had no serviceable tools, of course, just whatever was left behind by the caterers. Tongs and a spatula and a bread knife for prepping the bruschetta. A pair of snippers the florists had forgotten. Under the sink in the bathroom I had desecrated was that contractor's bucket with some duct tape, pencils, and, disturbingly, another sweaty bandana. It was not easy going at first. The memory foam mattress we installed in the third bedroom, the one meant for that unexpected child or, if she was lucky, the winsome, if homely, au pair, was hard to cut, even if I'd had a real saw and not something meant for slicing baguettes. Eventually I got the hang of the flower snips and was able to shape a decent, somewhat recognizable, head from the grapefruit-sized tumors I had excised. With a red wax pencil, I sketched on two eyes and a mouth. I shaped a nose from some of the scraps and glued it on with silicone caulk. I helped myself to the faux-Hermès scarf from which I'd made my mask and wrapped it around the stubby neck, giving it a sporty little knot halfway down to suggest hips, louche and swinging. The elegant silk carré was disconcertingly refined compared to the brutally carved face it framed. Well, a lot of women with rough-hewn faces and silk scarves on their shoulders lived in fabulous penthouses. I reached inside a cavity I had made inside her head and managed a sort of gnashing movement perhaps reminiscent of speech.

"Any girl can be glamorous. All you have to do is stand still and look stupid," she said.

"Why hello!" I crowed, in an enthusiastic greeting for my reincarnation of Hedy Lamarr. It was, after all, one of the Golden Age movie queen's most famous quotes. And though she was known as a beauty, she had brains too. She was an inventor—ever heard of radar?—a war hero, really, but I'm sorry to say that the

times she lived in were not kind to her. Later, she'd be vindicated, but by then she was much less beautiful, not that it matters. Whenever it seems the deck is stacked against me, when I feel the world telling me—telling any woman for that matter—to stay in her lane, I think of Hedy and am encouraged. She persisted. She didn't wilt in the face of Nazi Germany or Louis B. Mayer.

"We're a couple of peaches, aren't we?" Hedy asked. "You with your train wreck of a life and me looking like badly baked bread."

"I kind of freaked out before," I told her.

"You think?" she asked.

"We're in uncharted territory," I said.

"Whaddaya say we tidy up a bit and open a window? Stinks like desperation in here. *Girl* desperation."

"Listen, Hedy, statements like that are considered a little problematic nowadays," I said.

"So, what's wrong with problems? That's where all the solutions come from, ya?"

I couldn't argue with her. It was one of the most honest conversations I'd had in weeks.

That night I finished decimating the mattress in the guest room, carving out another half dozen heads. I got the hang of it after the first two or three and was able to fashion increasingly human-looking and refined figures.

"I guess I was the unlucky one," Hedy remarked.

"You were the trailblazer. No one wanted to give you credit."

She shrugged and lit another cigarette. "You're damn right."

I introduced Hedy to Mrs. Wringman, an aging dowager; to Alistair Smudge, self-made entrepreneur; to the twins, Phil and Jill, aspiring figure skaters; to Bronwyn, assistant editor and aficionado of weak tea and plain cheese sandwiches; and to Bobby Turbinado, lounge singer extraordinaire. Bobby was my handsomest creation, with his pencil line mustache and a jaunty side part. He gave me two kisses, European style, and my face left a momentary impression in his memory foam.

"I bet you're a hard act," Hedy told him. "To follow, that is."

There wasn't much to work with in the way of giving my characters bodies. The only black material I had was trash bags, so that would have to do for Bobby's tux. The twins each got a matching striped athletic sock to rest their heads on. I

fashioned a comfy cardigan for Bronwyn out of one of the guest towels, and for Mrs. Wringman, I braided an extra string mop into an elegant silver *chignon*.

"Now you're showing some moxie. Have to respect a gal who just rolls up her sleeves and gets it done herself," Hedy said.

I sat them around—or pretty much on—the dining table and we enjoyed waffles, albeit frozen, and tea. Mrs. Wringman, especially, enjoyed the company of the twins, inhaling their youth like a vampire.

"The *two* of you, from *one* sperm, you say? How clever," she remarked.

Alistair Smudge made no secret of his love for Jill.

"My dear, if it's sperm you want, I'll give you a million of 'em!" he promised.

Bronwyn sat quiet most of the time, probably taking mental notes for what would no doubt be the surprise literary juggernaut she was keeping under her hat.

Bobby eschewed tea for two fingers of the Bulleit. "Cool, cool," he kept murmuring. "Diggin' the scene."

I was having a good time. I'd like to think that we all were. I'd staged the apartment again, only this time with souls, or at the very least, voices.

"A home this size and no servants?" Mrs. Wringman wondered.

"Staff," Hedy corrected her. "*Servants* is problematic."

I couldn't help but think about Clarissa. Besides me, no one had spoken with my creations as much as she. It didn't strike her as odd or uncomfortable to converse with them. And I was more honest with her at those moments than at any other, perhaps.

"Max," Clarissa once asked me, that is to say, him—my mustachioed high school guidance counselor creation, thought to be a cool adult in his denim shirt and skinny punk rock tie. "I wonder sometimes if everything I'm doing isn't just bullshit."

"Bullshit is vague. Open up your feelings. Find more precise words," Max said.

"What do people want of me? To tell all my secrets? Is that art?" she asked.

"Art, I'm told, is whatever you say it is," he reassured her.

I saw her beautiful painting every day, but I had no idea if she was alright. She'd never taken to social media. "It's a Ponzi scheme for attention whores," she'd said. Who knew who'd still be around when this all shook out? My one trip outside was enough to convince me that something was lost, that certain things would be forever changed, and that what remained unchanged had been exposed

for what it had always and would always be, as gray and brutal and uncaring as bedrock—fear, death, the desperate struggle to survive.

"An inflection point," Craig had called it on one of our increasingly infrequent text conversations. "The question is how low is that point?"

I'd left his last text unanswered. I couldn't face the thought of falling any lower. What if Clarissa had even gotten sick, or worse?

"That vase needs flowers," Mrs. Wringman complained. She was right. There'd been a lovely arrangement the night of the showing party. But it was dead a day or so after I'd stowed away, and I'd simply never done anything about it. I stood on the terrace and pulled off one brown petal after another, sending them into the wind. I caught my reflection in the window, and beyond it, the dinner party for puppets that I was hosting. I went back inside the penthouse and poured the stinking water down the kitchen drain.

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Chapter 24

Craig

The apartment was silent for the better part of the week. I was so happy when Craig called that Friday night.

"You did what?" he asked when I confessed everything. The sound of his voice alone had been enough to release the floodgates of my guilt. I'd held back for too long, and now I had little control. When he got over his shock at what I had done, he was curious about the logistics. I told him about Danny the good doorman and Sheila the bad one. I told him about the gap in the fence and the service door and the blind spot and, for some reason, how Jimmy had complimented my body that one time (though I omitted our Space Invaders interlude). Craig said he didn't need to hear that. He hadn't had contact with anyone in more than a month. His nascent relationship with this other person flamed out when the pandemic struck. He'd tried to shelter in place with her, but she'd not yet gotten used to his peculiar style of lovemaking. They hadn't the chemistry needed to survive living with a near stranger.

"Well, I guess I'll go back to my small, efficient apartment on the second floor while you live like the one percent," he said.

"It's May Day next week," I said. "Maybe you should march with the proletariat."

"Income inequality and the diminished status of the American worker, especially in a fraught moment like ours where wage workers are hurt the most, is a serious problem. I don't like to make fun of things like that," he scolded.

Suddenly I was very tired and no longer excited to speak with anyone. I helped myself to another canary. The sun was still high in the sky but, after putting Bobby outside on the terrace, I said goodbye and crawled back into bed.
I was woken later by what I thought was the sink dripping in the bath, a

persistent gentle tapping. When it didn't stop, I went to check the faucet in the bathroom, but it was closed. I followed the tapping from one sink to another until it led me to the front door. "Maya!" I heard in a harsh whisper. Shocked, I pressed myself against the wall and silently drew the chain across the security lock. I'd covered the inside lens of the peephole—a curiously analog security technology for such a smart-technology home—with a Post-it note in case my silhouette could be detected through the bright little pinprick on the other side. I blocked any daylight with my body and in a motion worthy of Indiana Jones pilfering a precious totem in the depths of some far-flung cavern, I replaced the Post-it with my eyeball. There he was, Craig, his unmistakably soft form collapsed against the wall, arm reached out with key in hand, tapping.

"Hey, Siri," I whispered. "Call Craig." I watched him startle at the vibration in his pocket.

"Maya?"

"You're breathing everywhere!" I said.

"I'm. . . I'm what?"

"Here!" I said, opening the door and beaning him with a pack of upscale catering napkins, paper but embossed, and a bottle of industrial strength disinfectant I'd found under the kitchen sink.

"Wipe down the place, undress, and knock when you're done."

"Maya, please."

I slammed the door and watched through the peephole as he grunted himself onto his knees, then stood up finally. I ignored him when he knocked on the door.

"Maya."

"Wipe it all down!" I whispered as loudly as possible. "And undress!"

He hesitated a moment to decide whether his self-respect would allow it, but his dignity never had a chance. He undressed to his underpants, and I watched him wipe the elevator door frames and buttons, the doorknob to the stairs, the doors themselves, even the baseboards.

"Done!" he said.

"Clothes."

"Done!" he called. I swung the door open and there he was, sweaty from head to tighty-whities, what sparse hair he had on his belly curling with moisture. His breath still not back under control, puffing and deflating his beleaguered surgical mask. He seemed paler and more pear-like than I remembered. His softness was

why I'd first liked him. I'd been on a run of skinny, androgynous misanthropes till then, and Craig was an easy way to off-ramp. We devoted our bodies to one another, like lab partners sharing a fetal pig to dissect. Adulthood begins with morning breath and skid marks. With back sweat and toenail fungus. With cracking the orgasm code. With eliminating boundaries, if only to discover where those boundaries should lie and why they were important in the first place. We both liked to close the bathroom door, for example. We tried it the other way, but it only made us shy and frustrated.

I was immediately in hysterics.

"Maya. May—" Craig protested.

"I'm sorry! Sorry!" I said, unable to hold back my laughter.

He pressed the remaining paper towels into his face. "What the actual fuck?"

"Nothing." I gathered myself and stepped back a few feet. "Okay, okay, come in. Stand right there."

"That disinfectant. . . I can't breathe," he said, stepping in and leaning back against the wall, hands to his knees.

"Sorry!" I said, as I slid open the door to the terrace. A surprisingly warm breeze swept through and with it, miraculously, the smell of saltwater. Athena would have loved that. She was enthusiastic about the olfactory dimension of our work. "It's the one sense we are helpless to avoid. We can't hold our breath forever," she told me back in October as we bought flowers at the wholesale market on West Twenty-Eighth Street. She had me scent pillowcases with relaxing lavender, spray complex bergamot in the study, lively tangerine in the kitchen, inspiring ylang ylang in the great living room.

"That shit gave me such a headache," Craig said.

"Sorry again," I said.

"Wow, this place is really nice," he said.

"Isn't it?" I asked proudly. He'd never seen any of the apartments I'd worked on. "I'll show you around, but first, go take a shower. There's a bathroom in the bedroom, second door on the right." I'd taken such comfort in that first musky cloud of sweat when Craig arrived. Of course, Craig rarely had an opportunity to break a sweat. He never exerted himself physically. Even our sex was mostly mine to execute. I preferred it that way. Let's face it, men are easy. Trite but true. My satisfaction was achieved through a peculiar set of stimuli. Craig only needed the touch of a woman, or even the promise of the touch of a woman. He was quick but he was also a quick study, and a naturally considerate lover, the way, say, an

attentive dinner companion might pull out your chair before he himself sat down.

As Craig padded down the hallway I called out, “Oh, and please don’t sit in the chair. That velvet is so delicate. I don’t want you leaving an impression.”

“You mean my sweaty butt print? Ugh! What the fuck did you do to the mattress in here?” he asked. I said nothing. “And what’s this thing staring at itself in the mirror? Is this one of your pup-sculptures?”

“They are fucking puppets!” I hollered, maybe a little too wildly. Craig took a pause.

“After I shower, I’m going to lie down,” he said. “I don’t feel so good after climbing all the way up here and hotboxing all that Pine-Sol.”

“What do you mean climbing all the way?” I asked.

“The stairs. It took me like forty-five solid minutes, with a few rests,” he said.

“So, not solid,” I said.

“Maya!”

“You didn’t take the elevator to forty-eight then walk the rest?” I asked.

“On the phone you said you took the stairs,” he said.

“Oh, I’m sure I didn’t,” I said.

He took another pause before turning on the shower and shutting the bathroom door with the most emphatic of clicks.

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Chapter 25

Fresh Off the Branch

After Craig's nap, I warmed up two of the frozen pizzas and set his down at one end of the hall and ate mine at the other. I brought out all the puppets I had made and had them join us. Jill especially liked Craig. Phil was jealous. Mrs. Wringman looked down her nose and through her lorgnette, scandalized by the unaccompanied man in his underwear. Bronwyn had been too shy to even join us.

"Maya," Craig said, taking in the crowd and, I hoped, the drama of the setting sun as it transited down the broad corridor. "This is kind of messed up. Are you, like, alright?"

"It's nice to have you here," I said. "But you need to stay in that room for the next two weeks. That's the protocol."

"I'm not going to stay here for two weeks," he said.

"Then why did you come?" I asked.

"I was going crazy, May. I needed. . . I don't know what I needed."

"So, you're not here because you love me," I teased.

"No, I guess not. Is that a problem?" he asked.

"No, I guess not," I said.

We ate quietly for a few more minutes. It gave me satisfaction to watch him eat. How is that for typical? For heteronormative? But I was willing to cling to anything real at that moment. Anything ordinary and humble.

"So, what's your endgame?" he asked. "Won't someone come back, sooner or later?"

"I have big plans," I told him.

"Really. No one has plans right now," he said.

"Transformation. Metamorphosis," I said.

"Oh. I thought you meant like. . ."

"What?" I asked.

"Something. . . real. Sorry, I mean metamorphosis is real but, honestly, you've been metamorphosizing for as long as I've known you," he said.

"Well, hasn't everyone?" I demanded.

"No. People change, maybe all the time, but they don't change completely. Not unless they're forced to." He seemed to realize what he was saying. "Did something happen to you Maya? Something bad?" he asked.

"A homeless man called me a pile of shit," I told him.

"You're not a pile of shit," he said.

"He sounded sure of it," I said. We were quiet again for a long moment.

"Do you remember when we drove all the way to Worcester to see that band Leslie's boyfriend was in?" he asked.

"And the show was in Waterford!" I said.

"We were stoned," he said.

"I fell in love with you that night," I told him.

"May," he said.

"No, I did. It's alright," I said. "You were completely lovable."

"This place," he said, after another quiet moment. "It's like you create a character for an apartment that's sold to someone else, and a place like this might not ever be occupied. It's all make-believe. You imagine fake people for fake homes."

"*Fake* is not the word I'd use. Maybe aspirational? One time we put in this enormous white cast-iron bed in this Meatpacking District loft. Our lady was a brass-tacks corporate executive, a PR bitch. Yeah, she fucked her way to the top, but then again, she fucked her way to the *top*," I said.

"And then, like, you make these puppets too. Like. . . all your interactions with people are not real."

I said nothing. I knew he worried that he had hurt me, and it's true. I was hurt. But all he had done was tell the truth. It's not like it was anything new either. Leslie had been pursuing the same line of critique for years now. But to hear it there and then, at the scene of the crime, as it were, made it all so much worse. Made it more real.

"Maya. I'm sorry. Who am I to criticize anybody? Hey, at least you try," he said.

"What good is that?" I asked.

"I don't know, but I mean. . . why the fuck not?" he said.

I lay back to look at the ceiling, now golden with the waning afternoon.

"You will stay the night at least?" I asked him.

"Yeah, I'll stay," he said.

"You don't have to," I said.

"I fell in love with you before that, even if. . . even if things have changed," he said.

"That's what things do," I said. "Oh, wait!" I disappeared into the bedroom and when I returned, I was waving the bag from CVS.

"No way! Parakeets?" he asked.

"Canaries!" I sang. "Fresh off the branch."

Later, when we were high, we lay down on the living room carpet, keeping a few safe feet of space between us.

"My brain just feels goo-ood," Craig said.

"It's all good," I answered.

Then we wound up rolling close together, then slightly touching, and then, yes, we had sex.

"If we do this, we have to be ready to live with the consequences," Craig said, turgid and stoned, still masked, kneeling above me on the living room floor.

"How is that different from anything else?" I asked.

"Yeah, but," he said.

"It's not," I said, pulling my shirt off above my head. "Nothing is different from anything else. Okay?"

"Okay," he said. And it wasn't different. It was the same. It was blissfully familiar in a world that had become increasingly unrecognizable. Thank you, Jimmy, for the junior high school prelude, but Craig was exactly what I needed.

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Chapter 26

What If This Goes On for a Long Time?

We would keep having sex, masked at Craig's insistence, but I wanted to sleep in the primary bed, alone. I wasn't ready to give up being the lady of the house just yet. We needed to be careful, to not take one another for granted. After all, before he showed up, he'd already moved on.

"These are very special circumstances," I told him. "But I'm glad you're here."

Craig agreed, plus he happily took over cooking. The kitchen became his domain and there was no end to his ingenuity with the limited supplies we had. He made us omelets and pancakes and tiny sandwiches. Ice cream sundaes. Stews and soups. We ate dinner late and watched the news. Each day they suggested that lockdown might last longer than we anticipated. That things might not get back to normal until the summer. Until September! Until next year! I didn't want to go outside ever again if I didn't have to, except maybe to sneak down to forty-eight and have a peek at you-know-who's door. But the weather had gotten nice. Craig was restless, and he wasn't the only one. The country was stirring. It wasn't just the springtime that drew people out again. We needed haircuts and cardio classes. We needed to ignore meatless Mondays. We needed to go bowling. We needed to be reminded of what we loved. But at the same time, we were reminded of all the things we wanted to forget. In lockdown, some things had just become too vivid to ignore. We became acutely aware of the things we took for granted. It was as if the world knew we had less to look at, so it seized the moment to commandeer our attention. A man with a knee to his neck called out for his mother before he disappeared in front of our eyes. It terrified and enraged us. Or was it the other face in the picture, entirely unconcerned, as if even he wanted to appear unaware, to show that it all mattered so little, that broke our hearts?

"And those skinny, bitch arms," Craig practically spat. "I hate it, Maya. I hate

all the bullshit done in my name. I hate being expected to be that guy. I want to get out there and do something in the name of peace."

"You're a peaceful man," I told him.

"Thanks. That means a lot," he said. "I mean, when did we stop being thoughtful? When did that stop mattering?"

"Is mattering a word?" I asked.

Craig usually fell asleep shortly after and woke at daybreak.

"I'm not used to living with this much natural light," he explained when I found him cross-legged on the living room floor watching New Jersey arise with early morning sunshine.

His apartment was dark and low. He lived mostly by the glow of his devices. Nighttime fell early and the day was sluggish to enter his little cave. In the penthouse, the natural rhythms of the sun imposed themselves on him with brutal compliance. In staging, window treatments are almost always decorative; narrow panels that sit on either side of the window. Pull them and they'll go nowhere. They block out nothing. The penthouse wasn't meant to be lived in, not yet at least. And it wasn't possible to live our ordinary, familiar lives there. Although I remained a night owl, maybe even more so. It was hard to surrender the night with all its twinkling lights. Sometimes, late at night, when I couldn't fall asleep, I pushed open the door to Craig's room and, from the safety of the hallway, watched him as he slept. He was the picture of passivity, like a dog on a hot afternoon. It was all I could do not to slip in and rub his belly. The thought of that helped me sleep—and I was often wakened by the smell of fresh coffee brewing and the early morning conversation he had with Bronwyn. They were both very political, a surprise since Bronwyn was so soft-spoken, but once she got the chance to expound on her beliefs, she was ardent and articulate and nearly identical in her ideas to Craig. He thought Smudge a fool, Wringman a fossil, the twins entertaining but insubstantial, and Bobby, naturally, a threat.

"Just tell me, do you actually sleep with that one in your bed?" he asked me at dinner at the end of the first week. "You know what, don't tell me."

"I wouldn't mind, you know," I answered.

"What?" he asked.

"If you and Bronwyn wanted to take it to the next level."

Bronwyn blushed, and I could see Craig did as well.

"This is nice, Maya, you and me here together," he said as he passed the mashed potatoes, and I handed back the asparagus in return.

"It's always been nice," I said.

"Yeah, but. . ." he began, then he did something I'd never seen him do before. Something I'd never imagined he could do. He cried. "It's been hard, Maya!" he practically yelped.

It caught me off guard, his sudden desperation. The pathetic way his voice broke. For all his doughiness, for all his careful sensitivity, Craig still practiced a standard form of masculinity. He had his own brand of stoicism, was reliable and sturdy in his own way. Of course, we'd been lovers, the first real ones we each had. I had seen his softer side, and he'd confessed his anxieties: He thought he had womanly hips; he had done terribly on the math portion of the SATs and admitted to me his paltry score; he was terrified of skateboards and spiders. But even when his mother had a health scare junior year, he didn't cry. He let me hold him one night in the midst of some kind of crippling silence that overcame him shortly after he'd received the news of her ailment and not long before her decisive surgery, but he'd not shed a tear. She came through it fine. We never discussed that bleak sleepless night of fear.

"He was having his whole history shook up inside him," Clarissa explained, when I shared the story of our motionless, arm-breaking marathon. "Mommy go away. Top level fundamental shit, especially for boys."

Craig played at being a misanthropist, but I knew how much he depended on human contact. He belonged to role-playing game clubs and political chat rooms and online sports round tables. He had even been dating! He'd been putting himself out there. I knew how hard that must have been. Already his hairline was creeping back. He'd begun to look less boyish. He still had roommates. He could have made a cave of his life and retreated into it, but he didn't. And then that cave was forced on him. No wonder he came over. I had been surprised by how easily I took to isolation, but he must have been more scared than I'd first thought.

I reached across the table and took his hand. He gasped at the touch, and his other hand fell to his waist to adjust what I realized was his sudden erection.

"Sorry," he said. "I'm just overwrought." I smiled and waved it away. He laughed and so did I. "Guess I'm pretty predictable." He shrugged.

"We all are," I answered.

* * *

"Imagine, just imagine," he panted as I sat astride his round tummy later, both of us masked. "Imagine if we really lived here!"

"Are you getting a taste for the billionaire life?" I asked, breathlessly, pulling

down my mask, in return, punctuating each word as I rocked my hips. “Huh? Huh?”

“No!” he shouted.

“No!” I answered.

“No! Put your mask back on!”

“No!” I laughed. I pushed his mask up and planted a big wet kiss on his mouth. I knew that would push him over the edge.

“No! Maya,” he cried out as he passed the point of no return. “No-o-o!”

Chapter 27

Norman

With Craig's ambitious work in the kitchen, our food supply soon got low. Feeling chivalrous and suggestible by the supply of essentially responsibility-free sex, he volunteered to make the journey down and out.

"Or, come with me, maybe?" he asked.

"Are you worried? It's easy if you follow the sequence. Fence, alley, etc. When you get back, we can, you know, fuck."

"That's great but I mean, like, maybe it would do you some good. To get outside," he said.

"It won't," I said, still shook by my encounters with Athena and the homeless man and even Jimmy, terrified that he might smell me again and somehow figure it all out.

"We could have an adventure. Don't you want to be in the middle of things again?" Craig asked. I shook my head.

"Don't you want a real life?"

He looked at me almost imploringly, but a moment later his face dropped. I'd forgiven Craig many of his foibles, as no doubt, he'd mine. We were far from perfect, and we knew it. But the only time he ever enraged me, the only time I cursed his name silently, is when he didn't grant me the respect of having my own feelings, when his raised eyebrow or slightly pursed lips suggested I didn't know what was good for me, when, in his eyes, I was a clueless victim. He was doing it now. He *pitied* me, the son of a bitch. How dare he! I was the only one allowed to pity myself. And I did it better than anyone else. He could have the outside world. It wasn't coming back anytime soon. He could go take a flying leap, too, as Leslie would have loved to inform him. He could fuck the hell off.

"Maya, that's not what I meant," he said.

"I'm going to go rub one out in the tub," I said, walking off to take a bath. He was as confused as dismayed. His luck had evaporated before his eyes. "You should stretch your calves before you head downstairs. I don't want you to get a cramp."

It wasn't much later that I heard the unmistakable sound of grocery bags being set down outside the door, the familiar crinkle of plastic wrapping, the sound of bottles bumping against one another, a relieved exhalation at a burden unburdened. I'd barely finished my bath and was wrapped loosely in a towel. I was still annoyed at Craig, and wanted to torment him with my warmed and fragrant body so nearly accessible beyond the loosely wrapped towel. I was hungry too. I figured I'd let him do penance by making a delicious meal, one into which he'd put extra effort. I had forgiven him a little. His heart was in the right place, while mine was all over the map. He'd only wanted to help. The world needed peaceful guys like him. Anyway, I pitied him a little bit too. It was part of what made our sex so exciting. The bath had relaxed me. I was ready for another go, but on my terms.

"Pity *me*, will you?" I said, tugging down the towel a little to show off some flushed cleavage. I threw open the door, expecting, of course, to see Craig. Instead, I found Norman.

Covering his face was an elaborate shield, clear and sculpted around his features, like a second face, but unmistakably Norman, maybe even more so for being so expensive, and elaborate, and probably unnecessary. He wore board shorts that, on closer inspection, revealed the pricy logo of a storied French *couturier*, and a graphic T-shirt that altered a familiar corporate soft drink icon into a dirty word. He smelled good, recently misted with something complex, spicy, and manly.

"You're naked," he said.

"I—I am not," I said.

He nodded.

"But I feel naked now," I said.

"I didn't do that," he said.

"I know." I secured my towel. Norman watched.

"I did not come for sex," he said. "Do you believe me?"

"Do you?" I asked.

"I think so," he said.

"Then I do too."

"But if you want to, I brought an electronic thermometer," he said.

"How thoughtful," I said.

"I also brought lobster, and steak, and sorbet, and absinthe, and broccoli rabe. I thought you might like that," he said. "And some playing cards, and cigars, and underwear, and water with electrolytes, and a bunch of other stuff," he said.

"Norman," I said.

"Good, you remember me," he said.

"You asked me to marry you," I said.

"You said no. This place looks so different in the daytime," he said, stepping forward into the living room.

"Please! Observe social distancing!" I told him. "And tell me, *why* are you here?"

"I thought you might be hungry. I remembered how you like to eat."

"How's that?" I asked.

"A lot."

"So, in the middle of all this you just waltzed into the lobby with this and took the elevator up here?" I asked.

"No, why would I do that?" he asked.

"How did you know I was here?" I asked.

"I saw your pictures on Instagram. You take a lot of pictures of the sky and they all kind of look the same," he said. I was stung. I'd thought each of them was a specially and intentionally curated viewpoint. Certainly, they were important moments to me. Passing epiphanies. A cloud that resembled a lady's bonnet. Rays of sunlight that reminded me of those idyllic summers at my mother's uncle's fishing cabin on the lake before he drowned, drunk, and the family sold it. "I mean, you could have been anywhere. But then in this one," he said, scrolling through my feed to show me where I'd given myself away, "when you play with the filter, you realize that almost the entire apartment is reflected in the window. . . right here. Look, here's where we're standing right now."

"Shit. Come in, bring those bags with you. Put them there. Stand there," I said.

"I'm really happy to see you, Maya," he said. "I like your hair. Isolation suits you."

"I'm transforming," I explained. "Behold the dormant chrysalis."

"I'm not sure what you mean, but very cool." He paused a second, then smiled as if remembering he should. "Can I wear a towel too?"

I felt such tenderness for Norman. The part of him that needed love didn't know quite what to do with it. I imagined he'd grown in fits and starts, always stuck between one stage or another, always disproportionate to himself. The only thing he could really rely on, his only constant, was his pragmatic mind, his ability to see the most efficient way to do something, and to get it done, except when it came to other people. I thought of Josiah and what type of boy he probably was, awkward and cross-eyed, I bet, until he blossomed in late high school. "The longer the development process, the better the product," Leslie declared during our boy-crazy days in high school, even if her own husband, who still resembled a confused twelve-year-old at times, didn't bear out that theory. Craig, I figured, kind of always looked like he did. Almost plump, almost hairless. Athena too. She had the lithe body of an eight-year-old, after all, the kind always practicing cartwheels in the backyard.

"But, Norman, why are you *here*?" I asked.

"I miss talking to you. Isn't that funny? The one thing I thought I'd never miss. Not you, just other people and the things they say. Sometimes it's just the worst."

"I know what you mean," I said. I'd come to understand I was as bad with other people as Norman. At least he had something they wanted. I was pitiful. Invisible. I thought of my mangled Hedy in the other room. "You could have called," I said. "I mean. . . just to spare you the trip."

"Oh, there was no trip. I brought a—"

The stairway door swung open then, and Craig tumbled in, out of breath, and once again radiating his unique musk.

"I brought *spanakopita* and freeze-dried fish from Iceland," Norman told him.

"Maya? What. . .?" Craig asked, as unable to understand as he was to breathe.

"This is Norman," I said.

"Hi, I'm Norman," Norman said.

"Craig just got us some groceries too," I said.

"Us?" Craig asked.

"Oh, you're Craig! The affordable dinner and sex guy," Norman said.

"What? Who the fuck is this, Maya?" Craig asked, strangely angry. "You with him?"

"No, he's a friend," I told him.

Norman seemed touched by the statement.

"Wow, look at all these dolls. Are these the ones from your apartment, the

ones you told me about but refused to show me? Are these those?" Norman asked, strolling off into the living room as if physically rebuffed by Craig's aggressive vibes.

"No, they're new," I told him.

"How do you know about those?" Craig demanded, following him.

"I saw them in her bedroom. Or I guess, really, it's just the one room," Norman said. "But great water pressure. These. . ." —he leaned in for a closer look —"are terrifying." He waved his hand in front of Mrs. Wringman's face, perhaps trying to make her blink.

"Don't say that," I said. "Norman, you can stay in the den."

"Oh, okay. I guess that's something I could do," Norman said.

"You must only use that bathroom, and you must keep it clean," I said. "Until you have been quarantined for two weeks—"

"Wait, what?" Craig asked.

"We'll have dinner at seven thirty, sunset," I said. "I'll call you when we're ready. Craig, you could use a shower, and we could all use a rest before we eat."

"I tore my fucking pants on the fence, Maya!" Craig said.

"Got your steps in, I bet," Norman said to Craig, trying to be as friendly as possible. I nodded encouragingly. "Were you lonely too? There's something about her, right? Something just so pathetic. It's really attractive, isn't it? And pretty good move with the towel, am I right? *Molto* sexy."

Craig swung his fist at Norman. He didn't so much miss as set in motion a chain reaction that left most of the groceries on the floor, Craig on one knee and out of breath—again—and Norman, untouched, in a defensive crouch, most likely some incorrect variant of Krav Maga.

"Violence is never the solution, bro. But you should know that I am certified. I have training," Norman warned.

"Quiet!" I whispered loudly. "And pick up all these groceries! Everyone is making too much noise!"

Norman held his finger to his lips, while Craig glared at me balefully, fists balled at his sides as he struggled to contain his yawps of cuckolded rage. For a long, tense moment there was only the sound of his breathing, which slowly began to come under control. I met Craig's eyes and told him silently that everything was going to be okay, that he and I had something special, that everything was going to be made clear, that it was just more of the wacky stuff that happened all around Maya and that was why he loved her, after all, and that

we—*he*—should just try to find peace in the moment because I knew he was a peaceful man. With great reluctance, Craig mumbled a barely audible apology just as my phone exploded into Calypso in my hand and my towel slipped fatally to the floor.

"Ya, mon!" Norman cried, pulling an enormous spliff from one of the many pockets on his expensive shorts and sparking it into existence through a cleverly designed portal on his mask.

"Fuck!" Craig bellowed. "Maya! Fuck!"

"It's a vibe!" Norman said, trying his darnedest to catch the beat.

"Hiya!" I said. It was Leslie.

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Chapter 28

Leslie

"Where are you?" Leslie demanded, as I made a hasty retreat to the primary bedroom.

"Home. Where else?" I asked.

"Oh really? Because I am at your apartment, and you are not here! Or you're not answering the bell. Mom is freaking out. I came to get you," she said.

"You what?"

"I was going crazy. I figured a ghostly car ride into the epicenter of a pandemic was preferable to another fucking jigsaw puzzle. I left her with Dave. They have become total pandemic buddies. It's goddamn gross. Anyway, where are you?" she asked.

"I thought you were depressed," I said.

"What?"

"I mean, why didn't you call?" I asked.

"I wanted to surprise you. You used to love surprises," Leslie said. "For real, Maya, where are you?"

"I'm at a friend's place," I said.

"What friend? You're supposed to be alone."

"I am. I mean. . . I came here alone," I stammered.

"Where?"

"The city," I said.

"Isn't this the city?" she asked.

"No, you see, here in New York we call Manhattan the city." I could imagine her shaking her head at the absurdity of it. If only she knew how wonderful it was to be an insider, to know in-group language.

"So, what is Queens?" she asked.

"Queens is Queens," I said.

"Don't you live in Queens?"

"I think we're going in circles," I said.

"What friend?" she asked.

"No friend. I lied."

"Maya."

"I'm a stowaway," I said. She was quiet for a long moment. I was familiar with those moments. That brief pause. Nothing broadcasts skepticism so loud as silence. It was my sister's way of telling me she didn't believe anything I was saying. Her pauses told me she was supremely annoyed, that she wished I'd act like a normal person for once. That she wished she could understand me. "In a penthouse," I added.

She sighed. "Maya, come on. I'll wait outside in my car but hurry up."

"I'm in the city, Les. In a penthouse," I said.

"Maya—"

Noises erupted from the kitchen. Men's voices raised. Craig's was hostile. Norman's was calm. I guess being empathy-challenged had its benefits. He was preternaturally non-reactive—oblivious, you might say—even as Craig provoked him. Craig, who'd been deeply embarrassed by his attempt at violence, that he'd been seduced by such base emotions, and apologized to both me and Norman, still clearly wanted to make a point of not being intimidated by Norman or his money. Norman, of course, was the least intimidating person in the world. . . if you saw him for what he was, if you saw what he was really asking for and not what he had accumulated along the way. We all knew the kid with the most toys was always the loneliest.

"What is that?" Leslie asked. "*Who* is that?"

I guess I could have lied. I could have made up another story. I could have pretended. But I didn't have it in me, not anymore. I didn't know what the point was of saying anything untrue ever again. If you ask someone what they think is the worst thing that humanity ever invented, you'll get answers like war or high-fructose corn syrup, stuff along those lines. I think our worst invention is lying. Speaking untruths. Why on earth did we ever start doing something so irresponsible and even cowardly? Then again, as a species we do like to tell stories. We love make-believe. I guess I still hadn't reconciled the two thoughts.

Anyway, I told my sister the truth.

"Craig," I said.

"What? *Craig* is there? Maya, do you realize how irresponsible that is? Did you even think about how that might pose a danger to me?" she asked.

"You should have called," I told her. "He and Norman are talking about a vaccine, I think."

"Who is Norman?" she asked.

"He's my friend. He's very well off. He offered to buy me this apartment but, of course, I told him that was ridiculous. I think maybe Norman owns, or is going to own, one of the vaccines. Not everything he does is good though. You can't swing that much money around without some innocent people getting knocked over, amirite? He'd been sad, so at dinner the night before lockdown, I told him the best way to not feel sad is to do something nice for someone else. To give something away. So he brought us lobster!" I said.

She was silent again, so I just gave her the address and the way to access the building. Alley, fence, blind spot, sunglasses, mask, the sequence of stairs to elevator, eyes to the ground the whole way.

"I'm really supposed to believe this?" she asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Can't you come down and get me?" she asked.

"My ankle, remember?" Which reminded me, it was probably a good time to have a canary. "Oh, and bring toilet paper," I said. "Neither of these guys thought about it, amirite? Thanks!"

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Chapter 29

The Handsome Painter. . . Again

I chided myself for not being as close as I could have with my sister, especially the last few months before lockdown. I knew she didn't want to be that person still living at home, with an underperforming husband. I knew she really wanted a baby, and I knew she'd be a wonderful mother. Better than our own, I'm not loath to say, even if our mom was that picture of engineered efficiency—of full bellies and play schedules and braces and glasses and maxi pads all according to schedule. She marshalled us to all our milestones, but always under great duress. She was often fraught, but she smothered everything with a smile.

When it came to our personal development, our inner lives, our mom was decidedly *laissez-faire*. Leslie was too much of a busybody to ever let that happen to her own kid. Leslie had her anxieties, but she was happy to manifest them as anger or disappointment. She'd spoil her child, probably, to overcompensate, but she'd also drive them half to death. She was so inspirational, in fact, that she was the first character I created: Yes-lie. I fashioned her from a shearling vest and a deflated volleyball. Yes-lie would ask you, in a voice like a myna bird, a question such as, "Did you clean your room?" And if you didn't say yes, she'd scream. And if you did say yes, she also screamed.

"Stop screaming!" Leslie said when I first showed her. "I don't sound like that!"

"Yes! You do! Ahhhhh!"

Later, when Leslie was up in our room with her friends, I heard her using the Yes-lie voice, proudly.

"You're a puppet!" her friends, stoned, said in amazement. "It's uncanny."

I was proud, but that didn't stop me from stomping into our room and ripping Yes-lie out of her hands and hitting her. She hit me back. In a moment,

we were tumbling around on the floor, our rage unleashed. We'd gotten physical before, but this was the first time we both lost control. We hit one another very hard. We pulled hair. We twisted arms. Our friends were taken aback by the ferocity of our blows. Naturally, it wasn't just about the puppet, but all the frustrations and impatience of adolescence. By the end of the week, my mother had taken Yes-lie away, but nothing could take away her voice.

"I can always use it," I told my poor tormented sister in the dark, late at night, when I knew she was just about to fall asleep. "I can *always* use that voice."

"And you can always get hit," she said.

"Remember Yes-lie?" she asked me when she accompanied me to my abortion.

"Ahhh," I screamed.

I was really glad she was coming to the penthouse.

"I have a surprise!" I called out, as I came back to the kitchen with the phone in my hand.

"What?" Craig asked.

"My sister is coming!"

Poor Craig, once again, he looked so deflated. Norman, seeing Craig's response, grew concerned.

"I'll make coffee," I said. I needed to rescue the mood, especially with Leslie's arrival being imminent.

Both men perked up. I was terrible in the kitchen perhaps, but Craig knew I made a killer cup of coffee. Norman, seeing Craig's enthusiasm, grew enthusiastic himself.

"Can we have cookies too?" Craig asked.

"Of course!" I said.

"Cookies!" Norman called.

Sugar and caffeine settled everyone's mood. We ate and drank silently, if contentedly, and it wasn't long before we heard something drop and skitter across the floor outside the door. I heard the familiar sound of an exhausted body slump against the wall. Was it Leslie already? She exercised compulsively, but she also had a terrible diet. She loved fast food and CrossFit both. I'd watch her do sixty minutes on the treadmill in our basement before devouring half a box of Nilla Wafers. I didn't doubt she'd make it upstairs, but not this quickly.

When I took up position by the peephole and removed the Post-it note, however, I saw a man's figure, trying his best to catch his breath, a pile of debris

around him, bubble wrap and a tape gun, as if he'd looted the packing supply section at Staples. Something about him was familiar, even as he gasped and curled up into himself. That shirt. Where did I know it from?

Aha!

"You!" I cried, as I flung open the door. It was Josiah.

"What the fuck?" he caught his breath. "You're—"

"Maya."

"Hey there! The artist guy, right? You're wearing the same shirt!" It was Norman, waving from a safe distance on the other side of the kitchen.

"Ah, the billionaire. Who else is here?" Josiah asked, looking amused.

"No one," I said. "Except Craig."

"Craig," Josiah said. "Okay."

"You walked all the way up, dude?" Norman asked.

"Yeah, I did," Josiah said proudly, though he was still on his knees, defeated and depleted.

"I could have given you my fob," Norman said.

"Fob?" I asked.

"Yeah, for the elevator, for my place. On fifty-three. I have this." He held out one of the sleek little modernist orbs that attached to a keychain, designed by the same architect as the building itself. Part of the whole synergistic branding program. "It's VIP. For the penthouse floors only."

"Hang on," I said. "You've been living downstairs?"

"No. Not living technically, it's still bare concrete, after all. But the place is mine. Anyway, it's too small to really live in. Three bedrooms, four if you count the den, and only two balconies. Nothing like this place. I'm just going to flip it. I like flipping things. I brought a deck of cards, I could show you some sweet handwork," Norman said, at which Craig, from the kitchen, groaned.

"We'll get back to that later. How did you get in?" I asked Josiah.

"There's a blind spot—"

"By the alley next door," I finished his sentence for him. "Jimmy."

"Yeah," he said.

"Did he flirt with you too?" I asked.

"No, we talked about motorcycles," Josiah said.

"I suppose you have one," I said, understanding completely. Women bonded over men. Men talked about machines.

"One what?" he asked.

"A motorcycle!" I said.

"I used to. Ducati Scrambler totally rebuilt. Just sold it," he said.

"I have five!" Norman added, exalted.

"Only five?" Craig asked, coming in from the kitchen.

"Yeah," Norman said sadly.

"Didn't you walk up too?" Josiah asked.

"No. Elevator to forty-eight," I said.

"Ah. Makes sense. That would have been so much better," Josiah said.

"It would have been hard for a man half your age," I said.

"Does Athena know you're here? What are you doing here anyway?" he asked, suddenly confused.

"I'm quarantining," I said.

"Ah. Nice move," he said.

"I'm still figuring that out," I admitted. He smiled at me. I could see that he was impressed, but I knew his smile wasn't sincere. He probably smiled that way at Jimmy, got stoned with him, maybe got gossip on the sexy women who lived in the building. Maybe convinced him to slip him the extra key to the service entrance, which he clutched in his hand. But it was a good smile. Effective. Probably half responsible for his career.

"Please cover your face. Your exhalations worry me," I said.

Annoyed, again, he pulled his bandana over his nose and mouth.

"You look like Billy the Kid," I said. "Or should I say Billy the Middle-Aged Man?"

Craig laughed.

"I was fine until the thirty-fifth floor," he said. "I run Tough Mudder, you know. I mean, I have."

"Why are you here?" I asked.

He nodded silently for a moment. "I needed to see her painting," he said.

"Clarissa's?" I asked.

"She's a genius. She makes me feel like I'm like a tree frog, croaking away idiotically," he said.

"I can see that. She and I have a complicated relationship too," I said. "Wasn't this a lot of trouble, though, just to look at a painting? Anyway, I broke the lock so the service key wouldn't have worked. I whacked it with that little bronze from the study," I told him.

He nodded silently. "You know. . . when we first met, I thought you were a

flake, but now I see you're actually a con artist of some skill."

"Thanks," I said. "But I don't know what I am. I'm metamorphosizing up here." I spread my arms like a butterfly's wings.

"Cool. We're all going a little crazy, I guess," he said. He pulled his bandana down and struck a pensive pose. It probably worked like magic usually. "I thought you had a crush on me."

"I don't," I told him.

"Do you have a boyfriend?" he asked me.

"No," I said.

"Girlfriend?" he asked.

"No," I said.

"I have an ex-wife. Alice. We had a bad divorce, by which I mean I had a bad lawyer," he said.

"Your face," I reminded him. "My sister is coming, and I don't want your breath all over the corridor."

He pulled the bandana back up over his nose and mouth.

"Are you going to invite me in?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," I said.

The stairway door banged open. My sister strode out, aglow with the exertions of hauling her suitcase.

"Leslie!" I cried.

"I lost some of the toilet paper. Went right over the edge and bounced down five or six flights," she said. "I just couldn't run back down thinking I'd have to run back up again."

"We can always get some from my apartment," Norman offered.

"I thought it was empty," Josiah said.

"It is, except for toilet paper. A whole pallet. I heard something bad happened up here. I wanted to be ready," Norman answered.

"Why did you bring a suitcase?" I asked her.

"I have stuff I need. Don't you have stuff? Maya, who are these guys?" Leslie asked.

"You remember Craig," I said to Leslie.

"I guess everyone knows Craig but me," Josiah mused.

"He's great," Norman told him. Leslie snorted.

"Josiah's a painter and Norman's an entrepreneur," I told her. "Norman, stay

where you are." I gestured to Josiah to step inside and wait over by the breakfast table. "Leslie, come in. Stand here, by the wine refrigerator."

"Maya," Craig said.

"Craig!" I said. He obeyed.

"I need to pee," my sister said.

"Les, third door along," I told her.

After she'd passed, Craig came over close to me. "You invited your sister?" he asked, pulling me aside conspiratorially.

"No, she invited herself. Besides, she's family," I said.

"And who is this guy?" Craig asked, pointing his chin towards Josiah.

"He's one of the artists! You know that painting in the dining room?" I said.

"Oh, the really nice one," Craig said.

"No, that's *hers*," Josiah corrected him.

"He's in love with it too," I told Craig. "He came all the way here to see it."

"Umm. . . Maya? He didn't come here to see it." Craig's gaze moved to the pile of packing materials in the hallway. "He came to steal it."

A weird moment passed before Josiah made a dash towards the door, but Craig kicked Leslie's wheelie bag into his path and floored him. Leslie, returning from the bathroom, saw her luggage in distress and leapt to protect it with a pocket-sized canister of Mace from her fanny pack.

"Can we all just take a moment to talk?" Josiah narrowed his gaze at me. "I mean. . . think what would happen if Ownership discovered you were hiding up here—"

But Leslie didn't want another moment. She pushed the trigger and sent the spray right into the unprotected upper half of his face.

"Ahhhrgh!" he screamed, not unlike Yes-lie, I should note.

"Whoa! Unexpected!" Norman declared.

Josiah retched through his bandana and slapped the floor in agony. Tears ran down his beautiful face. We all took a cautionary step backwards and Craig wisely slid open the doors to both terraces while Leslie marched to the refrigerator, removed a bottle of water, and tossed it to Josiah who poured it greedily into every orifice in his head.

"Wash your face, and shut your mouth, and don't you ever threaten my sister again," she said.

"What were you going to do? Take it off the stretcher and walk it down fifty-four flights?" Craig asked.

"It's a perfect scheme. No one's around. Everyone's wearing a mask," Norman deduced.

"You're a thief," Craig said.

"I'm an artist," Josiah admitted. "And I'm broke. Why do you think I sold my Ducati? I've been making some bad choices. I was broke before the pandemic hit. I know my career's run its course. I haven't had an original idea in years. Don't you think I know that?"

"How much is it worth anyway?" Norman asked. "The good painting."

Leslie smirked. Craig cleared his throat.

"She's about to go stratospheric. Her art is indeed too good for this place," Josiah said. "She's treated no better than a vase of flowers. You should be ashamed for putting her in here," he said to me. "Then again, you're completely fucking nuts, right?"

"You came to steal Clarissa's painting!" I answered.

"I was going to sell it to someone who really loved it. Not use it as a prop in some dollhouse," Josiah said.

"You should get out of here, dude. Now," Craig said, trying his best to be threatening.

"And what's to stop me from telling Rogan you're here?" Josiah asked.

Leslie waved her phone in his face.

"*I was going to sell it to someone who really loved it. . .*" the video confession she recorded declared with sparkling clarity.

Poor Josiah. It had been one misstep after another that night. He looked so crestfallen. A bull stag left behind on the banks of the river, unable to ford the rapids one last time.

"Well, at least stay for dinner," I said. "We have tons of food."

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Chapter 30

Everyone Could Use a Shower

Josiah went off to shower away the sweat and Mace and vomit and guilt. We'd made him surrender his phone and wallet as security. Craig bundled them up in a CVS bag and tied them to the balcony railing outside the breakfast nook. Norman and his face mask sat on the sofa, three different hand-held screens demanding his attention. Leslie and I went to speak in "her" room.

"Since when do you carry Mace?" I asked.

"Since I got married. A wedding ring is like a neon sign for every lamebrain to put the moves on me," she said.

"Have you ever used it before?" I asked.

"No. Well. . . accidentally, in an elevator once," she said cryptically. "Maya, I don't have to tell you how crazy all of this is."

"No, you don't," I said.

"Let's go home."

"Things are happening, Les," I told her.

"Nothing is happening. Haven't you noticed?" she asked.

"I'm finding myself," I said.

"Exactly. You can get found out and arrested at any moment!"

"We have the makings of a funny little community here," I said.

"Surrounded by a bunch of broken men?" she asked.

"They *are* all kind of broken, aren't they? Ha, I hadn't seen it that way before," I said.

"Are you fucking them?" she asked.

"No. Well. . . Craig of course, a little bit, and Norman, no, well. . . once. It was nice, interesting. And Josiah, the painter slash thief? No. But I totally would have."

"Oh," she said.

"And I let the custodian downstairs cop a feel," I said. "Oh my god, we played Space Invaders! I kicked his ass."

"Maya, I'm worried," she said.

"Sis, you should have seen the look on your face when you hit the trigger on that Mace. A woman possessed. Priceless. He's good looking though, Josiah, don't you agree?" I asked.

"Very," she said, sitting down on the bed and lying back. I lay on the floor next to her, as close as I could to how we did as girls, in one of our beds. "I really thought we'd spend some time together," she said. "I'm not made for this. I know you live a lot in your head, but not me."

"I do," I said.

"Maybe too much. Then again, they didn't close down your head like they did my entire life. This is bad. Bad in ways we have yet to even discover. I mean. . . no mixed martial arts, no job, I have nothing. I'm really worried. I don't have the imagination to survive in a world where everything is cut off, even for a little while. I need to know that things are still possible," she said.

"Oh, Les, they are! They always are," I told her.

"I'm not sure. I mean, you're sure, that I know. You were always a hopeless optimist," she said.

"You sound like Craig," I said.

"Craig, despite being a drip, is a realist. These other guys are oblivious. I mean, Norman, why isn't he on some private island?" she asked.

"He likes talking to me," I said.

"Okay," she said after a pause. "And the other guy. God's gift to women," she said.

"I bet he has lot of sex, sure," I said.

"Maya! I don't want to hear that. I could care less about men and their dicks. I need to shower. Those are working, right?" Leslie said.

"Of course!" I saw Leslie looking towards the door, where Josiah was standing.

"Hey, I'm sorry," he said. He was just showered himself and clad in only a towel. "I think I grabbed the last one. Listen, I'm not a bad guy—"

His towel was tucked under a firm, flat abdomen. He was in very good shape, but he seemed to have acquired his physique not in an expensive gym with a trainer but by being a man genuinely engaged with life, with his Tough Mudders

and Mongolian hiking and strong Ducati-controlling triceps. Wet, you could see his hair was thinner and started farther back than when it was dry and casually yet studiously styled, but it was human and appealing. He was hairy, too, with the very center of his chest just turning gray. He was cast in a kind of late afternoon chiaroscuro. The light angling in from the study down the hall might have drawn a sharper silhouette to what lay beneath his towel. I caught Leslie looking. So did he.

"Or maybe I am a bad guy," he said sheepishly.

"Maybe you are," Leslie agreed.

"It wouldn't be the first time a woman told me that," he said.

Leslie groaned. "I guess you think that's what women like."

"Some," he answered.

"Sad but true," she said.

"You're not bad, Josiah," I told him.

"Just desperate," Leslie said.

"Exactly," I said, optimistically.

He flushed, and a strange look passed between my sister and him. She snorted, maybe a little too emphatically.

"We're all a little desperate at times," he said, hitching up his towel. "I mean, whatever. . . it's the end of the world."

Leslie pushed the hair out of her face. I'd seen that gesture a million times too. Her will was wavering. She was close to crumbling.

"How old are you? I mean, I can't believe you used the last towel," she told him. I didn't want to ruin the moment by telling her about the designer bathrobes in each bedroom closet.

I clapped my hands together. "Fun! We can do laundry!"

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Chapter 31

Dinner

Nothing brings people together better than a meal, and we needed togetherness more than anything. We were fractured. We had forgotten what we had in common. It's almost like we were living in different worlds. But some needs are universal. We are all creatures that become empty in turn, our cycles faithfully running down, our energies dissipating. I know that when I am hungry, I am best described as faded, not all there, not all me. We'd share a wonderful dinner. Our brain chemistries would stabilize, our moods would elevate. We would find points of contact with one another again. Like I said, I'm not much of a cook and, unlike a lot of us, I didn't get any better during the pandemic. I produced no sourdough bread, no inventive salads or homemade gelato. This was a special occasion though. Craig would do the wet work. I would not so much cook as curate our meal. And I'd bring my talents as a stylist, a stager, to bear. Every lovely dish and platter and bowl that I had scoured the city for would be enlisted to service. And where we didn't have enough—because in all ways, a staged home is an incomplete home, the way a mannequin can suggest the shape of a body, the implication of an inhabitant, but lacks the most essential features of humanity—I improvised.

We'd drink from two rocks glasses that Athena and I had staged, as well as two coffee mugs, a mottled glass tumbler from the "teen bedroom" meant for brushing one's teeth. We served with a few random implements forgotten by the caterers—big plastic tongs that would have to do for most of the dishes—and seventy-five teaspoons. I made that dining room a real place. Before, it had merely been the idea of a room, a place to imagine a glittering dinner party. Tonight, I would light a dozen candles that were never meant to be lit, on a candelabra that was only supposed to burn in one's dreams, but we were worthy of a swanky

Manhattan dinner party, our colorful band of artists and designers and entrepreneurs and Craig, and Leslie. We'd made it real.

We laid out over a dozen dishes, leftover wine from the reception, the delicacies Norman brought and the ones I got at Gourmet Smorgasbord Emporium Market, Craig's Trader Joe's purchases from that afternoon, a few of Leslie's car snacks and drinks that she insisted on including—her low-fat Fig Newtons and low-fat Luna Bars and some kind of terrible alcoholic seltzer. We served ourselves from the inlaid-bone sideboard, masked and gloved, and sat far apart at the enormous dining table. I threw open the terrace doors on both ends of the room, so a pleasant and prophylactic breeze transited the apartment. The air had just the suggestion of the warm months to come. But there was something behind it too. The coming of something even bigger. If you're lucky, it will be a breeze that stirs you from your dream. It will be the unimpeded movement of invisible particles, a gentle realignment of pressure that wakes you to the world as it really is, and not the picture you have in your mind. I wonder why we prefer alarms instead—or maybe, when it comes to stirring us from our dreams, that's the only thing that works: shock. But there was just the whisper of change that night. We were still living in a dream. We didn't understand yet how lucky we were. We didn't understand how naive. We played at having nothing, but we had no idea just how much nothing really was.

"*Mangia*!" I called. "Dig in."

We were all hungry and spoke little as we ate. But soon, the silences themselves grew loud. At a dinner party silence equals space, and it means there's a lack of connection. I looked around at all the work I'd done, and I felt ridiculous. Despite what I told myself, despite what I wanted to be true, I wasn't very good at other people. How was I supposed to manage a dinner party, especially where everyone there plainly got on everyone else's nerves? I wasn't that charming. I didn't have the moves to bring people together. Each tap of the spoon against the plate or rattle of ice at the bottom of a glass was like that empty toilet mechanism clanging out a reminder of my failure. That I could only really function in make-believe. For a moment, I felt as if the floor might fall out from underneath me again. That fear might rise up, and seize me, that I'd lose control, and just scream. The toaster samosas turned into ash in my mouth. I looked down at my folded hands, desperately strangling a napkin to the death.

Everything was wrong. Every*one* was wrong. We were all living in make-believe. I distrusted the floor below me. I was skeptical of gravity. Of happiness. I

saw a picture in my head. The blankness of the pandemic, but everlasting. Something Boschian. People eating someone's arm, that kind of thing. I was crushed by dread. And I was angry for being blindsided by it. But I was also angry for being born into the world while it was such a fucking mess and not doing anything about it either. Such rage and hatred I had. . . against myself!

"When Alice and I were married, we used to eat off the same plate, always," Josiah said, suddenly, breaking the quiet. "We didn't even have a table. We ate on the floor, which was essentially our bed. I mean, our bed took up the whole apartment." He gave me a quick little wink. He had come to steal Clarissa's painting, but now he was coming to my rescue. "It was all the furniture we had. I guess it was all we really needed. And that plate. A pan, a pot. We shared the fork even."

"*Tres bohème*," I said, clearing my throat. He reached across the table to refill my wine.

Leslie sighed. "That sounds gross."

"It was. But it was beautiful too," Josiah said.

"Was it? Was it really?" Leslie asked.

"Yes," Josiah said sincerely, so much so that I saw it affected Leslie, the truth of the connection Josiah had with his wife, even if it hadn't lasted. "It was gross, but all the more real for being that."

Craig rolled his eyes.

"Come on, Craig. We had our gross moments," I said. Leslie snickered. He blushed.

"Sure," Craig said, bravely, sitting up straighter and pulling in his belly. "People are people. We're not mannequins."

"We knew each other, that's my point," Josiah said. "And it was good to be known."

"But maybe she knew too much, in the end," Leslie suggested. "She found out you're a thief. Maybe you took the fork all for yourself."

"Did you?" Norman asked.

"I did not," Josiah said. "I sold my first few paintings while we were together. We bought more forks. We bought sheets and towels. I took her to Mexico."

"Did you make love on the beach?" Norman asked.

"We did," Josiah said, looking at Leslie. "We made a lot of love. Until we didn't." He seemed strangely sad for a moment. "Eventually our bullshit caught up with us, and we refused to pretend it hadn't. We were good to each other that

way. Sometimes, you know, collapse, everything just falling apart, is exactly what you need. We believed for as long as we could, too much, too long. But no one is more afraid of life than a cynic."

"I don't think I believe in much, honestly," Leslie said.

"No, Leslie! Don't say that!" I was shocked by my desperation. "You have to believe, sure, you do."

"Eh," Leslie said, and turned her dark face towards her wine.

"I asked Maya to marry me," Norman said.

"Congratulations!" Josiah said.

"Maya, what?" Craig asked.

"She said no. She's pretty sensible despite being kind of *out there*," Norman said, air quoting once more. "We had also talked about how her personal weirdness combined with her upper percentile physical attractiveness was a potent erotic combination. No wonder we acted on it."

"Acted on it? Maya?" Craig said.

"Sorry," I mouthed silently. He shook his head and poured himself a few fingers of whiskey.

"But why get married? You're so rich," Josiah asked Norman.

"He needed an anchor, for a while at least," I explained. "A way to identify."

Josiah nodded. "We do need to see ourselves as something, us humans. Can't just trust we are there unless we are connected to some concept."

Leslie snorted. "Connected to a concept?"

"Maya would have made a good wife," Norman said.

"I'm sure I *could* be a good wife, but then again, maybe I have a different definition of the role. I might want to please a man, but that wouldn't be why I'd marry one. The one-plate thing, now that makes a lot of sense, but not all the time. But some of the time," I said.

"And why exactly did you say no to Norman?" Josiah asked me.

"Because Norman deserves love. We all do," I said.

"Fuck Norman!" Craig said.

"Shut up, Craig. You don't want to marry Maya. You were barely even her boyfriend," Leslie said. "You're barely even grown up!"

"I am the fuck grown up!" he roared.

"Why? Because you're going bald?" she asked. "Or maybe there's some erectile dysfunction thrown in."

"There is not," I said. "And that's really rude, Leslie."

"Speaking of break-ups, why aren't you friends with *her* anymore?" Josiah asked me, waving his whiskey at Clarissa's painting. "I feel like there's some unexplored conflict there."

"Bro, you're not Oprah. You don't have to get up in everyone's shit," Craig said, finishing his drink. "You're wise and divorced. We get it."

"No, I'll tell you what's wrong with all of you," Leslie said.

"Okay, here goes the suburban white lady speech," Craig said, having reached for the Bulleit again.

Leslie cocked her head at him. I'd seen that gesture a million times too. "*Bro*, you're so white you're almost clear. Hypocrite much?"

They'd never liked each other. When Craig and I first started seeing each other, they both made that clear.

"It's not hypocritical to care about other people, to demand change, even from a position of privilege. I won't let my whiteness be anyone's burden," Craig declared.

"I agree!" Leslie shouted angrily. "I just don't make it a fucking T-shirt."

"We all agree," Josiah said. "Biting each other's heads off over an eighth-of-an-inch difference."

"I have this theory that everyone's right," Norman said.

"You mean we're all white," Leslie said.

"Just not at the same time," Norman added. "We're all right, but at different times."

"Interesting," I said. "Do you know that Josiah has a twin?" I asked the rest of the group brightly. "He's not an accomplice, is he?"

"No, he'd kill me if he found out," Josiah said. "He's been on me for years to go after a juicy licensing deal. Sell my soul to Marriott. Let them put a bazillion inkjet paintings in airport hotels everywhere. Problem is, every hotel in the country is empty now, and I bet half of them are going to close for good. Waited too long."

"Bingo," Norman said. "Then again, the whole idea of *hotels*," he said, using yet more air quotes, "is kind of medieval, isn't it?"

"Not really," Craig said.

"Staging won't fare much better, in the short run at least, and I can't make it very long on fumes," Josiah said. "My brother knows the business, but he doesn't know how broke I am, personally. Anyway, Zack went home to keep an eye on our folks. They're getting on."

"So, then he's the good son and you're the hapless art thief," Leslie said.

"Nobody's perfect," Josiah said.

"Not yet," Norman offered. "Perfection is just a matter of scale. If we can do something small completely right, it holds that we can continue scaling up until we can do everything."

Craig snorted. "Perfect is something that only exists in the mind."

"You could argue that the imperfect is already perfect," Josiah said. "Sometimes in painting—"

"Oh my god, shut up!" Leslie exploded. "You bunch of little boys!" She held up her hand to show us her ring. "I'm married. *That* means something. Something real. Not perfect, and not a fucking fork!" She had a hard time getting all the syllables out clearly and in the correct order.

"I would like to ask you though, are you unhappy in your marriage?" Norman asked Leslie.

"That's beside the point!" Leslie said.

Josiah smirked. "Everything is beside the point in your world. No wonder you're lonely," he said.

Leslie stood up, took two big steps towards him, and slapped him, hard, in the face. "I'm not fucking lonely!" she said.

Josiah smiled.

"Smoke break," he said, producing a pack of Winstons, and stepping out onto the terrace. He lit two cigarettes and gave one to Leslie when she joined him. They stood apart together on the terrace, Josiah, arms in the air, gesturing emphatically at the city Leslie hated. Doubtless he had a million stories. Norman and Craig and I, rapt, watched them. They were like a pair of silent movie stars on a bright star-speckled screen. Josiah had a tall bottle of Pellegrino that he opened and passed to her. She took long therapeutic drafts, her eyes locked with his. Finally, she liberated a terrific baritone burp and stood with her hands on her hips, flush-faced and proud.

"Coffee!" I called out. I was so glad Athena insisted on that elegant espresso maker, and that we both agreed that if we were going to stage some beans, we needed to stage a lot. She wanted the pantry to smell like coffee, and it did. "Come sit down!"

Everyone did. I put out cream and sugar and Leslie's fat- free Nilla Wafers. Norman surprised us with some pungent pre-rolls he'd brought back on his plane from Oregon.

"Fuck yeah, Rich Guy," Leslie said.

"It's called Wedding Breath. Wedding Cake crossed with Mendo Breath," Norman said as he handed out the little stoppered cylinders, each containing a perfectly-made conical spliff.

"Everybody smokes their own. No sharing of germs!" I said.

"Oregon, that's a big carbon footprint just to bring these here," Craig said.

"Actually, it's offset by their production," Norman told him. "Solar, hydroponic, small batches, organic."

"Of course," Leslie and Craig said together, to their mutual chagrin.

"Jinx! You owe me an eight ball!" Josiah said. Leslie laughed. "You can't say anything, or you'll get jinxed," Josiah warned her.

She stuck her tongue out at him. Josiah pretended to snatch at it. Leslie opened her mouth wide in response. Craig watched the interchange, amused. He might otherwise have been annoyed—Leslie was intentionally provocative around him, especially around the topic of sex, as she had been with all my boyfriends since junior high school—but it was obvious he was getting stoned. I could see by the lazy smile on his face that he was enjoying himself. He held the spliff between thumb and middle finger, like a character in a French film, and studied it after each puff he took as if pondering the curious nature of its existence. At school he'd been known as a lightweight. Always put to sleep by strong bong hits. Now he was taking his time, being careful. Leslie, on the other side of the table, across from Josiah, took long, defiant drags, scowling out from under her brow. When we were girls, she was known as the Cruise Director, assuming responsibility for rolling our joints, cleaning the weed of stems and seeds, making sure that lighter and passing protocols were followed. She was the keeper of the weed, too, of course. It was why I always knew she'd make a good mom, someday.

Norman, for his part, was a strange smoker. He only took a few puffs at a time before putting out the joint, only to light it again shortly after, never sure if he was smoking the right amount, not wanting to misjudge another human situation, and glancing around the room for confirmation. Josiah didn't smoke. Instead, he'd gone to the bar and served himself a healthy pour of the Bulleit. I could see Norman was factoring this into his assessment. Craig coughed and waved his hand in front of him. The giant room was filled with smoke.

"We look like those dogs playing poker," Josiah said.

"I'm not a dog," Leslie countered.

"She's a married woman," Craig said, before dissolving into giggles.

"Happily, quote unquote," Josiah added. Leslie flung an oven-warmed cheese stick at his head. He nearly caught it in his mouth too, which was funny, but, as I'd learned in the sixth grade, the food-throwing stage of a party usually meant you were running out of moves.

"I don't get it," Norman said.

"There's nothing to get," I answered. "A clumsy joke, that's all."

Norman nodded. He stood up and walked across the room to pick up the violin we'd staged on the bookcase. He placed it under his chin, as it was apparent he'd done countless times before, and plucked the strings, tuning them as he went along.

"You do not," I said, astonished.

"Ten years of lessons. I hated every single one," Norman said.

"That's such a fucking cliché, dude," Craig said.

"Tell me about it," Norman said. He started off with a few classical favorites. Some Chopin. A touch of Vivaldi. He was technically accurate, I guess, but he lacked a kind of heart. He was playing as if to please someone with a clipboard and checklist. Someone who demanded mechanical perfection, not poetry. Someone who wasn't interested in how the music felt. Then, to my surprise, Norman switched tack and began playing something simple and sad, the way a lone violin can do so well. When it stands in for a voice. And when what it says is absolutely necessary. It was "These Days" again. I could see Leslie recognized the song. Without thinking about it, I started singing along. It seemed the most natural thing in the world, even if I'd always been terrified to sing in front of anyone before. It wasn't until I'd begun to make puppets that I was ever comfortable even speaking in front of people. Norman was intent on his bowing. I nodded to him as I sang. I put my hands on my heart. Well, what if I was the puppet for once? I saw myself as Maya, a creative and optimistic young woman in love with life, even the sad, lonely parts. What was she made of? What did she sound like?

"Fuck yeah," Josiah encouraged. He had found his light close to the candelabra.

"You played that for me in your bedroom that night after we had sex, remember?" Norman said, glowing, when he was done.

Craig groaned. Josiah cleared his throat. "Maybe everybody should just take a minute to look at the light," he said. The sun had recently set. Reflections of our

stark faces rose up before us against the dimming skies. The world was made of bits of fading fire, of steel and glass and stone, magma-bright for an elusive moment before turning blue and surrendering to the electric galaxy of the city. And who were we but eyes in a dark forest aware for the first time that we were lost and scared and maybe hungry for a speck of love?

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Chapter 32

Midnight

After dinner we went our separate ways. Craig finished wiping the counters and table while Norman mopped. Thrilled by the novelty of the experience, he shared with Craig his dream of figuring out some way to remove the human presence from the task, until Craig burst his bubble by revealing the existence of the Roomba, over which Norman ruminated on whether he should buy the company. They were good men. No one was perfect, our lot especially. They weren't cruel. They tried their best to make me feel better, but they had their appetites. Everyone does.

Josiah went off into the den slash office without saying anything. Leslie watched him with the same confused angry look she often had before she slipped into one of her funks. There was nothing to do but let her go through it. She'd feel better when she sobered up a bit, I knew, but then she grabbed the last bottle of wine off the sideboard—three quarters of a cheap zinfandel—and strode off to her room. Sitting at the dining table I realized that the day had taken its toll on my body. "I need a shower," I told everyone.

"We got this," Craig told me. "Fresh towels in the laundry room, by the way."

"Yeah," Norman chimed in, looking to Craig for approval. "We got this."

* * *

The door to the primary bath had the most satisfyingly solid click when closed, nothing like the ambivalent and anything-but-plumb threshold on my bathroom in Sunnyside. I even pushed the little chrome button next to the knob and locked it. As kids, locking the bathroom door was strictly forbidden by our parents, especially my father, who had an unnatural apprehension of us flooding the tub and sending water down through the dining room ceiling, which, I admit, was not without precedent.

I set the dimmer switch to its most romantic setting and took a long, hot shower beneath a rainfall showerhead the size of a personal pizza. The city twinkled softly behind the foggy glass everywhere I looked. I wrote my name with my finger in the hazy door and watched as the steam erased it, filling it in as if it had never been there. It was a relief to see the atmosphere reclaim it. Atmosphere is just another word for the sky, isn't it? I made the water very hot. I disappeared inside clouds of steam. I was no longer there.

When I stepped from the shower later, wrapped in one of the big bathrobes, my hair bundled in a tall towel turban, the penthouse was dark and quiet, just two soft blades of light slipping out from under Craig's and Norman's doors. I grabbed Hedy, about to tap on Craig's door, but then the light went out. Almost immediately I heard him snoring. I opened the door. He was asleep on the bed in a T-shirt and the boxer briefs that he bought in economical twelve-packs. On the nightstand was a Neal Stephenson novel, the same one he was always in the middle of, its pages feathered with a rainbow of Post-it notes. I watched him sleep until it felt weird to do so. . . and until one of his nocturnal farts chased me away. I wish I could say that it was a more sentimental moment than it was.

Norman's door was open a crack. I peeked in and saw that he was sitting cross-legged on the bed, three glowing tablets laid out in front of him.

"Hey," he whispered. "Just checking my crypto."

"How is it?" I asked.

"Inscrutable," he said.

"It can't be scruted?" I asked.

"Maybe not. Are you here for sex?" he asked.

"No, Norman, I'm not," I said.

"All good. Like I said, I have trouble reading the signs sometimes."

"I know. It's alright," I told him.

"But under other circumstances, if a woman comes into a man's bedroom late at night in her bathrobe, then it might indicate her desire to have sex?" he asked.

"That's one of a number of possible scenarios," I said.

He thought about it. "So how can I tell?"

"Just like you did. Come out and ask," I said.

"Nice," he said, proudly. "This is fun!"

"What is?" I asked.

"This place. Tonight. It's awesome. . . or maybe not? I don't know," he said.

"No, it is. You're right. It's supposed to be fun."

"Earlier, when I was mopping, that was great. Wow, that's a scary puppet."

"I didn't mean it to be."

"I rarely do what I didn't mean to," he said.

"Must be nice," I said.

"It can be a lot sometimes," he said. Something on one of his tablets claimed his attention. He was fully absorbed for a good ten seconds before he tapped one screen, and then another. He turned one of the tablets around to show me a jagged green line making its way to the upper righthand corner of the screen. "Heaven is a place where nothing ever happens," he sang, badly. "People think numbers aren't human, but we invented numbers. I mean, yes, we discovered them but only because we have human minds. Just like this room is only, quote unquote, white because we have human eyes. The algorithms that everyone is so terrified of, they're just love potions. They're flashcards. A picture of a cow on one side, on the other the word *COW*. What's the story ever about anyway? Money. Like, no shit, Sherlock, right? You're lucky what you do is worthless."

"Is it?" I asked sadly.

"Not this." He waved one hand in a circle, indicating the penthouse. "I mean her." He pointed at Hedy. "I mean you, the real you. Your funny apartment. These puppets. You're lucky that it doesn't really have to be bought or sold. That it doesn't even have to have a value. Even your friend's amazing painting. It's worthless, right? Sure, one day it will be priceless. Who knows, maybe I'll even buy it. Maybe I'll buy ten of them and then it will be worth even more. But she didn't make it with money in mind. That's obvious. That's real. That's the kind of authenticity I won't even pretend I can have."

"But not all art is like that," I said, almost, but deciding against, bringing up Josiah's art as an example.

But then Norman said, "Oh, I know. Josiah's not a bad artist, but we both know he's not doing it for the love. Or not anymore at least." I was surprised at Norman's sudden intuition into human nature. Or maybe he'd always understood. He just didn't know how to engage, how to be subjective; with someone else, that is. It was his own nature that was a mystery. He didn't know what other people were supposed to mean to him. That must be a very lonely place to be, as rough as the opposite could be, to be so done under by other people that you lost sight of who you were supposed to be. Funny how it was always other people who made us feel lonely, just the fact of them. "But your friend, she's a genius. If she's not careful, she'll wind up so expensive it's the only

thing people will notice. I know what that's all about. Anyway, maybe that's your job. To not get too famous, to not be the voice of your generation, to not be too important, but to be your own voice."

"I guess," I said.

"Wow, I got it right?" he asked.

"I think you did," I said.

"You're good at that, being you. Please turn off the light," he said.

"Thanks," I said, and turned off the light.

He turned over and got under the covers, sending his glowing tablets tumbling to the carpet. "Your friend. . . don't let people like me ruin it for her."

"I'll do my best," I said.

I walked out of Norman's room and heard the sound of voices. There was something familiar and comforting in the rise and fall of the words. In my still-sleepy state, I almost thought I was a little girl again. It sounded like Leslie's voice, the sound of our childhood. She was laughing. She was happy. The whole world made sense. I wondered if it wasn't all just a dream. That I wasn't in a penthouse at all. That there had never been a lockdown. That I was home again. That I'd never gone to art school, met Clarissa, moved to New York, downloaded that terrible app, met Athena, stowed away in a life that wasn't mine.

"Les," I whispered.

Her door was open, but the bed was still made, the room empty. The strangeness of that roused me with fear. The darkness felt different. Endless and contagious, like it might be the true nature of the world and everything else was a delusion. Growing up, the shape of my sister's body in the darkness had always reassured me. Even when she was "dead to the world," as my mother put it, when she took her marathon naps. Even when we were at odds with one another, I could rely on her to always be there. For the first time, I considered what if, in this terrible pandemic, I actually lost her? It would be like losing myself. It would be like losing my childhood. Memories would be cut away, turned into something else. I'd be something else. I'd be a table with three legs. "Les!" I whispered again, more loudly this time. I heard her voice again. I must be in a dream. I stepped into her room and turned on the lights, but it was empty, and I was awake. The brightness was more terrifying than the dark. It was emptier, more hopeless. I shut the lights off again and heard another voice. Low and quiet, familiar and far off. Then two of them, laughing, intimate. Their words playful, and teasing. I

followed the sound into the living room. It was dark, the drapes drawn. I turned on the lights and heard Leslie cry out.

"What the fuck?"

I saw Josiah first, in the flash of lights, startled like an animal that should be back in the safety of its hidey-hole, but is too hungry to know better. He and my sister were making out on the big awkwardly shaped sofa. Leslie's shirt was off, but her pants were on. His shirt was on, and his pants were off.

"Are you kidding me?" I asked angrily. Leslie laughed and shielded her eyes. "This is a pandemic! In case you forgot," I shouted.

"I did," she said.

"I didn't," Josiah said. "I mean, how could you?"

"Shut up," Leslie told him gently. He obeyed, seemingly ashamed and thrilled at the same time. "You know. . . bullshit, Maya! You do what you want all the time. Now I'm going to do the same," she said.

"You have no idea what I do," I said to her.

"You do this," she said, drunkenly waving her hand around. "Curtains and teacups."

"You're married!" I said.

"You're carrying a doll for Chrissakes!" she said. "You live in make-believe!"

"This is a sculpture!"

"It's terrifying," Josiah said, reaching for his pants.

"Don't!" Leslie ordered. "Don't be a cockblock, Maya," she said, defiant and unsteady. She was stoned and drunk and horny and couldn't give a damn what I had to say about it. She wasn't exactly the good girl among us, but she was at least the one who stayed home, who got married. And now she was about to stray, very far. I knew what strength of will it took for her to finally allow herself this transgression, even if Leslie had always been attractive to men, in large part because she let them know how much she held them in contempt. The whole thing was so neurotic and basic, so depressingly high school, no wonder it made them both so horny.

"You don't even like him," I said.

"Not much. Not really," she said.

"Wow," Josiah said.

"You don't even *want* her to like you, Josiah!" I said. "You've been needling her all night just so she lashes out at you."

"You did do that, didn't you?" Leslie teased him.

"Kinda," he admitted with a sheepish, and undeniably handsome, grin.

"It worked." She kissed him. Their two faces came together like puzzle pieces, except when they pulled apart, they were whole and still beautiful. There was something like joy on her face. I hadn't seen it in a long time. But it wasn't really happiness. She looked like those men salivating over the busty home health aides I found in Craig's browser history. It was glee. She had the same expression when she hit the nickel slots in Atlantic City at a cousin's wedding a few years earlier. Twenty-eight dollars against the two she'd spent. It was her first blood. She chased it the rest of the night until the nickels were all gone, and slept so soundly she nearly missed the ceremony.

"What about your marriage? Is that make-believe?" I asked. Leslie didn't say anything.

"Maybe we should take a beat," Josiah said.

"No beats!" Leslie said. "I am done with beats. Done with waiting. Done with being respectable. I mean, who could respect me? I'm a whiny bitch. I invent problems to cover up how terrified I am of my real problems. I only feel alive when I'm pissed off. Don't get me wrong. I'm good at it. I call the goddamn manager every time. Why shouldn't I? That's all I got!" There was a long tense moment of silence. After a bit, it turned sad. "You didn't have to leave," Leslie said quietly. "What did you get out of it? This fucking city. It's filled with bad people. I just don't understand sometimes, Maya. I don't understand anything."

"Neither do I, Les. I haven't understood anything for years. . . No, you know what? Do it," I said.

"What are you talking about?"

"Cheat. Have a fling with a flaky New York artist. Give yourself a hot secret. That's what this city is really for." I walked to the window. "Look. Secrets everywhere. They light up the whole place. But go somewhere else. Quarantine yourselves together and do it until it's done. Think about it. Two weeks where no one is allowed to bother you. There's no reason to go back home. This is a wrinkle in time. None of this counts. It's a gimme."

"It's the rug," she said.

"The rug?" Josiah asked. Leslie reached out and touched Josiah's cheek, stroking him tenderly along the chin, before startling both of us with a solid and sonorous slap to the side of his face.

"Okay," Leslie said to me. "We'll get the story straight for Mom later. You got me for two weeks, Mister. My car's downstairs."

"You found parking?" Josiah asked.

Leslie got her suitcase, and they left together. I gathered Hedy up in my arms.

"Oh, Hedy, I think I've been trying to become an idea instead of just being a person."

"I mean, welcome to Hollywood, or wherever we are now," Hedy said.

"I'm so fucked," I said.

"Sounds like it, Darling."

I turned on my heels. I decided I needed to look at that amazing painting one more time.

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Chapter 33

J. Weinberg-Patel

Josiah was right. Clarissa's piece was too good for the apartment. But also, it was just a painting, and the world was full of paintings. It was full of people. It was full of mistakes. It was full of examples of how we just got it wrong. Norman was right too. I understood what I had to do. I had to save it. It seemed so obvious at the moment, the reasoning so abundantly clear. Every second that painting was there it became less of what it was supposed to be, just like me.

I think Clarissa would thank me. She once told me she had no use for her art once she'd finished a piece.

"It's somebody else's problem now," she said, when she'd hung her senior show.

I wished I could talk with her. I had a million things to tell her. But now all I saw was the glaring distance between us. There was no way for words to fill that up. No way to express what I'd done, why I'd abandoned her, how I'd wound up stowing away in a penthouse, in front of her painting, ready to do what I was going to do. We'd never find ourselves in the same room again.

I had Norman's lighter. Hell, I had a six-burner La Cornue stove. I had a bottle of alcohol-based hand sanitizer that Leslie had left on the kitchen counter. I'd wake Craig and Norman, once I'd done it, and we'd leave. Maybe if I told Norman soon enough, we could meet one of his helicopters on the roof—or was that a dramatic overreach? Poor Craig, he'd never understand. He'd almost certainly be anti-fire, even if there were five empty floors to protect anyone down below, especially you know who. The apartment would no doubt be damaged, maybe catastrophically so. Josiah's painting would burn too. And the weird sofa, and the beautiful carpets. The sheer drapes. The towels and bedsheets. Mrs.

Wringman. Bobby, the Twins, Smudge, and Bronwyn. And oh! My soaps! Maybe I'd rescue them beforehand. I still liked the idea of papering my bathroom with the wrappings. Maybe I could get back home in time to see the flames from Sunnyside.

Leslie would probably be happy. I'd send her a text of the burning painting:

"the rug lol"

I gathered up the hand sanitizer and took the candles out of the candelabra on the table. I started to rub a little hand sanitizer on one corner of the painting, but it was slow going. It evaporated quickly and I wasn't sure if it would be effective at all. I flicked the lighter and touched it to the bottom edge of the canvas. It scorched a little bit and extinguished itself. I tried again with a much thicker layer of gel, and a corona of blue flame enveloped my hands. I was motionless, awed by how fast it happened. It was beautiful. Of all the things I had held in my hands, all the souls and voices, Hedy, Yes-lie, Mr. Woode-Bannister, none had the light, the elemental truth, the quiet potential as that ball of fire. I wanted to believe that it was my greatest creation to date. Instead, I let loose a string of expletives and patted away the flames with Hedy's scarf just as the doorbell rang.

The house I grew up in was of the style known as contemporary. It was a motif unsure of itself. Our doorbell was a sleek white box with four brass pipes hanging below at different lengths. It sounded the classic four-note arrangement that denoted suburban elegance, something European and elevated. *E C D G, G D E C*. Leslie and I always set words to the melody. "*You are stu-pid. You smell like poop.*" The penthouse, for all its expense, had a doorbell with only the two notes. The classic ding-dong. In all the time I'd been there, I'd never heard it. Until now.

"Just a minute," I called, double-checking my hands were no longer on fire.

I'd been expecting it, kind of. I wondered why Rogan wouldn't just use his key. Although disappointed that I couldn't burn the apartment down, I was prepared to meet my fate.

But when I opened the door, it wasn't the bald, belligerent Rogan standing there. Instead, there was a woman in black running tights and a reflective silver T-back top, a lavender neoprene mask that matched the scrunchie on her brunette ponytail. She was barely five feet tall, with impressive muscle tone for a woman of any age, not just in her fifties, which I guessed her to be judging only by the tiny lines at the edges of her gray eyes. Her sneakers, silver and lavender, were spotless.

She smelled wonderful, light and clean and sweet. She introduced herself but she needn't have. I knew exactly who she was.

"I'm Jessica," she told me, a smile flashing at the corners of her eyes. She took a step back and removed her mask. "Jessica Weinberg-Patel."

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Chapter 34

Is That Puppet Supposed to be You?

"I've known all along," she said. "Lockdown happened, and it's quiet like it's never been before, right? Then, one day, I hear footsteps in the stairway. My apartment is right next to the stairwell, yes?"

"Yes. I know," I said.

"I can hear the trash chute open and close. I can hear footsteps on the stairs," she said. "So much for luxury construction, but that is the dirty little secret in this building boom. Everything's made like crap. Anyway, I thought to myself, why are they heading *up*stairs when there aren't any apartments up there except this one? I even asked Hector and Jimmy if anyone was up there and they told me they had checked and that it was empty and I thought, hmm, weird, but I didn't say anything. So, one day, again I heard the trash chute and then the footsteps, slowly this time, like they were tired. I thought, this is my chance! I left my apartment as quiet as I could, and I snuck into the stairway, and I followed them. I was like a little spy."

"Fun," I said.

"Yes," she agreed. "Imagine my surprise when they went all the way up! And then I saw you, from the little round window, for barely a second, the Colorful Girl."

"The colorful girl?" I asked.

"I remember you from the reception!" she said.

"You were there?" I asked.

"I had to come and see what all the fuss was about. Your outfit that night was very creative. Although, you seemed so sad, maybe. . . or lost."

"I was on painkillers, but also, yeah, I was both those things."

"Painkillers?" she asked.

"I fell," I said.

"Oh no!"

"At the gym. I was distracted, and lost my footing," I said.

"No good deed goes unpunished, as they say, right? Are you still in pain?" she asked.

"Not really sure. Not being sure is kind of my jam lately." I shrugged. Jessica nodded in understanding.

"Anyway, at first, I was shocked. I was even a little indignant. We've all gotten a little judgy during this thing if you ask me. But then I thought, good for you. Move right in. Adverse possession, am I right? I hate to think of anything being wasted, even a ridiculous apartment like this. Honestly," she said looking around at the apartment. "Who really needs all this?"

"But you live in this building," I said.

"I live in a sensible apartment," she said.

"But if you could afford—"

"To what? Be insensible?" she said, waving away the suggestion. "And then I worried about how lonely you might be. I know you ordered things to my apartment, by the way."

"I'm sorry," I said.

Another wave. "Necessity is the mother of invention."

"Hedy Lamarr was an inventor!" I blurted, holding up my own Hedy, now little more than her gnarly head on the end of my fist. Jessica Weinberg-Patel cleared her throat.

"I've heard that, yes. So, I almost—almost—came up here and knocked on the door, but then I heard you again, saw you make your way up with groceries! I don't know how you pulled that one off, getting in and out."

"There's a blind spot. In the basement," I said.

She nodded. "Every once in a while I jogged up here, and I listened outside the door. I could hear you talking to yourself. I mean, you talked a lot. You'd sing. You called your mother. But then one afternoon. . . nothing. I could hear your footsteps for an hour, just walking back and forth. Something wasn't right. It worried me, the silence and the footsteps together. Something had happened," she said. "Am I right?"

She was. "I had a little crisis of confidence. Things built up. A panic attack," I said.

"I knew it. Such silence. That's not your style."

"No," I admitted.

"And then I heard another voice, many voices," she said, glancing warily at Hedy again. "I could hear you talking to people, and that's when I realized it! You were making all the voices! I thought, she's very creative. Either that, or she's going a little crazy."

"Ah," I said, humiliated that she had such insight into my collapse. I wondered if I'd been conspicuous like that my whole life. If I mistook how invisible I sometimes felt. That, really, I was a very noticeable freak. A big shiny basket case.

"And then tonight it seemed like you were having another party," she said. "Real people coming and going."

"Real people," I said. "I'm not too sure about that. I'm not sure what that's supposed to mean anymore. I'm sorry if we bothered you," I said.

"It wasn't that. I miss the noise actually, don't you? I'm not above living a little vicariously. But I was worried about you. I thought maybe you made a bad decision. Put yourself at risk. There were two very obviously drunk people on the stairs just a little while ago. I heard them coming a mile away."

"My sister and an artist. They're not coming back," I said.

"Have you been getting enough to eat?" she asked, touching my arm. Her gloves were printed with some kind of texture, for grip, I guess. They felt reptilian on my bare arm, but I appreciated the contact.

"We had lobster tonight." I sniffled.

"Dear, I don't think you should be alone. Lobster, by the way, you should not eat. They are remarkably sensitive and intelligent creatures who form lifelong love bonds and don't deserve to be anyone's dinner."

"Jessica, I'm afraid I'm not that good a person," I found myself saying.

She waved me off. "I doubt that," she said.

"I could do more."

"Is that puppet supposed to be *you*?" Jessica WeinbergPatel asked.

I didn't answer.

"Anyway, do you have someplace to live? A place of your own?" she asked me.

"Sunnyside. And I'm not alone. There are two men here," I said.

"Your lovers?" she asked.

"No. Well, come to think of it, they were both my lovers. But before all this," I said.

"I hope they were nice to you," she said.

"I think they were. I mean, yes, they were," I said.

"Let me also tell you, I have great taste, and *that*," she said, pointing to Clarissa's painting. "That's the only thing in here worth its salt."

"I almost burned it down," I said.

"Oh heavens! In that case, I think it's time for you to go. For your own good. Tomorrow's going to be a beautiful day. Go outside. Join in. Wear a mask. Bring some water. Wear sunscreen. Be a good person if you want."

"So, what do you think it means?" I asked.

"Hmm?" she asked.

"The painting?"

"Oh. I don't think it matters," Jessica Weinberg-Patel said, smiling again at the corners of her eyes.

"She was my friend, the artist," I told her.

"Well, aren't you lucky!"

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Chapter 35

Why I Live in Make-Believe

I didn't tell you the real reason I stopped making my sculptures—my puppets—is that after a while they could only tell the truth, and I wasn't interested in hearing it. I furnished a dozen different voices to convince myself I wasn't a disaster, but my characters turned on me. They were friends to the facts, and not to me.

"You can do better, Maya," Mr. Woode-Bannister told me gently but firmly.

"Better? She needs to get her S-H-I-T together!" Aunt Bobbi declared. She was my most straight-talking creation, based on my father's sister. Made from a crushed paper grocery bag as tan and leathery as our real-life aunt, she was mostly mouth and rattled with a handful of coffee beans inside her noggin and, like our actual aunt, refused to use swear words except to spell them out. But I knew what she meant. I knew what they all meant—I was a mess and a coward—and just like I turned and ran the day of Clarissa's opening, I turned and ran from the truths about me that they—oh fuck it—that *I*, was speaking. I stuffed them angrily into that box. I shut them up.

But you can't stuff history into a box. You can't pretend that what happened didn't. You can't pretend to be something you're not. Yes, I know people do it all the time, but it never really works. You wind up being a third thing. A bad version of yourself, a puppet made of garbage. When you lose a sense of who you are, well, that's when all hell can break loose. For a while at least, I chose hell. Something about it was familiar and reassuring, like a dollhouse on fire. I looked down at Hedy, where I was cradling her in my arms. I could never fault another girl for not looking perfect. The only thing that mattered was that you tried. Still, she was unfinished. She wasn't living up to her potential. I hadn't done right by her or me both.

"You were in a tough spot, Doll," she said.

I dropped her on the floor and sat down. My head was killing me. I wanted a canary more than anything—I realized I hadn't taken one all night—but instead I put my hands over my ears and closed my eyes as tight as I could. It didn't help at all. When I felt a little steadier, I opened my eyes and there was Clarissa's painting waiting for me. It made me happy and sad at the same time. I'd had something once and then I lost it. I took a picture of it with my phone. It was good to remind myself I'd never be capable of making something like that. I needed to get real about who and what I was. I was the sum total of my mistakes. I was impossibility personified.

"Almost too beautiful to stand, Clarissa," I said.

Jessica Weinberg-Patel had told me to go out, but where was I supposed to go? I'd flown from one dollhouse to another, always burning them down instead of sticking around and making them real. I was lost and stuck at the same time. My phone chimed. It spoke up.

"Sent to Clarissa."

With horror, I realized I'd accidentally triggered the voice assistant on my phone and stared terrified for a few moments at the little thumbnail of Clarissa's painting on the messenger app on my screen. Delivered, but not read. Every writer's nightmare, I suspect, were I a writer.

I told myself it was almost impossible that Clarissa would have the same number after all these years—even if I did. She was a different kind of person. Someone very much out of reach—to someone like me especially. Sending the picture was just another stupid accident in what clearly was a lifetime chock full of them. The light had started to change. It wasn't quite yet dawn, but it would be soon. I felt like we hadn't had real daytime for months. Just a pretend version, a lightbulb through miniature windows. I realized how much it meant to me, that slow turning of the earth. As long as we kept spinning in the darkness, then somehow it all still made sense, that somehow there'd be a reason to have faith. I closed my eyes to see if I could feel it, and for a moment I thought I could, the gentle thrumming of time underneath my feet, traveling up dozens of stories to where I stood, the earth infinitely more powerful and significant than anything we could build on top of it, no matter how tall. It was as reassuring as it was intimidating. Any time it wanted it could remind us of who was boss. For the first time in months, I felt something like certainty. I could feel it in my palm. I could feel it in my fingertips. A vibration, unquestionable and clear. But then it stopped.

"Oh no!" I said, scared at suddenly having lost contact with that elemental and generative hum. Crushed that I'd been given only a momentary glance at—dare I say it?—grace. Well, that's the way this story goes, I guess. Always a near miss.

And then it started again. That wonderful vibration. Oh, I laughed with joy. It was a pulse! The very heartbeat of the world in my hand! Then it was music itself. It was Calypso!

I didn't have to look at my phone to know who it was. Only one person in the world had ever called me at the stroke of dawn before. Only one person knew they could.

"Maya?" Clarissa asked after I tapped the little green circle below her name on my screen. I opened my mouth, but I couldn't make a sound. It might come out like a squeak. I might start sobbing or laughing or hiccupping uncontrollably. I'd begun to sweat too. It was amazing the ability of my body to produce so much moisture so fast. I'd had aggressive flus that hadn't rocked my glands as hard. I felt like a kitten fished out of the drain. "Hey, why are you up so freaking early?"

"I've been up all night," I said.

"I feel you. Everything is upside down, I guess. It's all just one weird long day," she said.

"I was just thinking that. Listen, Clarissa, I didn't mean to message—"

"Weird side effect of lockdown is now I'm an early riser," Clarissa said, not hearing me. "Up before sunrise. In bed by nine, like a baby."

"Oh. Is that what babies do?" I asked.

"Fuck if I know. Where are you, Hon? Home?" Clarissa asked.

"No, not home," I said, suddenly nostalgic for my crowded, crooked little apartment in Sunnyside with the sound of mice scratching in the wall and late-night parking-related fistfights in the street.

"Alone?" she asked.

It seemed too much to explain Norman and Craig and Leslie and Josiah, and well, everything else. It seemed insane. "Just me and Hedy Lamarr," I said.

"All a girl's got to do to be glamorous is stand there and look stupid, right? I'm with my mom. I'm going nuts," she said. "Ten times a day I ask myself, did I really come from this person, but then she does something, some little mannerism, and I'm like damn, I am just like her. Fundamental shit that will be with me for life. It freaks me out. What about you? You're okay?"

"Sure," I said. I decided I'd keep quiet, for the moment at least, about my

painkiller habit and having just tried to burn her painting. "You know, upside down world, right?"

"My mom's friend, we used to call her Aunt Donna, she died, in a nasty hospital near our house, Maya. I mean this is happening to real people. I gotta tell you, I'm having a hard time believing that art is the right response. I know it should be, or could be, but there's all this fucking noise. If there's a pattern there, if there's a message, I'm not seeing it yet. I mean, nobody knows shit, right?" I didn't know what to say to her. I didn't know shit either. "What about you? Honestly, I wasn't sure you were still in the city," she said.

Norman appeared in the kitchen doorway.

"Are you on the phone?" he asked in a loud whisper. He looked at his glowing smartwatch. "Is it Asia?"

I looked him in the eye and made very clear hand gestures indicating that he was to leave the room, but like so many other typical human signals he did or could not read them. He flopped back heavily on one of the sofas. I strode off to the other end of the room.

"I'm here, Sunnyside," I said. "It's nice. I've been staging apartments. I mean, like, as a job."

"That sounds fun," Clarissa said.

"It can be." I looked around at the beautiful apartment. It was like a polite ghost awaiting instructions. Norman was snoring quietly on the sofa, his tablets gently rising and falling on his chest. "I mean, none of it is real. It will never be real." I said, my voice breaking.

"Maya, you sure you're okay?" Clarissa asked.

"The views can be incredible," I said, clearing my throat. "Sometimes, I just can't help but stare out the window."

"You were always good at that," she said.

"I'm good at soaps too," I said.

"How'd you get that picture, Hon? What's going on? Shit, I was obsessed with that bridge when I first moved to the city. Do you remember how we walked across it the night of your birthday?"

"I remember. Why didn't you tell me it was there? I thought maybe that was my surprise," I said.

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

"That picture of me. In the loft that night."

"Oh, yeah! It was so hot that night I made it, in your bleak freaking dorm

room," she said.

"You smelled like the woods," I said.

"Every time I'm at CJ and Sharon's, someone says something about it. They love it."

Funny, I never thought that Clarissa might go back there. I was glad to let that night recede into the past, while for her it was another fortuitous step on a journey forward, a good memory.

"Anyway, yeah, I guess I forgot," she said.

I believed her, but maybe that made it worse. I knew where every one of my characters were. My puppets, that is. Hidden away, of course, but accounted for. They didn't have a life away from me. It seemed careless to be an artist. To fall in love with something and then let it go. Then do it again and again.

"You were weird that night," she said.

"I was so angry," I said after a long moment, surprised that I had. "You can't do that to a person. Give them away like that. Turn them into something else," I said.

"This is what we do," she said, calmly but firmly. "You and me. Artists."

I knew she was right. I ripped off everyone I came into contact with. Turned them into something else in my mind, and eventually at the end of my arm. Remade them with things from the Lost and Found. Put words in their mouths. I never asked anyone's permission to do any of that. I sat down wearily on one of the armchairs, my face in my hands.

"Was I scared, Clarissa? Did you see me that way?"

"You were often scared, back then, yeah," she said. "But you were also fearless. You have a very funny way of not giving a fuck," she said.

"No one at that party wanted to see the real me. They already had your version," I said.

"Where are you, really?" she asked. Outside, the shadows and light exchanged places. The insubstantial gained substance. The material became immaterial. There was no sky. It had descended in its blanketing grayness to erase everything.

"Nowhere," I said.

"Come on, Maya, you are always in the middle of something," she said.

"I stole a penthouse!" I said.

"Girl, *what*?" she asked.

"Clarissa, I made a hero out of you, and you never asked for that!" I said.

"What are you talking about?"

"I had an abortion!" I said.

"Whoa," Norman said, stirring.

I waved him away again, but he just lay there, mouth agape, waving his hands along with mine.

"I don't know which you want me to react to first," Clarissa said.

"It was freshman year," I said, quietly, as my heart pounded in my chest. "It was before. . . us. I'm so sorry. I never said anything, but—"

"Yeah, I know," Clarissa said.

"What?" I asked.

"Leslie told me. I just figured you weren't comfortable talking about it. All good," she said.

"Leslie?" I asked in disbelief.

"What'd Leslie do now?" Craig asked, shuffling over groggily in his underpants, roused from sleep by my shouts.

"It's always the sister," Norman told him.

"Don't be angry at her," Clarissa said. "Your sister's got a big mouth, but she cares about you. Though, now that we're talking about it, Maya, I waited for you."

"Me?"

"For you to tell me. You're right, we were friends. I waited for you to step up. It was your fact to share but when you didn't say anything I felt like you didn't trust me, maybe just a little bit but a little goes a long way."

Then we didn't say anything for a while, which often happened with Clarissa and me. Our conversations went on for hours, layered and frantic, then stopped suddenly by unspoken mutual consent and we passed a long time, many minutes, an hour even, neither of us moving, still within our conversation but in the deep, silent part, right before we took it up again in a daybreak of conversation. But this was different.

"I wanted you to think I was smart. I wanted you to think I was in control," I said. The sky was silvery now, the buildings barely visible in the hazy gray monochrome. "I should have said something when you were going through the same thing. There shouldn't be secrets between friends."

"Everybody's got secrets," she said.

"Leslie thinks I live in make-believe," I said.

"Well, duh. That's why I love you," she said.

"Stop saying you love me! You don't know me! How could you? I hide

behind made-up voices," I said, bending down to pick up Hedy Lamarr from under the coffee table, where she'd fallen face down, ass up.

"You don't hide, you speak through them. That's a gift, Maya."

"Is it?" I asked. "Because sometimes it feels like a curse. Not knowing who I'm supposed to be at any one moment. It matters to be someone. Doesn't it?"

"Nobody knows who the fuck they are," she said. "I am proudly unidentified, thank you very much. And in the end, that picture I painted of you has nothing to do with you, except the way that you react to it, which is entirely on you. Anyway, there's not a painting in the world that's going to change shit. I'm not anyone's fucking hero, Maya. I just want to stand there, look stupid, and tell the truth. I swear to God, just let me be a person. Millions of people out there in the street right now are literally screaming for the same thing. We shouldn't have to fight our friends for that."

"I'm sorry."

"It's not for me to forgive you, Maya—" she said.

"I understand," I said quickly. I felt sick in the pit of my stomach. "I'll let you go."

"No, listen. I can't forgive because forgiveness is not necessary. You didn't do anything that everyone else hasn't—get scared, make mistakes. We all have our disappearing acts. Look at me, I sell a few paintings, and I turn into *that* girl. Anyway, you're right. You were scared and I guess I found that beautiful. I guess, maybe, I needed you to be scared. And then, like I said, I ghosted. . . I'm good at taking care of myself, Maya. That's all it is. I know you are too, so you shouldn't take it all too seriously. Anyway, I'm sorry too," she said. "And I'm here if you want that."

I tried to speak but I couldn't. Maybe I'd never speak again. I slid open the terrace door and heard traffic far below. The day had officially begun. The sun was up, but hidden behind clouds. The city was filled with countless blank windows. I was terrified by how much couldn't ever be said, how much about one another we'd never know. But then the clouds moved, and the sun with its many reflections found its way in, like the assembled saints in a painting of some waiting paradise.

"Listen, on Tillary Street, right where you get on the Brooklyn Bridge, there's a sculpture, a giant hand. It's pointing to the sky," Clarissa said.

"I know it," I said. And I did. It's where people were gathering to help change the world.

"I miss you. Tomorrow—shit, *today*—find me there," she said. Her invitation undid a fearsome tangle years in the making, made tighter still the last few months. I felt it loosen. I saw a way to slip out.

"Everything okay?" Norman, asked in his stage whisper again. I nodded at him for a few long moments before he began to do the same, excited at having figured it out.

"I'll be there," I told Clarissa.

"Awesome. I'll be the one in a mask," she said.

"Hey, Clarissa," I said.

"Hey, Maya."

"Do you know why I live in make-believe?" I asked.

"Tell it," she said.

"Because I believe. I mean. . . in everything. All of it."

"You do!" Norman said. There were tears in his eyes.

"Thanks," I told him.

"Beautiful," he said.

"Yeah, nice," said Craig.

Yes, they were good men. As funnily shaped as the rest of us.

"Back atcha," Clarissa said, three syllables as simple as a bird song, sweeter than any canary could sing. "And I believe in you, every last bit."

* * *

Before Clarissa was famous, before I was a train wreck, we were hungry together. Some days we wanted to devour the world, all its ideas and heartbreaks. Other days we were just broke, living on granola and ramen and cigarettes. But a thing existed between us. A sympathetic vibration. Something we made. Something we let grow. It was often all we had. We passed it back and forth like Josiah and his wife and their fork. We stayed nourished.

I think you start a room with a rug because the ground is where it all begins. The sky. . . well, the sky is everything else. It's everywhere you can go. It's everything you can do. The trick is to be in both places at once: feet on the ground, head in the sky, corny as that sounds. When you think about it, all you really have to do is stand there, and maybe not look stupid. There should be a puppet for that. Tomorrow, after I get home to Sunnyside, after I see Clarissa and we raise our voices for a better world, I'm going to get started on one right away.

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